Reconceptualizing Gendered Imperialism in Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea

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Charlotte Bronte's epochal literary text 'Jane Eyre' strikes unprecedented chords and shakes the world with its unparalleled theme cantered around an unconventional heroine who grapples amid unfavourable circumstances by remaining headstrong all through and in the end emerges a puissant figure wherein her societal position ameliorates. Jane, an absolute non-conformist, is not a distressed damsel who waits for her man to salvage and validate her existence. The notion exemplified by Bronte by delineating a viable protagonist was fairly received by the readers and critics. What made Jane a cut above the rest was her refusal to be dictated to by the socio-political norms of her day.

Accustomed to the occasional chidings of her aunt and the consistent brawls with her cousin, Jane ruminates instances of hysterical behaviour after which the decorum of the house is flouted. The 'mad cat' is incarcerated in the red room in an attempt to reinstate order in the house where she hallucinates and passes out. Her experiences at Lowood school bolster her character and spirit by providing wings of expansion to the avid learner that she was until she was placed as a governess to a French girl. She falls in love with the man of the house, and decides to marry him, however, before the marriage can be solemnized, the tables are turned with the revelation of Bertha.

Since Imperialism is not a gender-neutral phenomenon and so is colonialism which is a form of imperialism, "is a violent conjugation where the sense of self develops through a negotiation rather than a separation, a relation rather than a disjunction, with the Other." (Nayar, 2017) From that vantage point the literary theorists, by all means, regard 'Jane Eyre' as the specimen of an increasingly colonial text of all times. It might as well be mentioned that the relation between the coloniser and

the colonised then becomes the talking point, thereafter, laying breeding ground for other literary approaches to play their parts.

The rationalist evolution of the Commonwealth literary studies into the agreeable Postcolonial studies can be viewed as an audacious attempt in darkening the contours of the otherwise watered down assertions. The disbelief in Commonwealth literature springs from its own purposeful capacity to emasculate the heterogeneity of the minority cultures and the denial in acknowledging their autonomy with the earnest need to correspond to the metropolis cultures. On the contrary, "postcolonial theory and criticism emphasizes the tension between the metropolis and the (former) colonies…to expose the internal doubts and the instances of resistance that the West has suppressed in its stream rolling globalizing course" (Bertens, 2014)

In the light of the idea enunciated by Rhys, we are open to lay the claims made by Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert's 'The Madwoman in the Attic' whether they demand the construction of an autonomous canon for the assessment of women's literary works by out rightly reprobating the reductionist patriarchal thought which had, for quite a while, classified women characters merely into a set of binaries embodying either an angel or a witch. Both Gilbert and Gubar maintain that "a life of feminine submission, of 'contemplative purity,' a life of silence, a life that has no pen and no story, while a life of female rebellion, of 'significant action,' is a life that must be silenced, a life whose monstrous pen tells a terrible story." (Gilbert & Gubar, 1979) While taking note of their arguments, Rhys's work sews the loopholes that the first-world feminists overlooked, given the fact that this canon was exhaustively, a Western construction. The unanticipated appearance of Bertha imparts equivocal dimensions to the narrative laying ground for another canonical literary text 'Wide Sargasso Sea' with the ability to puncture the preconceived structural dynamics in Western writing.

Whereupon, Postcolonialism, as a theoretical approach, conspicuously stands as a foundation for this varied perspective, which essentially aims at lending voices to the colonised peoples, stemming from the inadequacy of the narratives of the erstwhile colonisers in exemplifying the Eastern cultures. This

representation was inherently racist, concealing and at the same time controlling the politics of the power dynamics. That is precisely when Jean Rhys's work can be vouched for to illumine and sensitize readers on myriads of implicit notions. Where readers of Bronte's work failed to perceive the fissures and voids apropos the inconsequential existence of certain minority creeds, however silenced they may be, Rhys attempted to bridge those chasms asking for reconsidering such sacrosanct literary discourses.

The postcolonial as well as the feminist reading of Bronte's work gravitate towards unveiling multitudinous interpretations at the same time revealing the flaws in the same by providing an adjacent platform to the otherwise muffled voices surviving at the fringes. In the light of the aforementioned fact, calling 'Wide Sargasso Sea' merely a prequel to the Victorian text would be equivalent to doing grave injustice to her magnum opus. Rhys has in fact instituted, rather reinstituted structures by imparting parochial tinges into the traditional rubrics.

The themes of entrapment, madness and colonial politics in Jean Rhys's work strive to bridge the gap left by the discourse of the first world metropolis. One can easily identify certain autobiographical elements, for Jean, as a Dominica born woman, was a Creole, that is, of a mixed ancestry. At the age of sixteen, she moved to England and the repercussions of the move on her writings, encapsulate her struggles against racial oppression, and principally against the dictates of patriarchy. Psychoanalytical dimension to them makes us explore the unconscious realm of the characters.

The backdrop of the Emancipation Act exposes decadence, chaos and lawlessness. Antoinette lived on a plantation called Coulibri Estate with her mother and sickly brother. Family's finances go into ruin, subsequent to which, Antoinette's childhood is colored by hostility between white aristocracy and the impoverished Black servants. Antoinette's stepfather arranges her marriage with 'that name', who agrees in a bid to acquire her inheritance. The unnamed man goes on admitting "I must be provided for by a wealthy marriage…. Mr. Mason had a son and a daughter….and he could and would

give the latter a fortune of 30,000 pounds." (Diane Long Hoeveler, 2008) This evidently hints at the male preference primogeniture that was prevalent in the European society.

He receives a menacing letter that warns of the madness deep-rooted in Antoinette's family. After this revelation, their relationship becomes strained. She tries to regain her husband's love but fails. They move to England where he confines her in a garret room in his house under the surveillance of a servant. She has no sense of time or place and she is rendered as insane and violent. She has a recurring dream about going out from her prison to explore the house and sets it ablaze. The novel ends abruptly with Antoinette walking down from her prison to act on her dream.

Not to mention, Rochester justifies Bertha's enslavement to Jane in marriage as well as in the garret room by retorting that "her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger", and "a nature the most gross, impure, depraved I ever saw, was associated with mine, and called by the law and by society part of me". (Diane Long Hoeveler, 2008)

The abolition of the slaves comes at the cost of Antoinette's own independence. The consequences of the abolition of slavery bring doom for creoles like her who had to bear the brunt. Her incarceration is symbolic of her enslavement in love and dependency upon her husband. Rhys exemplifies the plight of women in line with the Victorian era in the person of Antoinette who is unable to free herself from the shackles of her husband's brutality presumably insofar as in terms of her financial independence. He calls her a "vain silly creature" who "will have no lover, for I do not want her and she will see no other". (Rhys, 2007) Not only does he wreck her emotional and financial faculties but also decides to deter her from socializing.

Misogyny operates within patriarchal discourses through characters like Mr. Mason and Daniel. That is precisely the reason why such men harbor hatred and get intimidated by women like Christophine who embody occultism. The letter that Antoinette's husband receives from Mr. Frazer describes

Christophine as “intelligent in her way and can express herself well, but I did not like the look of her at all and consider her a most dangerous person." (Rhys, 2007) Christophine poses a threat to the male characters through her belief in and exercise of obeah, a practice that casts doubt on European rational thought. Her husband also fails to understand the local customs of the Caribbean culture.

The narrative begins in Coulibri Estate, a plantation in Jamaica, situated in the Caribbean, once a British colony. What all transpires in the plantation estate and the plight of those like Antoinette and her family is reminiscent of years of devastation, plunder, and havoc wreaked upon the colonized peoples during the Pre-emancipation period and the repercussions of the same. Antoinette vacillates where she is neither assimilated by the whites nor by the black race which addresses her as a ‘white nigger’ and subsequently she becomes a misfit. This quest for identity manifests itself in multiple instances where she conveys- “Between you, I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all”. The need of finding an identity hints at the dearth of one. Eric Williams, the first Prime Minister of Trinidad, contends the lack of identity for the people of West Indies who have become “victims of imperialism have had decisive advantages over the West Indies. They had a language of their own, a culture of their own... we in the West Indies have nothing of our own”. (Juneja, 1996)

The plight of Antoinette corresponds to the other creoles yearning for identity in the post-emancipated world. Her unpleasant experiences during childhood like their house being put on fire by the enraging Blacks or Tia’s categorical assault, leave an indelible impression on the psyche of a neglected child. Her longing for motherly affection is supplanted in the being of Aunt Cora and Christophine in most of the novel. The work is indeed a testament to the physical and mental agony of both mother and daughter in the hands of men.

It tends to expose the dark and diabolic history of colonialism and patriarchy in the Caribbean by bringing into light the political and economic exploitation of the ‘other’ and justifying the same by projecting a range of negative associations. It also manifests that the ‘strange’ and the ‘alien’ can be

controlled, diminished in power, and dominated. The ‘strange’ and the ‘alien’ attributes are unmistakably exhibited by both mother and daughter.

The contrapuntal reading of the novel opens up avenues of perceiving Bertha’s unruly presence as a resistance to those who deem her less than fully human. Quite apparently, had it not been for Bertha, Jane would not have been able to climb the ladder of upward mobility, whereby her position ameliorates. In the light of the aforementioned fact, calling ‘Wide Sargasso Sea’ merely a prequel to the Victorian text would be equivalent to doing grave injustice to her magnum opus. Madness is irrevocably imminent for someone bred in her circumstances. It is nevertheless, realized at once, from this vantage point as to when madness becomes ostensible. Rhys is implicitly alluding that insanity is a condition shrewdly construed by those in power to subjugate the ‘other’ and in this case the man in the being of Rochester. Michael Thorpe in "The Other Side": Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre remarks on Bertha’s insanity that "sin is itself ' species of insanity " — Rhys joins those modern writers, novelists especially, who have sought to win their readers' understanding and compassion for those whose mental state is often, and for deeply complex reasons, just the wrong side of a thin dividing line from "normality".

This reverberates the notion withheld by Foucault in his work ‘Discipline and Punish’ (1975) that strive to explore the disciplinary mechanisms operating through power and knowledge, which are increasingly patriarchal constructs. He writes “There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations”. (*Foucault and His Panopticon - Power, Knowledge, Jeremy Bentham, Surveillance, Smart Mobs, Protests, Cooperation, Philosopher*, n.d.) The only plausibility behind her action that surfaces in the end is that she acts her dream in the form of her resilience as she wrecks vengeance against the imperialist agency for siphoning off her mental and material capacities.

Firdous Azim *in 'The Colonial Rise of the Novel'* assesses the position of Bertha as "the failure of the pedagogical, colonizing enterprise" who subverts "the dominating and hegemonizing imperialist and educational processes". (Firdous Azim, 2015) Susan Meyer in "Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of Jane Eyre, speaks of Jane's plight as "an implicit critique… And an identification with the oppressed," to, "an appropriation of the imagery of slavery". (Meyer, 1996) Gayatri Spivak in 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' offers an interplay of gender, race and class, wherein she examines the pitfalls of the erstwhile representation of the classic text for its failure in acknowledging the latent political subversion in "imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English". Spivak quite eloquently, hints at the immediacy in Bertha's action of putting "fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction". (Belsey & Moore, 1997)

The precursor of Postcolonialism in the provocative figure of Edward Said, deserves special mention. His works blazed a trail in the study of literary theory and Postcolonialism precisely. In spite of all the biases and accusations, that the piece is fraught with, 'Jane Eyre' never fails to occupy a prominent place amidst all classics and we, as researchers might as well, alleviate it from the yoke of 'rhetoric of blame' as in the words of Edward Said. (Said, 1994) Literary critics ought to forsake the practise of accusing the classics from the position of blame or solely viewing them from a colonial vantage point. Also, John McLeod maintains a similar stance in '*Beginning Postcolonialism'* that "'classic' texts are re-read to uncover emergent, counter-colonialist positions that they may, perhaps unwittingly, make available to the reader". (McLeod, 2010)

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