Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea, the
Silence and the Voice
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ABSTRACT

The re-telling of a story from another point of view can be seen as a process of deconstructing an enunciation based on a certain perspective into a new one with new way of seeing. It is a process of tackling a text from a different point of view to explore issues that have been kept unexplored for a long time in the same way Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre has been kept and isolated in her attic room. Jean Rhys in her novel Wide Sargasso Sea sets a debate or dialogue to revision or re-examine the history of the other and gives a voice to people that have been overlooked and silenced in Brontë’s Jane Eyre for a long time. In giving a voice and a considerable space of existence to Berth, Rhys cursors Brontë's failure to see the other as human with expectations and aspirations regardless to her race, the colour of their complexion and religion. Jane Eyre’s Bertha or Wide Sargasso Sea’s Antoinette, the Creole woman who has been introduced to the reader by Brontë’s Jane Eyre as the mad woman, has been kept in the dark and allowed no chance to speak up herself. Rhys in her novel negotiates Jane Eyre and presents a new reading of the mad woman in Jane Eyre. The story of Antoinette or Bertha is not only a retelling of a story or viewing the other side of a story, but rather it is an attempt to explore and expose the narcissism and patriarchy of the Victorian society concerning the other.

Keywords: 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”:

In the deep, at the farthest 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 groveled, seemingly, on all four; 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, hides its head and face. (*Jane Eyre*, p.296).

*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 a 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). The Victorian male and due to the industrial revolution and the prestige of the British Empire (Doyle 1989) was dictated to tolerate and play an uncomfortable role that is not his own but was urgently required by society. Lee Horsley argues this notion in referring to the burden English men in the Victorian era should undergo by saying that the English men, “went enthusiastically into far and curious lands to strange and native peoples to slay numerous dragons that plagued them for centuries” (Horsley 1995). In this context, Jane and Rochester can be seen as the victims of the English normalcy conventions and the norms of the Victorian society that subjugate both to a prison-like status that is drawn and designed for them coercively where no attempt to break is allowed. Neither Rochester nor Jane is capable of rejecting these norms or protesting against the social instructions that dictate a role for them to play indisputably. No doubt such repression and impediment result in hysteria and mental distress not only upon Jane and Rochester as individuals but also upon the entire society (Pyrhönen 2010). As a Victorian female, Jane is forcefully dictated to be the negatively compliant character that has no right or no voice and to succumb to the uncomfortable social norms. Mr. Rochester is the Victorian male who has to be what society chooses for him to be not what he chooses to be. He is not only the patriarchal who controls and dominates the female arrogantly but also he is the usurper who appropriates other’s wealth and riches to sustain the English personality and prestige even if by acting brutally and inhumanly.

1.2 Silence and Voice:

1.2.1 The Victorian Silence:

Jane’s status of being pathetically dependent personality does not dramatically change. She is instructed by the social conventions of the time what to be, what to dream and what to feel not what does she want or wish. The first reference to the Victorian female blinded obedience can be seen in the opening chapters of *Jane Eyre* with John Reed, a symbolic figure of the Victorian society, who treated the child Jane violently and wanted her to call him her master. Jane could do nothing but to endure his blows silently, “Accustomed to John Reed's abuse, I never had an idea of replying to it: my care was how to endure the blow which would
certainly follow the insult” (*Jane Eyre*, p. 67). As a mature individual, Jane has proven that she cannot stand by herself, she cannot act without Rochester’s love and care because Rochester represents the center and the focus of Jane’s romantic “quest” (Friedman 1989) which renders herself inferior and insufficient. Jane’s subservience reaches a despairing level in that she is not only totally and submissively dependent to Rochester but she is happy with it; she believes that being in her subordinate position is one of the sweetest nature a female should, and must, align herself with, “… He felt I loved him so fondly, that to yield that attendance was to indulge my sweetest wishes” (*Jane Eyre*, p. 389).

1.2.2 The Trauma of the Victorian Male.

The reality of Rochester is fully exposed by Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* not only as a colonial figure who appropriates the wealth and belongings of others, but also as a patriarchal, selfish and a character with unstable personality. Ellen G. Friedman describes him as “at least in part, greedy and sadistic” (Friedman 1989). Like any Victorian, he lives at odds with the prevailing idea of being the superior and the fittest to control and lead. Rhys presents him as a hateful character whose main concern not only to control Antoinette and her wealth but also he insists on uprooting her identity and individuality. Veronica Marie Gregg writes in this connection clarifying how Rochester, in renaming Antoinette, tries to uproot her identity, “In renaming Antoinette Bertha, the husband does not succeed in changing her, but in splitting her identity” (Gregg 1995). And in the same vein, Erika Smilowitz, argues Rochester’s intention of renaming Antoinette as Bertha because has a deep desire “to dissociate her [Antoinette] from her West Indian past, and to establish her rebirth” (Smilowitz 1986). He does not have any connection what so ever with people around him or the environment as well and he treats them as invisible and none-existent. This notion is notified clearly when both Rochester and Antoinette are in their journey to their honeymoon house. They stopped at a village called Massacre. Rochester shows aspects of contempt and dislike to the place and all villagers. He calls them “spiteful, malignant and sly.” Because of his neurotic obsession in marginalizing the other and detesting environment, he is neither able to sense the beauty of nature nor to lay bridges of communication with others and this is the way the colonizer behaves in his relationships with the native people. Anna Laura Stoler argues in this connection: “The boundaries separating colonizer from colonized [are] …self evident and easily drawn” (Stoler
This status of a total isolation burdens his mind with so many blank spaces that he cannot overcome or fill, “There are blanks in my mind that cannot be filled up” (Wide Sargasso Sea, p. 76). The sense of strangeness and suspicion within himself is due to his deep rejection of the other. In order to escape this sense of estrangement and in an attempt to reduce the level of de-familiarity that surrounds him, he insists on seeing Antoinette as an English girl, “any pretty English girl,” and The West Indies as England in which Antoinette responds with a bitter mock of “Oh England, England,” a repetition that to Rochester “went on and on like a warning I did not chose to hear.” In an environment which he hates and has no sense of belonging, he has never sensed the feeling of being welcomed or hospitalized. Rochester now is inside a world that not only offers him no hospitality but resists his presence. Such a state of disturbance and uneasiness increases his feeling of hatred and contempt to those surround him including his wife Antoinette. He becomes violently defensive as he attempts to negate and delegitimize Antoinette:

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 the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it. (Wide Sargasso Sea, p.172)

Due to his previous financial disturbances he experienced in England before he comes to the Caribbean world, he becomes obsessed with gain and profits regardless to the legality and credibility of such gaining. He left England as a younger son of the landed gentry with no money of his own and started his journey into the outside world looking for a land that provides him with wealth and rich. It is true that his mercenary marriage to Antoinette Cosway Mason has enabled him with a relatively “proper” status as a wealthy man and a gentleman, (like any colonial power that appropriate the resources of the colonized land), but such marriage has deepened and complicated his neurotic obsession. Rhys in Wide Sargasso Sea gives him no name. She refers to him and throughout the whole novel; as “that man” only. This indicates that Rochester has no identity or being but through his connection to his wife Antoinette. He has no place and no means to communicate either with himself or with
others. His first interaction with the native people reveals his level of misunderstanding and misreading the native people. When Amelie, Antoinette's maid at Granbois, greets him with “I hope you will be very happy, sir, in your sweet honeymoon house,” he could not escape the belief that Amelie is mocking him in which he starts thinking that “She was laughing at me I could see (Wide Sargasso Sea, p. 66)”. Rochester's voice is heard for the first time in part two. In this part, we find him making a despairing attempt to locate himself and control the sense of dispersal, fragmentation and loss he experiences. The first words in his voice are “So it was all over, the advance and retreat, the doubts and hesitations” (Wide Sargasso Sea, p.66).

With the patriarchal, oppressive and sadistic authority, Rochester colonizes, imprisons Bertha in her dark attic at Thornfield and deprives her from her real name and her identity. It is the same strategy enacted by Robinson Crusoe who enslaved and deprived the colonized native from his identity and name, giving him a new name and new history, "I made him know his name should be Friday, which was the day I saved his life; I called him so for the memory of the time; I likewise taught him to say Master, and then let him know, that was to be my name. (Robinson Crusoe, p. 203). It is the same strategy that Rochester, the colonizer, deployed when he renamed Antoinette into Bertha, “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name” (Wide Sargasso Sea, p. 147). This pervasive atmosphere of female oppression symbolizes the colonial project that suppresses the native land. It is not unreasonable to believe that such brutal act provokes anger, protest and revolution. It is the state of anger which manifests female resistance against oppression which, in the case of Bertha, represented by conflagration, burning and fire as the scorching flames in both novels represents the burst against oppression, injustice and slavery of patriarchy. The injustice of oppression and patriarchy is like a plague that requires an act of complete termination and that cannot be done but by fire only. Thornfield Hall represents both Jane’s mysterious confinement and Antoinette’s savage imprisonment in which there are “ambiguities of status” for both females, Bertha and Jane. It is a Gothic edifice that is “too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation” (Jane Eyre, p. 128).

The intensified level of ambiguities and peculiarities is necessary for the colonizer to hide reality. In Jane Eyre, Mrs. Fairfax expresses her opinion in answering Jane’s inquiry about Mr. Rochester’s character, “Oh, his character is unimpeachable, I suppose. He is rather
peculiar, perhaps” (*Jane Eyre*, p. 122). That is why, according to Mrs. Fairfax, one can’t be always sure whether he is in jest or earnest when he speaks. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane is overwhelmed by the sense of ambiguity and mystery at Thornfield Hall, “all I had gathered from it amounted to this, - that there was a mystery at Thornfield; and that from participation in that mystery I was purposely excluded” (*Jane Eyre*, p.195). The mysterious and ambiguous architecture of Thornfield Hall with its Bluebeard corridors suggests the mysteries of its owner. The “two rows of small black doors, all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard’s castle” (*Jane Eyre*, p.108)” represents the secrecy of Mr. Rochester and his sinful past which he tries to hide intensifying the dimness of his mansion. This image contradicts the space where Antoinette used to locate and find herself in. Nature is her ultimate truth and her dwelling space. The openness and the clarity of nature ease her sense of injustice and cruelty of her world. Antoinette could not find the sense of belonging in her world, but she finds in nature:

A bamboo spout jutted the cliff; the water coming from it was silver blue. She dismounted quickly, picked a large shamrock-shaped leaf to make a cup, and drank. Then she picked another leaf, folded it and brought it to me. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 71).

This intimacy with nature reveals the intimacy with openness and clarity the colonizer’s world, represented by her husband, lacks. This husband, who has no actual name as another ambiguity, expresses his hatred for plainness and distinctness of things, “everything is too much, I feel as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too much high, the hills too near” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 70). He not only has no connection to the land that provides him with wealth and gives him the proper position as a gentleman, but also he drives his wife away from the place she is deeply attached to and loves. The place where she can feel her real belonging:

Do you know what you have done to me? I loved this place and you have made it into a place I hate. I used to think that if everything else went out of my life I would still have this, and now you have spoilt it. It’s just another place where I have been unhappy”(* Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 149).
1.2.3 The Creole Voice:

Rhys’s objects the negative representation of Bertha in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. In her *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys centralizes and gives Antoinette a focused point by granting her the status of a heard voice that has been silenced in *Jane Eyre* because she believes that the representation in *Jane Eyre* concerning the other is “only one side—that is the English side” (Wyndham 1984). Antoinette in Rhys’s novel displays a different sense of responsibility and shows different behavior of protest and independency. Rhys’s Antoinette/Bertha has more than one battle to fight and these are the racial and the feminist battles. In her post-colonial reading of Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Rhys gives a voice, through Antoinette, to all silenced and restricted females trying to speak up themselves and locate their individuality in society. Bertha/Antoinette is able to play her role and acts according to her free will and not in accordance to what society and the patriarchal structure wants her to be. She proves that she is not the negated other and the insane animal with no existence or individuality (Spivake 1985). She decides to use the flames of fire to shed light on the darkness of patriarchy and the racial resentment conducted by a colonial figure even if this fire will lead to her demise. In spite of Mr. Rochester’s locked doors and stringent secrecy of imprisonment Bertha succeeds several times in breaking free from her third-floor cell and comes out at the end to burn her prison, Thornfield Hall.

Bertha/Antoinette is the daughter of an ex-slave owner who undergoes not only the experience of being hated and rejected by the black community in the West Indies but also the pain of being rejected by the white community as well. Such a sense of fragmentation and dispersal is intensified by her experience of being enslaved by the oppression of patriarchy when she becomes Mr. Rochester’s wife. The complicated situation that Antoinette suffers stems from the sense of guilt that results from her being born in a colonial family that plays its part in colonizing and exploiting black people in the West Indies. To reduce this sense of guilt and pain, Antoinette tries to be in company with the victims of slavery to ease and calm the voice of conscious within herself. Tia, her black friend in the Indies from whom she learns so much is the closest one to her. Tia taught Antoinette the blessings of fire as a symbol of strength, light and free will, “Then Tia would light a fire (fires always lit for her, sharp stone did not hurt her bare feet, I never saw her cry” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 23). Christophine, is
another black character with whom Antoinette spends most of the time. Christophine is the black strong, but sensitive, maid at the family house who used to take care and treat Antoinette as a mother by singing her French-flavored evening songs (Russell 2007). With those songs, Antoinette feels the sense of home and warmth that never experiences with her own mother. The miserable and unbearable conditions the blacks suffer under the white slave-owners’ brutal treatment urge Antoinette to rebel against this by identifying herself with Tia, her lack friend. Antoinette herself experiences the same bad treatment from her husband who treats her indifferently and negatively. The novel speaks about a period after the act of emancipation of the slaves. It was an uneasy time when racial relations in the Caribbean were at their most strained. In such tension, Antoinette the child senses the feeling of resentment expressed by the blacks against her and all the white people. She is a descended of plantation owners, a daughter of another despotic sultan father who has had many children by Negro women. She is not accepted either by the Negro community or by the colonists. As a white Creole, she is no more than a “white cockroach” that is stuck in between. Such a fragmented and dispersed self is desperately yearning to find security and peace because she is “afraid of nothing, of everything.” The castigation her family suffers in the West Indies by both the white colonists and the newly emancipated blacks, the revengeful blacks who set fire in her family house, the rejection of her mother, the rejection of her black friend Tia when she throws a rock at her are the effects of the phenomena of colonization that flung Antoinette into an agonizing fear and insecurity which intensify latter by the patriarchy of her husband Mr. Rochester. Patriarchy and oppression by the authority of male is challenged and brought to light by Antoinette who takes the responsibility of freeing all the females from their slavery and subordinate. Antoinette takes the responsibility of opening long-time locked doors of unexplored history to uncover the injustices and exploitations against those who have been labeled as the other for having a different color. Antoinette's enthusiastic represents a daring struggle to free and release feminism from its long isolated attic confinement.

The difference between the Victorian representative and the Caribbean becomes more extensive and apparent. Charlotte Brontë in *Jane Eyre* penetrates the most daring zone by choosing a theme of great universality like feminism. Yet but this theme is within the limited contextual frame work of the world she was living in. Most of the background and story elements were drawn from the real life of a governess that hasn’t been exposed to the miseries
and pain of people who are exploited and enslaved by colonization. Jane’s world hasn’t experienced the miseries of the colonized people who underwent injustice, racial tension and hierarchical classification. Jane’s struggle is limited within the emotional and spiritual satisfaction and not with freeing and emancipating a culture and race that have been negated by the white. But Wide Sargasso Sea’s Antoinette is burdened with a universal striving, divided between worlds of hating races. A world that is doomed with endless search for a ground of identity in a world that has been by the exploitive colonizer. As a child she lived with the miseries of the black people, she wanted to belong to their miseries and be part of their sufferings. Her sympathetic feeling with the blacks is due to her deep realization of the injustices of her colonial society against those who have a different color. The brutality of her colonial society is so deep and pervasive that not only undermines any feelings of security but marks Antoinette as a character unable to survive in a world full of injustice and exploitation. Bertha has not been given a chance to tell her story, a defect which can be taken against the Victorian writer as a sign of oppression and inequity conducting against those who belong to different races. Thus the readers truly have no definite knowledge of her madness. Yet Rochester does in fact act as if she was mad and uses this as his reasoning for her punishment. Jean Rhys, the Caribbean writer gives equal chance to the oppressor and the oppressed to voice out what is beneath. She divides the speaking voice between Rochester and Antoinette, thus she avoids suppressing the Other voice that she recognizes in Brontë's text. Brontë had given, whether aware or not, some hints that convict Rochester. The reference of Bluebeard castle in Jane’s description of Thornfield is one of the most conspicuous hints that points out to the cruelty and inhumanity of the patriarchal figures (Pyrhonen 2010). Bluebeard first appeared in Paris in 1695 as La Barbe Bleue, in the manuscript version of Charles Perrault’s Histories Ou Contes Du Temps Passe. It tells a story of an evil man who murders his wives and keeps their corps in an isolated small room in his castle.

I lingered in the long passage to which this led, separating the front and back rooms of the third storey: narrow, low, and dim, with only one little window at the far end, and looking, with its two rows of small black doors all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard’s castle. (Jane Eyre, p. 124).
1.3 Conclusion

Brontë’s Jane Eyre was written at the time of the highest peak of the British Empire’s colonial project. During the nineteenth-century, the English strongly believed in the English superiority over the people of other races. It was an overwhelmingly inveterate and profoundly embraced belief that was inspired by the British Empire that dominated three quarter of the earth by the colonial rule. 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. No doubt the colonial phenomena and throughout history was—and is—a phenomena of violence and brutality. The indigenous peoples who have been subject to colonization, who have not been acknowledged and represented, have suffered displacement, appropriation and massacre under the racist, destructive and violent colonial rule (Ferro 1997). 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. These brutal acts against Bertha, which tremendously and destructively affected her life, stem from the sense of guilt within Rochester’s self because he violets the moral and social code. The sense of guilt essentially results from someone’s feeling of how his/her behavior has negatively affected someone else (Lewis 1971). The colonizer’s obsession in gaining the sense of security and peace of mind forces him to go on in his brutal acts against the Other and thus violence becomes the only means of interaction between the self and the other. Jane’s role in the colonial project can be seen in negating and not acknowledging Bertha existence and being as a human. 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.
References


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