

Jane Eyre to Wide Sargasso Sea: Transition of Character of Bertha Mason

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Abstract

Women have always been victims of patriarchy since time immemorial. Men have always tried navigating women's life as per their desires. Even more so when the women in question is a woman of colour. This paper attempts to highlight one such character who has endured male dominance in inexplicable ways and succumbed her life to it. The paper analyses the character of Bertha Mason in the novels Wide Sargasso Sea and through Jane Eyre. It attempts to problematise how even a female writer of Charlotte Bronte's reputation undermined empowerment and autonomy of women which ultimately results in perpetuation of patriarchy in society. This paper will explore how Bronte deliberately delineated the character of Bertha Mason in a bad light by merely using her as a stepping stone to make her novel intriguing. We can see some domineering characteristics in Bertha's husband Mr. Rochester with regard to his conduct towards Jane Eyre as well. This is quint essential in depicting how men may continue to subjugate women if not stopped at the initial stage. Their chauvinistic nature may keep on escalating if not confronted at the right time. Rhys recognizes the importance of women's autonomy and addresses this commonly faced issue in her novel which makes it a better-read giving insight into the lives of women of 19th century. It differentiates the way in which Jean Rhys gives a better portrayal of Bertha With respect to Charlotte Bronte's who just used her as a plot device and shows the plight of women and the circumstances which leads them to a miserable life.

Keywords: *patriarchy, subjugation, feminism, bertha mason.*

Introduction

Jean Rhys' Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) is a prequel to the popular feminist novel Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (1847).nte.

Materials and Methods

This paper would be an attempt to trace the portrayal of character of Bertha Mason in the novel Wide Sargasso Sea in terms of feminism. This paper will depict how Jean Rhys took a modern way of showing plight of women in Victorian era. It would focus on how women were termed as 'madwoman' after inflicting the atrocities on them. This paper will be juxtaposing the portrayal of Bertha Mason by Charlotte Bronte and Antionette Cosway by Jean Rhys.

Charlotte Bronte has merely used the character of Bertha Mason as a plot device for the progression of love story of Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester. She didn't even give her own identity and used such a derogatory term 'madwoman in the attic' to describe her entire existence.

There was no back story to her character which instantly leads the reader to mistake her as a villainous. She is no more than an animal who is tethered to a tree or a criminal locked up in a prison. She is depicted as a woman with only bad tendencies who is hazardous and has anger issues which can cost someone his/her life. Bronte showed us only one side of coin which is reflected by a popular quote by Nicky Gumbel:

"There is a story behind every person, a reason why they are the way they are."

Jean Rhys elaborated to the readers the story of a hapless and helpless woman which Bronte failed to show. Jean Rhys started with poignant picture of the Antionette's character. She described how she loses her father at an early age but that just is a beginning of her miseries. Her whole childhood is without her Parents' compassion and peer's support. She was deprived of a 'normal' childhood then how can anyone expect her to become a normal

person but Bronte showed it in a negative connotation by simply skipping her childhood in Jane Eyre.

Although Antionette was shown as shy, compassionate, introverted and indecisive woman who craves for love and respect but her gender and race of creole subjects her to get subjugated by others. Rhys intends the readers to sympathize with Bertha Mason showing the circumstances that made her the way she is shown by Bronte. She is not shown as a typical nineteenth century heroine as depicted in most of the Victorian novels instead we see glimpses of her wild imagination in the Wide Sargasso Sea.

Antionette's Childhood

Rhys wrote most of the novel in Antionette's point of view to give her the identity which she never got in her own life. Initially, we read how Antionette's life was always amiss. Her mother was second wife of her father and was disapproved by 'Jamaican ladies' because of being a 'Martinique girl'. Rhys has illuminated how race was one of the prime grounds of discrimination. Antionette's family neither belonged to black nor white community, therefore, we always find them getting shunned by both blacks and whites. Antionette has used the statements such as people jeering at her mother. This identity crisis and loneliness always haunted Antionette from the childhood. She is always shown worried about her mother and brother. Her mother withdrew from her and then she started spending most of her time in the kitchen. She was ridiculed by negroes with terms like 'white cockroaches' and 'sleeping dogs' which may leave a permanent scar on anyone's soul but Antionette was quite strong to deal with her predicament.

Antionette always became a scapegoat to others. We see Annette also took her for granted at times as she is more concerned about her son Pierre. Her bet with Tia led her to lose her clothes and wear the latter's shabby ones and this prompted her mother to marry an affluent man Mr. Mason to give her children better life. Mr. Mason was authoritative who loved to show off his prosperity which became a life-threatening problem for Antionette and her family. His sense of superiority as a 'male' makes him heedless to Annette's pleas to live somewhere else which ultimately leaves him penniless because of fire at Coulibri.

Mr. Mason was the first male person introduced in Wide Sargasso Sea who was so full of himself that didn't even consider the request by Annette. Antionette feels a sense of loss when she sees the fire burning. Coulibri was a part of her childhood- the golden and silver ferns, the orchids, the ginger lilies, roses, she had to leave everything and a part of herself too. When she saw Tia for the last time, her face was smeared with blood and tears and this fire incident at Coulibri changed her life forever but will always stay with her till her last moment.

When Antionette woke up after this dreadful incident, her life was completely changed. Her mother went mad due to loss of her son Pierre and Antionette lost both of her own people.

Later she was bullied and found refuge in the convent. But whenever Antionette thought her life is becoming normal, her destiny gave her the biggest shock. When Mr. Mason came to see Antionette and said her friend is coming to meet her, she had an unexplainable feeling of uneasiness and paranoia. Then Antionette's sudden dream about her following a man is a foreshadowing of her unequal and submissive marriage with Mr. Rochester. She is dictated by a man to follow her and she complies reluctantly is reflective of her upcoming fate where she'll be dominated by the hands of a man Mr. Rochester. Her dreams are outlet of her fears/anxieties throughout the first part of the novel.

Second part of novel starts with point of view of Antionette's husband depicting loss of her identity due to this relation called marriage. "SO IT WAS ALL OVER" are the initial lines of this part indicates that this is 'the beginning of an end'. Antionette doesn't seem to be comfortable or happy with her husband initially. She is afraid and reserved with him. Mr. Rochester didn't marry Antionette for love or out of admiration but for thirty thousand pounds paid to him by Mr. Mason. This dowry was given to him without the knowledge of Antionette. Antionette is objectified in this part of the novel who was bought and sold like a commodity. Her will wasn't considered important by her husband or stepfather. Rhys has reflected the plight of many girls all over the world who are married off without their own knowledge. When Antionette refused to marry Mr. Rochester on the wedding day, he emotionally manipulated her. When they both

came to Antionette's place, Mr. Rochester didn't reciprocate the enthusiasm she displayed. He admits many times that he isn't happy with the marriage and didn't find Antionette beautiful when she is fully committed to this Marriage and craves affection and love from husband. When Antionette tells him about her story in childhood, his remark, "I'm not astonished that you were frightened" is mocking her pain rather than understanding her plight. Antionette is happiest in the novel when she falls in love with Mr. Rochester after marriage thinking of her brightest future with him. She is always smiling, giggling, telling him stories about her childhood, her heartfelt remark, "I never wished to live before I know you" shows her zeal to lead a happy life with him and the amount of trust and love she placed in him. But Rochester once said "Have all beautiful things have sad endings?" is Rhys' remark for readers to prepare them for tragic ending of a beautiful thing Antionette. She herself said that she would die if Mr. Rochester said so. Antionette was a character who needed love, care and compassion to fight her own demons but Mr. Rochester didn't love her and was just thirsty for her.

When Mr. Rochester received a letter from Antionette's half-brother Daniel Cosway claiming that whole of Antionette's family was mad, Mr. Rochester wasn't shocked. He immediately believed saying that he already knew it and was just waiting for someone to say it. It was so easy for him to trust some stranger's words rather than trusting his own wife. This incident was enough to prove that he just wanted to get rid of Antionette by any excuse. Suddenly, one day Mr. Rochester starts calling Antionette as Bertha because he didn't like her name as her mother had a same name. Name is our first identity in the world but Mr. Rochester snatched even that from her. She became Bertha Mason from Antionette Cosway just because her husband wanted. Although this may seem a small thing to us but changing our whole identity isn't easy. Girls already have to change their last name after marriage but Antionette's whole name was changed with which she associated herself from her birth.

Daniel has referred to women as 'demons incarnate' and demanding. All of the men in the novel have misogynistic and chauvinistic view about women. They consider them mad, responsibility and even burden but not even one of them consider them sensible. When Antionette

confronted Mr. Rochester about his reserved behavior towards her, she is questioned a guilty in court. Mr. Rochester demands answers not only about her family but also about her meeting with Christophine. This whole marriage of Mr. Rochester and Antionette is imbalanced. Mr. Rochester hides so many things from her wife, even about dowry and expects full transparency from her. We see in many parts of the novel that Antionette loved to wear dresses which Mr. Rochester liked. She loved to get complimented and wanted just love and compassion from her husband. When Antionette is drunk, she questions about 'justice', how she saw her mother facing injustice and same happened with her too. Mr. Rochester is a man who stole her innocence and converted her into a mad woman. He was the one who made her believe that she is unworthy of love. He isn't the one to abuse physically but he did manipulated Antionette emotionally. When Antionette confronts him in her drunk state, she admits how the place that was dearest to her is now the one she hates. He took all her dearest things away from her, her peaceful and happy memories from childhood and even her friend Christophine who was with her since her birth. Antionette also mentioned about a heart-wrenching incident happened with her mother where she was forcefully kissed by a black devil. Women are considered as things to satisfy men's physical needs and Rhys has covered almost all the aspects all women's miseries in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Mr. Rochester didn't only consider her lunatic but also a characterless woman who would throw herself at any man. He swore to control her life and make her life a living hell, to not let her smile, to not let her see the sun, to not let her live a life ever again. This was the highest point in the novel where Antionette's life was changed for the worst.

In the third part of the novel, readers again encounter Antionette's point of view. She is locked in a cold room by a servant Grace pool. She is a helpless woman contrasting to what Charlotte Bronte painted her. Bronte described her as a 'virile force', who 'springs' at Mr. Rochester and 'grapples his throat violently'. Charlotte introduced her as a person trying to kill her own brother and used gothic descriptions to make the readers instantly hate her

character. Bronte made Mr. Rochester as a victim who is perturbed by his wife.

Findings and Results

There are contrasting portrayal of Mr. Rochester and Antionette in Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea. When Jean Rhys showed Antionette is avictim of Mr. Rochester's authoritative behavior, Charlotte Bronte chose to show Antionette as a vile woman acting as a villain in Jane and Rochester's love story. We can see few instances of Rochester's controlling behavior in Jane. Eyre as well when he dictates Jane about what to wear for their wedding. Antionette is ready to beg for her freedom from Rochester when she finds herself locked in the room, "I give you all I have freely and I will not trouble you again if you let me go". Despite knowing she has nothing to give to anyone, Antionette is ready to give anything just for her freedom. The room in which she is kept is totally empty with not even good was Conclusion food to her. She is very much rational and sane in this part of the novel but the conditions she is put in seems to be deliberate attempt by Mr. Rochester to make and prove her a lunatic just to prove himself right. He just wants to satisfy his ego by proving his point even if it costs someone her life.

Antionette slowly started losing rational part of her mind and attacks her brother and forgets about it. Bronte only picturized her worse side without any background

which leads the readers to term as villain. Bronte described her as an animalistic creature with thick and dark hair. In Wide Sargasso Sea, Antionette engages in a very sane conversation with Grace pool but Bronte termed her as a 'madwoman'. When at last Antionette went to put fire to the mansion, she remembers the door at the right. It reflects how Antionette did never lose her insanity completely till the end.

Conclusion

This paper proves how Charlotte Bronte took creative liberty in showing Bertha's character and Jean Rhys wrote the sequel novel to show the conditions which might have led Antionette to lose her sanity 'if she did. Antionette was a character who became a victim of social alienation and male authority and lost her life due to this. Mr. Rochester played a crucial part in adding to her miseries and leading her to taking her own life. Therefore, there are two aspects of Antionette's life, one is shown by Jean Rhys in Wide Sargasso Sea and the other is shown by Charlotte Bronte in Jane Eyre as 'madwoman in the attic'.

References

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