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Voices from the Margins: Power, Madness, and Female Agency in *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract

Post colonialism is a major aspect in subaltern studies through which the silenced victims are given voice. The paper attempts to establish recognition for the doubly colonised subaltern. The instinct of a human, who claim to be in a power structure, demands natural indifference towards the subaltern in terms of their race, gender, social class and political inferiority. This dominance questions the fundamental, cultural, psychological and ethnic awareness of a society. The study elucidates the hegemony, ambivalence and ideologies of the suppresser and the suppressed subaltern with special limelight to Bertha Mason, in both texts namely Jane Eyre by Bronte and Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys. These texts disclose the personal augmentation in human that paves way to the social condemnation of the subaltern. Bertha Mason is silenced because of the imperial mindset in the nineteenth century England. This imperial dominance is one of the roots of subaltern studies. Metanarratives used in the Wide Sargasso Sea explain this appropriate hybridity, a new trans-cultural or cross cultural form that arises in terms of the oppressed.

Keywords: power, madness, female agency, Jane Eyre

INTRODUCTION:

Postcolonial Literature as a discipline evolved after the decolonisation of British Raj in its colonies. It expresses the anxiety, lost cultural legacy, socio economical and political exploitation of land and native people. However the colonialism and imperialism started back in 1800's, it had much control over the colonies till the early Twentieth century. Colonialism resulted in marginalisation, Diaspora, racism, complexities, otherness, gender discrimination and identity issues. This imposed cultural discourses resulted in subalternity, which means a state of being victimized. The subaltern studies as a developing entity, questions the stereotyped dominations faced by the people who are ostracised in the hegemony of power structure.

As Gyan Prakash says,

The term "subaltern," drawn from Antonio Gramsci's writings, refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture and was used to signify the centrality of dominant/dominated relationships in history. Guha suggested that while Subaltern Studies would not ignore the dominant, because the subalterns are always subject to their activity, its aim was to "rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work" in South Asian studies (1477).

This conscious subjugation of the oppressed is voiced out through many South Asian scholars. Normally the subalterns suffer unconditionally and when it comes to women they undergo double suppression, both by the colonizer and by patriarchy. Gayatri Spivak in her work “Three Women’s text and the critique of imperialism” argues that the women of nineteenth century are treated more with imperialism. Colonialism and imperialism are the major causes for subalternism. Every work of art comes alive only when it is evident to the readers personal life, in that way all the text, those which fall under the category of subaltern studies are highly relevant to the current social status of women and girl children in the society. The paper takes a chance to relate the nineteenth century’s classical female Bertha Mason as a metaphor to relate the essence of subalternity in the present society.

BERTHA MASON- AN ASSUMED MADNESS

Jane Eyre (1847) is a Victorian novel written by Charlotte Bronte, under the pseudonym Currer Bell. The novel is about Jane Eyre, who arrives at Thornfield Hall to attend Adèle Varens. She meets the master of Thornfield Mr. Rochester and they eventually fall for each other. The plot is horrified by the presence of Bertha Mason, Rochester’s first wife. Usually Victorians consider women in two ways, either as Angels in the house or an evil, monster in the society. Bertha is portrayed as a horrific mad woman in the novel, yet she does not have a voice. She is viewed in the dialogues of other characters in the novel.

As Bronte states

In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (296)

In the novel Bertha is always heard as a mysterious beast, screaming, babbling, creating chaos, fear in other characters and setting fire to the hall. In the end of the novel, she sets fire to the Thornfield Hall and commits suicide. She brings down the luxuries of Rochester and he also loses one of his eyesight because of the incident. Jane comes back to Rochester, they marry and eventually Rochester recovers. Though Bertha has to be the heroine of the novel, Bronte does not give importance to her. She dies as a mysterious and silenced victim who is likely to be blamed by the English society.

WIDE SARGASSO SEA – REASONED MADNESS

Jean Rhys published her *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966, the novel centres Bertha Mason as the protagonist and is written in three parts. The narration shifts from one character to the other and the author also employs the use of native language and words in the text. The marginalised subaltern Antoinette breaks the stereotyped domination of the imperial England. The novel is written from the perspective of the indigenous communities who were once under the colonised by the European civilisation. The first part throws light into the hidden and untold psychological journey of Antoinette Cosway (Bertha Mason), a white creole. The plot shows the childhood traumas of Antoinette, her shift from the native land to a strict nunnery and her sudden marriage to Rochester is uncovered in the second part along with the aftermath of this marriage.

Antoinette feels uncomfortable and insecure with Rochester. They both go to her mother’s place, a native island for honeymoon. Rochester is bewildered by his Creole wife and by the haunting place. He develops hatred for native people and especially to the faithful servant Christophine who plays a major role in the novel. Rochester always gets deadly dreams, without loving each other the couple engage in marriage bliss. This intercourse is however not passionate, Rochester’s lust develops even more and he sleeps with a servant Amelie. Antoinette feels totally distorted to know that her husband has betrayed her, she goes out in a

horse daily and she turns abnormally violent. In the final part Rochester takes her to England where Antoinette is attended by a servant called Grace Pool, she is termed as mad and is left in attic. She dreams of setting fire to Rochester's house and the story ends with Antoinette holding a candle in her hand.

VICTIMIZED BRONTE'S BERTHA

Walia says reinstates, "Women as represented in novels written by men, are quite naturally a representation of observation from an exterior point of view. In her oft-quoted words, Simon de Beauvoir has pointed out how men see women as the 'other' (3)". In *Jane Eyre*, Bronte being a female writer takes up a patriarchal dehumanising stand and portrays Bertha Mason's mental illness, she is shown as a symbol of horror in the minds of Victorian age. As Spivak says, this is the imperial mindset prevailing in Victorian women. Rochester says "Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations" (295). Rochester accuses Bertha and strives to be freed from his first marriage. He also condemns Bertha's mother as a madwoman and drunkard.

Rochester questions her Creole ancestry. Being a Creole in white society, Bertha will never be accepted by the white man Rochester. Here comes the sense of identity crisis for Bertha. He sees her as a sense of sorrow, a mystery and a doomed creature. He never allows her to experience the outer world. She is put in the attic with one servant to attend, Grace Pool. Bertha also stands as an obstacle for Rochester to marry Jane. She actually goes into this emotional trauma which is never brought out in the text.

In Victorian era mental disorder is seen as a curse and as an inward corruption. The society is dominated by the patriarchal subjugation which silences the voice of women. Though Bronte shows Jane as the protagonist, she never explores herself as a female self in the novel. Unknowingly Bronte and Jane fall into the imperial mindset of dominating a woman's self. They live up to the expectations of the patriarchy.

VINDICATED RHYSIAN BERTHA

As Walia elucidates

Rhys relentlessly portrays an archetypal 'feminine' consciousness, broadening her awareness of the 'self' ... Rhysian protagonist has no particular career ambitions. She primarily hopes for happiness through love. Dependence is also her way and she seeks financial and emotional security from man, as she turns to him for her sexual and psychic needs. In the traditional feminine manner, she seeks protection, assurance and comfort in her relationships with men... The Rhysian women measure their worth in relation to their success with men (36).

In Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is voiceless but Rhys's Bertha not only has a voice she also explores her 'self' in the novel, her traumatic childhood experience and her mother's strange feeling in Jamaica shows the after effect of colonialism. Because they are Creole they are not accepted by the whites and also by the natives. Antoinette has many horrific experience in her childhood, she was also longing for her mother's love which she never gets. She associates herself more with the native servant Christophine who practices native magic. So she has more qualities of a native woman which Rochester dislikes.

When Rochester marries Antoinette, he inherits a huge sum of money as dowry from her father. He is financially supported by Antoinette's stepfather. So he artificially loves her and exposes his lust over her. He never understands her feeling of cringed identity. When they land in Caribbean island for honeymoon he feels much alienated and frustrated. This is a natural postcolonial aspect of a colonised place. Their marriage turns unsuccessful mainly because of his anxiety over the land and his extramarital affair with the servant Amelie. Rochester is the sole reason behind the madness of Bertha.

BETRAYAL OF ROCHESTER AND EXTERNAL SUBJUGATION

Antoinette tries to live up to Rochester's sexual and emotional expectation. In spite of this he goes for another girl, which a wife can never accept. This point changes her totally and she feels estranged by the situation. Marriage is an institution which demands love and moral trust between the couple. This is more relevant to the contemporary society. If a partner cheats on the other, then problem naturally arises. If Rochester has treated Antoinette properly then there is no place for Jane. Antoinette also faces many psychological issues of being a Creole. So the problem is not with Antoinette (Bertha), it is these external factors, cultural domination and societal pressures that drive her mad. The paper does not attack patriarchy as an opposing force, but it suggests that it is also an external factor which pulls down the woman from a human to a beast (as Bertha referred in *Jane Eyre*).

CONCLUSION

In modern era mental disorder is treated more with care and humanity to bring those people back to life. Rhys heroine Antoinette (Bertha) has also demanded this love and care from their surroundings. Though Bronte never gives voice to Bertha, *Wide Sargasso Sea* serves as a prequel which pictures an extensive or fictional reality behind the character of Bertha. Here Antoinette (Bertha) is vindicated and raised from the level of beast. Antoinette's life serves as a voice of vindication. She gets recognition by breaking the imperial dominance, hegemony and social condemnation of being a subaltern.

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