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Jane Eyre: A Post-Colonial (Re)-Reading

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Meenakshi Mukherjee in her book, *Interrogating Post-Colonialism :Theory, Text and Contexts* (p.3-4) has defended post-colonialism as an emancipatory concept on the grounds that “it makes us interrogate many aspects of the study of literature that we were made to take for granted, enabling us to re-interpret some of the old canonical texts from Europe from the perspective of our specific historical and geographical location .” In this article, I have attempted to address how the marginalized character in *Jane Eyre* is re-imagined in Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* for which Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* serves as a hypotext

Jane Eyre (1847) has been considered one of the classic English texts which celebrates the arrival to selfhood of Jane from the state of an uncared for orphan to a governess of a rich household and eventually as an heiress of Ferndean. English literature (as all other literatures of the world) has certain canonical texts, which are widely acclaimed and accepted as classics. In the classics, we expect to find the finest embodiment of a culture. However, in the post-colonial era literature is often read in a contrapuntal way to uncover the gaps. According to Said, such a reading bears witness to the *worldliness* of culture. The term reminds us that texts emerge from and have complex engagement with the historical, social and political conditions of their time, amongst which colonialism is fundamental in the nineteenth century. Said defines a contrapuntal reading as one which remains simultaneously aware “both of metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (459). The third point, which Said, raises concerns literary value. Reading texts contrapuntally, Said argues, often reminds the critic of the continuing value of literary work being studied. A “classic” text may have “affiliations with the sordid history” of colonialism but in Said’s view, there is no need to de-value the novel as a consequence. Said’s reinstatement in *Culture and Imperialism* of certain classic texts suggests that literary value need not be entirely dependent upon a text’s ideological moorings. Said thus opens up a debate upon literary values. The unsaid gains more importance than the obviously stated in a contrapuntal reading and to fill in the gaps we need a resisting reader who will not willingly surrender his senses to the magic of the narrative or the characterization. As Susan Sontag declares in her well-known essay *Against Interpretation*, interpretation is no longer the agenda of the readers and critics. Post-colonial reader welcomes multiple points of view or narrations and is often an active agent in creating meanings for an ambiguous text. Another strategy of the post –colonialists is the re-writing of the classicist texts. Often texts are re- written from an altogether different perspective. In such cases,

the Centre is re-located from the Euro-centric perspective and the periphery becomes the Centre. The marginalized or subaltern characters, often silenced in the classicist texts, are focalized.

Review of Literature

Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's feminist text *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination* (Yale University Press, 1979) and Spivak's essay *Three Women's Texts and A Critique of Imperialism* have set the framework for my study. My methodology is based on the post-colonial reading strategy in which the sub-text is more important than the text. It resists the tendency to fix meaning. This study illustrates a re-reading of the famous Victorian novel *Jane Eyre* from the post-colonial point of view. Many post-colonial critics have pointed out the fact that literatures written during the period of colonization hardly mention (except in a line or two) the colonies. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the money coming from the colonies funded the lavish style of the aristocracy. In *Jane Eyre*, Jamaica and India are the two Oriental places that are casually mentioned. Jane Eyre's uncle had accumulated wealth from the wine trade in Jamaica and Jane's cousin, St. John, is described as going to India as a missionary. He takes up the traditional white man's burden of "civilizing the natives". In the text, Jane herself is described as learning Hindustani from St. John. We are also told that St. John wanted Jane to marry him and accompany him to India to help him in his mission. However, Jane agrees to go as a friend and not as a wife for she does not believe in being trapped in a love-less marriage. And, it is significant that at the end of the novel Jane expects to hear about the death of St. John in a strange and savage land. There is even a veiled reference to "Sati" or widow burning in Rochester's song in which he sings to his beloved about living and dying together. Jane retorts immediately that it is a pagan custom. Bronte might have been aware of this "barbaric" custom from the Indian colonies.

Jamaica is also significant because it is the money from Jamaica which helps Jane and her cousin to become "respectable". The excessive Victorian concern with class and the aristocracy is reflected here. Jane also needs the money to raise herself from her position as "governess" to a child from an aristocratic household. A close reading of the comments of the other characters, especially Blanche Ingram is a pointer to the ambiguous status of governesses in Victorian households. They were considered as working class and as such, their aggressiveness was seen as a threat to the sexuality in the household. As a representative of her class, Jane did not take part in the social activities of Thornfield. Even when Rochester did not to exclude her, Jane was too embarrassed to join the festivities and fun. She was just a spectator from a corner of the room and made her discreet exit at the right moment. A historical study of the role of the governess in the social strata reveals that most of them came from respectable families whose daughters were well educated but did not have the money to "buy" husbands. Most of them were exploited or were harassed. Again, the post of a "governess" is a colonial legacy and comes to an end with the decay of the aristocracy.

The quarrel of the post-colonial critics is always with representation of the “Other”. In the novel, Bertha Mason is Jane’s “Other”. However, the ink spent on her by Bronte is minimal. She is or seems to be another Caliban who is able to communicate only through noises. Until Chapter XXV, she is submerged in the background, a ghostly presence. However, as Derrida has theorized elsewhere her absence is her presence. It is only on the night before Jane’s wedding that she is physically represented and that too, in a surrealist mode. Jane often refers to Bertha as “It”. For example, “it removed my veil from its gaunt head” (308; ch .25).Also, “it drew aside the window curtain and looked out” (308; ch.25). Again, in a de-humanizing description which caught the imagination of Spivak and has no parallels elsewhere Bertha is described thus:

In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human, 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 (317).

It recalls Edward Said’s reconstruction of reality by the Occident. Edward Said, since the publication of his famous work, *Orientalism* (pub.1978) has given us new tools to deal with European’s falsification of the East. What is important about Said’s argument is that he proves that Orientalism is a fabricated construct of the West and it comes through a series of negative images, which has come to stay as “reality” for the Orient. Following Said’s argument post-colonial critics have viciously raised their voices against the degrading portrayal of Bertha. John McLeod has an interesting thesis. He states:

The revelation of Bertha promises to solve the mystery by allowing Jane to look upon that which has been hitherto concealed. But notice how, in a series of vague phrases, Jane struggles to render what she sees. Bertha is not clearly visible to Jane’s eye: she remains in shade, *seeming* to grovel, looking like some strange animal. Her head and face remain hidden from view. We would read this passage as evidence of the extent to which colonial discourses (...) often disqualify the colonized subject from being adequately represented. But from another position we may notice how the presence of Bertha *problematizes* Jane’s position as an omniscient narrator. Jane’s authority as a narrator is challenged as Bertha will not be readily captured within Jane’s narrative (*Beginning Postcolonialism*, 160).

Since re-reading is a strategy that post-colonial critics adopted from the feminists, what Elaine Showalter said about re-reading a woman’s text can be applied to re-reading texts in general:

... it can be read as a double-voiced discourse, containing a “dominant” and

“muted” story, what Gilbert and Gubar call a “palimpsest”...we must keep the two oscillating texts simultaneously in view. As Elaine Showalter states, in the purest feminist literary criticism we are presented with a radical alteration of our vision, a demand that we see meaning in what has previously been an empty space. The orthodox plot recedes, and another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background stands out in bold relief like a thumb-print.

(Cited from *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*, Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader edited by David Lodge, 326)

Jean Rhys, a Caribbean writer has adapted and re-written *Jane Eyre* under the title *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). In an interview, Jean Rhys has stated that rage at the dehumanized portrayal of Martha propelled her creative instincts. Rhys' position as a Creole in Caribbean island, and her own displacement from “home” placed her in the same situation as Bertha, with whom she could empathize. It is interesting to note how Jean Rhys has re-worked the text. It is divided into three parts – the narrative of Antoinette Bertha Mason, the second part is that of an unknown male narrator (whom the readers will later recognize as that of Rochester) and finally of Antoinette. The first part recalls her childhood with her widowed mother Annette in a large house in Coulibri, Jamaica. Antoinette's mother marries Mason who tries to bring back the glamour and glory of its former days. It was a time of tense social relations between the Blacks and the Whites. Coulibri is set on fire. This drives Annette to distraction. Antoinette is sent away to a convent school. Eventually her mother dies and she is invited by her stepfather Mr. Mason to live with him in Jamaica.

In the second part of the narrative, Jean Rhys problematizes the issue of re-naming. Re-naming and re-inventing was something done by the colonial masters. By re-naming, the colonialists were asserting their authority and destroying the history of the thing re-named or was objectifying it. However, here we find the unknown male narrator addressing Antoinette as “Bertha” which is something that she does not like. The unknown narrator, who has overtones of Rochester, is uncomfortable in the island. Eventually, Daniel Cosway, who claims to be Antoinette's half-brother, misleads him. He informs the narrator about the madness that runs as a family trait in the Cosway family and leads him into believing that he has been tricked into marriage. Antoinette interrupts the narrative and tells briefly how she pleaded with Christophine (her maid) to give her a potion that will make her husband love her again. Instead, her husband has a sexual encounter with a Black servant, Amelie and decides to return to England along with Antoinette.

The third part of the novel is set in a large house in England. It raises memories of the antecedent text. Grace Poole narrates the opening paragraphs, but the rest is narrated by Antoinette. She contrasts her memories of the Caribbean life with the dull melancholy of her attic cell. One night she dreams of setting the house on fire and jumping from the rooftop. The

novel ends with Antoinette walking along a dark passage with a candle in hand.

The representation of Bertha Mason is the contested site where many opinions criss-cross. The feminists, Gilbert and Gubar, have an interesting hypothesis. They state that Bertha is a symbol of repression of the rage of the Nineteenth century female writer. She has also been described as the “Other” of the heroine Jane. Jane has to tame her wild characteristics before she can attain selfhood. But in her epoch making essay, *Three Women’s Text and a Critique of Imperialism*, Spivak points out that to see Bertha only as the alter-ego of Jane (as the feminist critics do) is to miss the point altogether. For Spivak, she is an epitome of the Orientalist “Other” that Said tried so brilliantly to portray. As an Oriental, she is presented in negative terms – compared to Jane’s small frame, Bertha is huge and corporal. Jane’s chastity is in direct contrast to her “rank appetites”, and that she was unfaithful in her marriage is more than hinted at and her madness is linked to the excesses. However, Bertha seems to be more sinned against than sinning. For her mistakes, her lord and master appropriates her and her lands, and puts her to solitary confinement in the attic of a huge house. The colonialist enterprise seems to have a parallel here. Bertha retaliates by burning down the house and jumping to her destruction. She proves she cannot be tamed to submission. The less than human treatment meted to the Orientalists is typical of the slippage in existence then, and is played out in the novel by Rochester’s Creole wife. She has to throw away her life in order that the white woman, Jane may have happiness and fulfillment.

John McLeod in his book *Beginning Post-colonialism* has systematically analyzed the characteristic features of re-writings. He states:

- A re-writing does much more than “fill in” the gaps perceived in the source text. Rather it seems to enter into a “productive dialogue” with the text.
- The re-writing takes the source-text as a point of reference and a departure, but its meanings are not fully dependent on it.
- The re-writing often exists to resist or challenge the colonialist representations of colonized peoples and cultures perceived in the source text and popular readings of it. In this way, we might consider a re-writing of a classic as “post-colonial”.
- A re-writing often implicates the reader as an active agent in determining the meanings made possible by the dialogue between the source-text and the re-writing (168).

Since the stress is upon “productive dialogue”, the re-writing is never free of the source text or the antecedent text. For this reason, some critics believe that re-writings can never challenge the authority of the “classic”.

To come back to the debate upon literary value, Edward Said exclaims that we are in danger of imposing upon literature from the past the concerns of the present, and in one sense we cannot claim to be reading historically at all. Said would describe this critical response as a “rhetoric of blame” (*Culture and Imperialism*, p.115) used by some critics to retrospectively

denounce classics which seems to support a colonial view of the world. To the issue whether Bronte can be summarily dismissed as a colonialist and a racist, the answer is a definite “no”. Whatever is of aesthetic value in her art is self-validating and even if she is addressing colonialist concerns, probably she is only reflecting a reality, which was undeniable at that point in time. A writer cannot but reflect reality however unpleasant it is. Though it is oft quoted that art is filtered through ideology, here the aesthetic concerns seems to over-ride ideology. The captive power of her narrative and the frequent incisive address to the “Reader” maintain an aura of authority and reality. The addresser-addressee situation is maintained until the last chapter. Her last chapter begins with the lines, “*Reader, I survived . . .*”. I would say that *Jane Eyre* survives and therefore Bronte survives!

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