

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES

[ISSN 2581-5369]

Volume 6 | Issue 5

2023

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Power-play in “Jane Eyre” and “Wide Sargasso Sea”: Confinement and Discipline

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ABSTRACT

Nineteenth century England saw women as creatures vulnerable to mental illness owing to their biological framework. Hysteria, which developed a steady medical interest during that period, was a term that became socially demeaning because it was used to describe women who embraced their sexual freedom, were susceptible to temptation and had ‘fallen’ too far beyond the protection of a society. The Victorian society aspired to build itself the ‘good woman’, enmeshed within its stringent laws and unyielding patriarchal aspirations; and, in doing so, confine the ‘uncontrolled sexual energies’ of the ‘hysterical’ woman in asylums. My close reading analysis and comparative study would explore the narrative and authoritative structures through which power structures attempt to confine, censure and discipline Antoinette Cosway or Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte’s canonical text ‘Jane Eyre’ (1847) as well as in Jean Rhys’ counter narrative ‘Wide Sargasso Sea’ (1966).

Keywords: *Nineteenth century, Victorian period, Jane Eyre, hysteria, madness, confinement.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Victorian society aspired to build itself the ‘good woman’, enmeshed within its stringent laws and unyielding patriarchal aspirations; and, in doing so, confine the ‘uncontrolled sexual energies’ of the ‘hysterical’ woman in asylums. My close reading analysis and comparative study would explore the narrative and authoritative structures through which power structures attempt to confine, censure and discipline Antoinette Cosway or Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte’s canonical text ‘Jane Eyre’ (1847) as well as in Jean Rhys’ counter narrative ‘Wide Sargasso Sea’ (1966). My paper would elucidate the power dynamics and the patriarchal and racial ideals associated with the portrayal of women in Victorian England. Further, confinement, as a mode of discipline, functions within the racial and patriarchal biases of the narrative and, subsequently, tends to curb the volatility associated with the madness of women. My study would explore societal disciplinary actions imposed on Victorian women and the complexities of confinement and discipline in a comparative study of Charlotte Bronte’s and Jean Rhys’s

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narratives.

(A) Materials and Methods:

The experiences of Antoinette or Bertha, a creole woman in a colonised estate, develop within the power structure of the colonial narrative as well as postcolonial counter narrative respectively. Antoinette, as Jean Rhys names the female monstrosity captured in Charlotte Brontë's narrative, has the agency to describe her home, her family and her struggles as an estranged offspring of a white man. She is seen augmenting, as the 'other side' of a popular narrative with the association of madness that she has filially received from her mother almost like the garden she describes, "Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible – the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown, and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell." (Rhys, 2). She also holds the authority to deny the marriage to Rochester initially. She is vocal about her dislikes and her desires and is human enough to fall in love with her husband and demand the love she knew she deserved. Rhys builds Antoinette a sympathetic discourse where her mother's madness is intertwined with her desire for love leading to her gradual transference into 'the mad' Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's novel who is confined and censured in Thornfield Hall. My critical analysis will be situated against Michelle Foucault's theorisation of discipline, confinement and punishment in his book *Discipline and Punishment* and explore the complexities of madness, hysteria and the colonial legacy of ostracisation in the context of the Victorian woman.

II. DATA ANALYSIS

Love holds an emotional authority which, for Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* and Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, surpasses her idea of her 'self' and her identity. She has a chaotic array of identities and a fragmented self with which she harbours her emotional attachment towards Mr Rochester, the coloniser and the patriarch. Jean Rhys's description of 'mad' Bertha is presented through Rochester's vision, which even though is sympathizing, does leave her narrative fractured. Additionally, Charlotte Brontë's narrative of Bertha, a stark contrast to Rhys's Antoinette, is linguistically bound to the discourse of the colonial master and superior patriarch, Mr Rochester. Neither is she given a language to build a counter narrative nor given her own name, thus discrediting any ties that she would have had with her origin. She embodies the racial other with an uncontrolled sexual vagrancy which, interestingly, escapes the confines of her tethered self through Jane, the protagonist. Bertha's existence is a slowly developing narrative while Mrs Fairfax guides Jane into Thornfield Hall and hints upon her existence saying, "If there was a ghost at Thornfield Hall, this would be its haunt" (130). Jane, a white

woman well suited for Mr Rochester, has the agency and the power to imagine Bertha as a 'demon' with the little knowledge that she gathers about her by feeling her presence. It is in Jane's rhetoric that Bertha Mason remains entangled as a creature "running backward and forward" [...] "In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room" [...] The maniac bellowed; she parted her shaggy locks from her visage and gazed wildly at her visitors" (Bronte, 367). While Rhys's portrayal is human and lets Bertha's madness hinge on hope and the aspect that she could not recall herself attacking Richard Mason, Bronte makes her appear through her formless groans. Evidently, Bertha has a sporadic existence and a pulverised narrative along the two texts and is enclosed within certain power structures that constantly encroach her sense of self.

Confinement, as a mode of discipline, functions within the racial and patriarchal biases of the narrative and, subsequently, tends to curb the volatility associated with the madness of a woman. The racial undertones in Rochester's voice have been significantly evident in the narratives where he describes the Caribbean Island as topographically the 'Other' with 'extensive climatic variations' and where he feels compromised of European values and the calm 'winds from home'. In the Caribbean islands Rochester comes to terms with the irresistible way in which he desires his wife and blames it on her 'mad coaxing' (Rhys, 68). He finds himself aroused with passion and comes to relish "flowers that open in the dark", the orchids and frangipanis. He however blames the irresistible womanhood of his wife and her land that allowed such extravagant urges within him. Rhys brilliantly shows the widened array of emotional complexities that both Antoinette and Rochester harbour. The Sargasso Sea, between Europe and the native lands endowed with colonial presence, is so wide that Rochester, as a masculine and colonial patriarch; a man built up within the extensive Victorian ideals and its obsession of the 'good woman' in 19th century England convinces himself of the fearful existence of the 'exotic other'. What is a tragic turn of events, a drastic and unjustified manipulation in Rhys' novella forms the basis of Antoinette's gradual transformation into Bertha. Confining her extravagant urges, that challenge and threaten Rochester's masculine self and the essential values associated with Victorian England, led to the creation of a space that, "constituted outside the legal apparatus when, throughout the social body, procedures were being elaborated for distributing individuals, fixing them in space, classifying them..." (Foucault, 231). Bertha Mason, as Antoinette becomes and stays in Bronte's narrative, is put in pieces with the dramatic indulgence of the questions of race, class, gender and identity that lead her towards a tumultuous emotional drift and, eventually, a psychological trauma of not being able to find herself an identity. The final snap of ties from her native land and her arrival in England where Rhys shows a poignant patience as she waits for her husband to come and talk to her, "I thought that when

I saw him and spoke to him I would be wise as serpents, harmless as doves. ‘I give you all I have freely,’ I would say, ‘and I will not trouble you again if you will let me go.’ But he never came.” (Rhys, 73). Dwelling in a secluded space significantly used to control her, rather than discipline, Bertha is disengaged from the society; she now is equally a part of owing to her strong ‘native’ aura and an enticing sexuality that progresses to threaten a society of masculine and feminine harmony in Thornfield Hall.

The ‘prison’ is a space where certain measures are taken in order to build a better human being, someone who can exist in a society under certain moral or legal obligations. Foucault sees a prison as forming a “part of an active field in which projects, improvements, experiments, theoretical statements, personal evidence and investigations have proliferated” (Foucault, 235). Compared to the proactive role of the prison, as a legal object for promoting discipline, the attic of Thornfield Hall exists in sheer denial of the woman that was locked in there. The power structure in a prison, in Michelle Foucault’s words, is a ‘disposal of one’s liberty’ and ‘isolation.’ (Foucault, 237) Working within it tethers, Bertha dwells in the ‘madness’ attributed to her. Additionally, while mental asylums in Victorian England used medical corrective measures to re-establish ‘sanity’ and prisons attempted to re-establish routine and discipline, Bertha is in an environment that is static and oblivious to her presence; there is no force that leads her towards growth, improvement or any kind of change for that matter. In Foucault’s idea of a prison, there is an ‘uninterrupted, unceasing discipline’ (Foucault, 236) where the liberty of the prisoner is compromised only to impose a ‘new form on the perverted individual’ (Foucault, 236). There is constant movement along which a routine is created, and a way of living established. Bertha is made to live without visits, without anyone to talk to and without any corrective measure. She is recognized as a hysterical, native woman and kept away from a refined English society owing to which, there is a fear that her ‘sense of self’ and ‘extravagant desires’ have instilled in the residents of Thornfield due to which no one tries to understand the deeper recesses of her ‘self’ and her ‘mind’. She is left in a directionless world and powerless amongst constant denial yet subsequent supervision. ‘Isolation’, as a principle of power infliction, not only keeps the convict away from the society and all the ‘complicities’ that promoted the crime but also instigates reflection and remorse in the convict, which is seen as a ‘positive instrument of reform’ (Foucault, 237). The attic of Thornfield Hall is secluded from the rest of the house as well as all the socialization and merrymaking that happens in it; in doing so Bertha is confined as the ‘social other’ who is a ‘mad’, unsolicited external force that attempts to destroy the essence of the English culture and values. She remains discordant and is associated with such animalistic metaphors that it is almost beyond remorse, repentance or

reformation that she exists, not surprisingly, entirely within Jane's narrative loop, "While I paced softly on, the last sound I expected to hear in so still a region, a laugh, struck my ear. It was a curious laugh; distinct, formal, mirthless. I stopped: the sound ceased, only for an instant; it began again, louder: for at first, though distinct, it was very low. It passed off in a clamorous peal that seemed to wake an echo in every lonely chamber; though it originated but in one, and I could have pointed out the door whence the accents issued." (Bronte, 366).

A crucial form of power, that which controls and disengages the considered 'other,' the mad Bertha, from the refined 'self,' Jane Eyre, in Charlotte Bronte's narrative, is disseminated along the aspect of supervision and moral policing. Jane being locked inside the red room is one of the primary motifs of supervision and discipline in the novel '*Jane Eyre*'. Jane is a white woman who must grow up to inhabit the values of a 'cultured society'. She lives a life where every aspect of herself is relentlessly controlled by external forces of the society, so much so that she grows up to become a 'good' governess and is capable of giving Rochester the kind of love, life and family that every settled society in England wishes for and strives towards. Contrary to Jane's childhood and eventual upbringing that happened keeping her in environments that controlled all kinds of excesses that might harbour a woman's body, Antoinette Cosway grew up amidst a peculiar sense of freedom and a gracious idea of her 'self'. Being a creole with signs of her mother's madness creeping into the society, she grew up in solitude with only Tia as her friend and Christophine as her guide. Tia, a mirror image of her existence and Christophine, who argues that "She have the sun in her" (Rhys, 65) and requests Rochester to "try her once more" (Rhys, 65), allow her the minute episodes of self-love and freedom. She begins her gradual journey from Antoinette to Bertha when Rochester starts to fear his own excessive desires and erratic energies with her; so, begins her journey towards uncompromising supervision away from her roots, eradicating very name despite her vain attempts to challenge, "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too." [...] 'If my father, my real father, was alive you wouldn't come back here in a hurry after he'd finished with you. If he was alive. Do you know what you've done to me? It's not the girl, not the girl. But I love this place and you have made 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 somewhere else where I have been unhappy, and all the other things are nothing to what has happened here. I hate it now like I hate you and before I died I will show you how much I hate you.' (Rhys, 60). She is constantly 'handled' and supervised by Grace Poole who is paid to not let her escape and Jane who, almost her body double opposes and challenges her and keeps her further away from Thornfield that she is a part of. Bertha is

looked down upon and vigorously controlled rather than being treated human, in the least. She embodies the flame resistance that the patriarchal regime of Rochester's house does not enkindle, thus leaving her a 'heaving mass of beastly stature', in their eyes.

III. CONCLUSION

Power weaves itself throughout Bertha's life; not only suppressing her as a human being but also making her an occasional nuisance or disturbance in the house during weddings and other social gatherings. Bertha, however, is a fiery resistive force usurping Rochester's colonial self and patriarchal vision by burning the house down in the final parts of the novel. What started with a destruction of Antoinette's origins came full circle with Bertha bringing the entirety of Rochester's life down, of which, the loss of vision that he suffered was an infringement that broke down his pride. The forces of social, cultural, racial and patriarchal power-play that occupy the two texts are countered by Bertha's actions of resistance. Her 'madness' keeps her well away from the society that is a dreadful combination of policing and punishment.

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