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Situating the Other in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract

Along with other leading contemporary intellectual such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, Spivak has challenged the disciplinary conventions of literary criticism by focusing on the cultural texts of those who are often marginalized by the dominant western culture: the new immigrant, the working class, women and the post-colonial subject. Spivak's deconstructive reading was influenced by her Prof. Paul de Man- one of the most prominent advocate of deconstruction in North America during 1960s and 1970s Paul de Man argues that the meaning of a literary text is not stable but is radically indeterminate and therefore always open to further questioning and that the texts contain blind spots which always and necessarily lead to errors and misleading. Exploiting various theories, Spivak has dealt with Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1848), a western canonical literary text of 19th century to expose the thematic of imperialism and to reveal the racial biases that constitute even apparently humanist texts.

Keywords

The Other; Charlotte Bronte; Jane Eyre.

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Along with other leading contemporary intellectual such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, Spivak has challenged the disciplinary conventions of literary criticism by focusing on the cultural texts of those who are often marginalized by the dominant western culture: the new immigrant, the working class, women and the post-colonial subject. Spivak's deconstructive reading was influenced by her Prof. Paul de Man- one of the most prominent advocate of deconstruction in North America during 1960s and 1970s Paul de Man argues that the meaning of a literary text is not stable but is radically indeterminate and therefore always open to further questioning and that the texts contain blind spots which always and necessarily lead to errors and misleading.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'Three Women's Text and a Critique of Imperialism' discusses the 'imperialist narrativization of history', in C. Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhy's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, to show how contemporary Anglo-American feminist literary criticism privileges C. Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1848) for the individual narrative of its female protagonist Jane Eyre.

The main narrative of Bronte's novel may seem to chart the education and development of the white, English bourgeois female protagonist Jane Eyre within the restricted space of 19th century domestic sphere. Yet at the same time, Jane's narrative of female individualism is achieved at the expense of Bertha Mason, Rochester's first wife, who is taken from her home in the West Indies and confined to Rochester's English household, where she is denied full

access to the category of human subject. Gilbert and Gubar have argued that Bertha Mason embodies Jane's dark double. Spivak insists that such a reading ignores imperialist sub-text; instead, Spivak asserts that Bertha is 'a figure produced by axiomatics of imperialism'.

Anglo-American feminists like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's text *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) represent Jane Eyre as an example of a liberated western female individual. As Spivak emphasizes, however, this tendency to focus exclusively on Jane's first person narrative overlooks the historical significance of Bertha Mason, the white Jamaican Creole woman, who is imported into the novel's gothic sub-plot as Jane's monstrous double, and denied existence as a human individual. Alarming, this representation of Bertha Mason as an unknowable other who is not yet human recalls Kristeva's description of the unknowable stare of the peasants at Huxian square in *About Chinese Women*. Like the Chinese women Kristeva describes, Bertha Mason is denuded of any cultural or historical being, operating instead as an oriental other who reflects the stability of Jane's western female self. In Spivak's account, both of these texts reproduce the stereotypes of colonial discourse in the representation of western female individualism.

The two characters: Jane and Bertha each represent a different region; while Bertha represents the East and the ancient, Jane represents the new and the modern. With an attempt to distinguish between the old and the new, C. Bronte creates the character of Bertha Mason as the exhibition of female representation and desire frequently found in the East. Bertha Rochester is the emblem of Eastern society, one which the British see as static and barbaric, and Jane Eyre is representative of the Western civilization.

Bertha is dehumanized through bestial imagery, such as confusing whether she is a "beast or human being" and embellishing her animalistic traits like

groveling on “all fours,” growling “like some strange wild animal,” having a “mane” instead of hair, and appearing like a “clothed hyena” (Bronte 1848:289-290). Furthermore, Jane is made to discover that Bertha’s skin was “purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed; the black eye-brows widely raised over the blood shot eyes” (Bronte 317). All these descriptions for Jane are “fearful and ghastly” and they remind her “of the foul German Spectre- the vampire” (Bronte 317). By constructing and then destroying her as the not yet human other, the novel allows Jane to establish her own identity in opposition to Bertha, thus replicating the way imperial powers construct their own identities and sense of superiority through applying the same process to inferior races. As Spivak notes, the text can therefore be read as “an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizers” (Spivak 251). By rendering indeterminate the boundary between human and animal in Bertha’s character, Spivak argues that her entitlement under the spirit of law is weakened. This allows the reader to accept Bertha as subhuman and thus Bronte has used Bertha to create or define Jane.

Bronte also presents Bertha as a sexually vigorous woman. This can be seen when Rochester indirectly describes Bertha’s characteristics pretending that they are Jane’s. He describes Jane/ Bertha as being “big, brown, buxom; with hair just such as the ladies of Carthage must have had” (Bronte 248). Although this statement is ambiguous, scholars believe that he is perhaps thinking of the stereotypical view of Carthage being a city of sexual sin. This, in turn, parallels Bertha with the fiery goddess of Carthage, Dido. Dido not surprisingly, burned herself on a funeral pyre when her lover, Aeneas, left. Similarly Bertha commits the same act in order to exhibit her anger and passion. Thus Bertha is representative of the corrupt empire of the past. On the other hand Jane represents the healthy empire of the present that rejects such a custom as sati. Jane, with her goal of living the life of emergent modern

woman, must reject the custom of sati, thus rejecting the Eastern illusion which Bertha represents. The scene of curtains on fire also conveys Bertha as the barbaric woman of the past, who is unable to repress the rage. Bertha's passion and anger made her a bad wife. Jane on the other hand, is the one who puts out the flame like a good wife. This may be representative of British's role in the prohibition of Sati. Jane saves Rochester's life thus correcting the barbaric act Bertha has just committed.

Again, when St. John proposes to have Jane join him on his mission to India; she is presented with the chance of getting grilled alive. If she submits to him, she will be killing herself, an act which may be representative of self-immolation. But Jane denied proving herself to be an exemplar of the female figure that is rebellious. When St. John proposes her accompanying him on his journey, he is exposing her to a similar temptation of self-sacrifice that Rochester does to Bertha Mason.

Spivak compares Bertha to Jane and asserts that there is a need to look the text through another angle, there is a need to study the gaps and silences. She further continues to say that the way Bertha reacts to her imprisonment is very similar to the way Jane acted in the 'red room' at the Reeds. Through conditioning Jane has learned to repress the passion and the anger that she had expressed as a young girl, due to the fact that her society doesn't accept it. This anger that she once held inside is prevalent in Bertha's act.

It is to be noted that despite her liberal feminist view, Jane holds an extremely imperialist view of Bertha, she feels that freedom is alright for her, but not for the colonists. Moreover, owing to Bertha's position as a Jane's rival for Mr. Rochester, Jane doesn't even support Bertha as another woman. Literary critic Peter Grundin best describes the way in which Jane's personality is at odds with the way in which she associates with Bertha: Even to the relatively charitable Jane, Bertha is essentially subhuman, terrifying and disgusting, and if her mysterious nature is at odds with the realistic

perspective dominant elsewhere, this uncharitable attitude towards Bertha is at odds with the novel's prevailing liberalism, which directs our attention towards problems of the day. Even before she knows about Bertha, she is convinced that she is better than Bertha.

Vast in the supporting role of the colonial other, Bertha is also the epitome of the 'spoken for'. Featuring in the text first as an unspoken as well as unspeakable secret, she is then no more than an object of discourse, a discursive construct that comes to textual existence in an embedded narrative told from the perspective of Rochester. Bertha's confinement to the third floor cell of Thornfield hall, makes her out as a mere representation in Said's sense of the world, a discursive formation which, far from being predicted upon firsthand experience or reality, entirely relies upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed upon codes of understanding. Rochester's second hand tale about Bertha is Europe's frame narrative about its non-European others. Bertha is both locked up in an attic and caught in the strictures of ideological representations, in the straitjacket of Rochester's one sided and embedded narrative which constructs her as a stereotyped figure of excess, deviant, sexuality and insanity.

Bertha Mason is denied access to the category of female individual in the novel because of her Jamaican Creole lineage. For Spivak, *Jane Eyre* asserts that Western women's struggle not only confined to reproductive rights in the 'closed circle of the nuclear family' but also contributed to soul-making enterprise i.e. enlightened morality in the domestic sphere. And this is very precisely situated in the Victorian world of Jane Eyre, where Jane stands as a paragon of feminine virtue, against whom Bertha Mason is defined as monstrous, or bestial, because of her mixed race geneology and wild, sexualized passion. In Jane Eyre, though the last section has already been dealt upon in terms of Jane's denial to self-sacrifice, it can also be interpreted as the civilizing mission of imperialism in the text in terms of a Christian

allegory. The hero of this allegory, St. John Rivers, is a Christian missionary, who proposes to marry Jane and take her on a pilgrimage to India. River's justification for this project is articulated in the terms of a civilizing mission:

My vocation? My great work? My hopes of being numbered in the band that have merged all ambitions in the glorious one of bettering their race- of carrying knowledge into the realms of ignorance – of substituting peace for war – freedom for bondage- religion for superstition- the hope of heaven for the fear of hell? (Bronte cited in Spivak 249)

By defining Indian culture as 'a realm of ignorance' where superstition and 'the fear of hell prevails, Rivers is thus able to justify his 'great work' through the moral imperative of a soul-making enterprise. Although Spivak argues that the last section of the text is tangential to the main narrative, this 'tangential narrative' or textual margin is fundamental to the 'territorial and subject constituting project' of imperialism.

What is latent in *Jane Eyre* is made to manifest in *Wide Sargasso Sea* from Bertha's point of view. The later text does a contrapuntal reading of the former. In *Jane Eyre* it is only when Bertha attempts to transgress the subject position of a good wife that she is cast as a monstrous inhuman figure while in Rhys' retelling we come to know that Bertha was compelled to behave as a bad wife and it was not an innate bestiality that prompts her violent reaction to Rochester.

Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a post-colonial rewriting of Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, located its main events in Jamaica, during the time of emancipation from colonial slavery in the early 19th century. As a West Indian but also as a writer blessed with a formidable critical intelligence, she understands the constructed nature of the colonialist discourse that passes itself off as naturalized and transparent. Jean Rhys was of course unhappy with C. Bronte's treatment of Bertha and undertook to revise the story of Rochester's mad wife. The novel in Rhys' is a response to *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte Bronte's book had long haunted

Rhys, mostly for the story it did not tell – that of the madwoman in the attic, Rochester’s terrible secret. *Wide Sargasso Sea* followed her voyage into the dark, both from Bertha’s point of view and Rochester’s. Rhys struggled over the book, enduring rejections and revisions, wrestling to bring this ruined woman out of ashes.

According to Spivak, Bertha’s reproductive body is legally defined as the private property of Rochester, and this is described by Spivak in 1988 discussion of sati in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ In many patriarchal societies, the legal definition of women’s reproductive bodies is the private property of the husband, the brother, father, son or any other male. By comparing the scene in *Jane Eyre* where Bertha violently attacks Richard Mason and the parallel scene in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Spivak emphasizes how in Rhys’ retelling, Bertha Mason’s violent reaction against Richard Mason is prompted by her brother’s invocation of the legally binding marriage contract between Bertha and her husband Rochester, which defines Bertha as Rochester’s private property.

Rhys explicitly challenges the representation of Bertha Mason as a monstrous, inhuman figure in *Jane Eyre* by showing how Antoinette, a white Creole child, is violently renamed as Bertha Mason by Rochester in the second part of the text. “In the figure of Antoinette, whom in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rochester violently renames Bertha, Rhys suggests that so intimate a thing as personal identity might be determined by the politics of imperialism” (Spivak 1985:250). Rhys powerfully articulates a scene that rewrites the events leading up to the fire at Thornfield hall in *Jane Eyre*. In this scene Antoinette recounts her experience of the journey from the West Indies to England; and how her cultural identity is denied when Rochester “wouldn’t call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window, with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking glass” (Rhys 117). Antoinette’s experience of cultural non-being is exacerbated at Thornfield hall, where she asks, “what I am doing in this

place and who am I? ...They tell me I am in England, but I don't believe them. We lost our way to England" (Rhys 117)

Rhys deals with Bertha's death as an act of self-sacrifice. In the 1800's the act of divorce was not acceptable and one could not remarry until one's spouse was dead. Bertha's act of self-sacrifice, representative of sati, removes the obstacle between Rochester and Jane. It is Bertha, who "acts out the transformation of her 'self' into that fictive other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction" (Spivak 251). Spivak sees this scene as "an allegory of general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer" (Spivak 251)

The novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, acts as a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's famous 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*. The most striking difference between the two novels is that *Wide Sargasso Sea* transform Rochester's first wife from Bertha Mason, the infamous "madwoman in the attic", to the lively yet vulnerable Antoinette Cosway. She is no longer a cliché or a "foreign," possibly "half-caste" lunatic, but a real woman with her own hopes, fears and desires. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is usually taught as a post-modern and post-colonial response to *Jane Eyre*. In Brontë's novel, the mad wife is a gothic monster, acting variously as a ghostly apparition, and a legal impediment to Jane and Rochester's marriage. With the exception of her brother's relatively brief appearance, she stands largely without a back-story to explain or assuage her madness, and while Brontë's Victorian readers may have found her presentation acceptable, most modern readers will probably find the novel strangely cold and indifferent to her plight. Rhys uses multiple voices (Antoinette's and her husband's) to tell the story; in addition, Rhys makes a post-colonial argument when she ties Antoinette's husband's eventual rejection of Antoinette to her Creole heritage (a large factor in Antoinette's descent into madness). Feminist criticism would view the matter as – Antoinette is sent into a patriarchal society from the

matriarchal bubble represented by her aunt Cora. Her descent into madness and eventual death can be seen as her spirit being crushed by the oppressive male world around her, as her husband removes her identity. Her name, Antoinette Cosway, a symbol of her selfhood, is gradually taken from her: when her mother remarries she becomes Antoinette Mason, when she herself marries she becomes Antoinette Rochester and finally her husband insists her on calling Bertha. Unlike Charlotte Brontë's Bertha, Rhys allows us to interpret the fate of Antoinette differently by having an ending open.

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