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Sharing of the Text: A Postcolonial Analysis of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract: Rewriting and reinterpreting the canonical imperial texts have remained one of the foremost agenda of postcolonial writers. The objective of this paper is to analyse one such canonical text *Jane Eyre* written by seminal Victorian novelist Charlotte Bronte and its prequel *Wide Sargasso Sea* written by twentieth century Caribbean novelist Jean Rhys from postcolonial perspective of writing back to the empire. It focuses on highlighting how these novels give a new life to the marginalised Caribbean protagonist who remained hidden and subjugated not only in the earlier novel but also had to face colonial suppression in the prequel that was written much later. Both the novels are interdependent and share the text to bring out the colonial forces working in the life of the protagonist and her intuitive decision to liberate herself through both the texts and reclaim her lost identity.

Keywords: Rhys, Postcoloniality, Bertha, Colonization, Antoinette, Resistance, Canon.

Introduction: Postcolonialism is the umbrella term used in literary theory to mark the writings that have attempted to shift the dominant ways in which the relations between Western and non-Western people and their worlds are viewed. The expansion of the European empire upto nine-tenths of the entire land surface of the globe created a broad division between the colonizers and the colonized during the nineteenth century. Throughout the period of colonial rule, the colonized contested this domination based on power, race and colour through many forms of active and passive resistance. After a prolonged and persistent struggle against the colonial powers, the colonies moved from colonial to autonomous, postcolonial status. It is striking that despite decolonization, there was not much desired change in the colonial mindset during the entire twentieth century.

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Postcolonial literature brackets together the entire writings that critically scrutinize the colonial relations and resist colonial perspectives in one way or another. It played a crucial role in overhauling and reshaping the dominant epistemological and ontological practices which supported colonization. Scholars like Edward Said, Jan Mohamed, Barbara Harlow, Homi Bhaba and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak see these writings as a form of resistance. Edward Said in his seminal text *Orientalism* argues that representation of the non- Western world in European texts, travelogues and other writings contributed to the creation of a dichotomy between Europe and its 'Others'. He showed how knowledge about non-Europeans was a part of the process of maintaining power over them. Similarly, Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist from Martinique stressed upon the need of reclaiming one's own past and of eroding the colonial ideology which devalues the past of the colonized nations. All postcolonial theorists have sought to offer ways of dismantling colonialism's signifying system and exposing its operation in silencing and oppressing of the colonial subject. Spivak has deliberated on the double subjugation of colonized women. Her discussion of the silencing of the muted native subject, in the form of the 'subaltern' women has testified to the fact that"There is no space from where the subaltern subject can speak".

Unlike Spivak, Homi Bhaba has asserted that the 'subaltern' can speak and a native voice can be recovered. Thus, postcolonial discourse not only delineates the workings of power but also locates and theorises oppositions, resistances and revolts on the part of the colonized. Literary texts have played a significant role in this formation because postcolonialism also works as a reading strategy to subvert the canonicity of a literary work. According to Bill Ashcroft et al:

"Some contemporary critics have suggested that postcolonialism is more than a body of texts produced within postcolonial societies, and that it is best conceived of as a reading practice."

The subversion of a canon is not simply a matter of replacing one set of text with another but by the reconstruction of the so-called canonical texts through alternative reading practices.William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has been subject to many such readings. It has been interpreted as a romance, as an imperial fable depicting the victory of the white man's knowledge over the

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savage, and as an anti-colonial text that depicts the struggle of the enslaved Caliban. George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), or Aimé Césaire's reworking of the play in an African context dismantle the hierarchy of Prospero, Ariel and Caliban.It is also reread as a political allegory.

Coetzee's *Foe* (1988), a postmodern rewriting of the Robinson Crusoe story, gives a neat symbolic shorthand for the process of self-articulation by the colonized. *Palace of the Peacock* (1960) by Wilson Harris, a rewriting of *Heart of Darkness* is a model of the postcolonial journeying tale. In the novel a dreamlike voyage upriver into the Guyanese hinterland turns into a ritual of spiritual reconciliation for each of the group of travellers involved. In the course of the journey oppositions of past and future, and of the coloniser and the colonized, merge. Similarly, Jean Rhys radicalized the feted feminist work of Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* in her seminal work *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

In their monumental study *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin theorise how imperialism affected the colonies and how the former colonies then wrote back in an attempt to correct Western views. Jean Rhys has also written back by giving voice to the 'mad woman in attic' in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. When Rhys read Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre as a young girl, she began to imagine the Caribbean upbringing of Rochester's infamous Creole wife, Bertha Mason. Rhys thought, "I'd try to write her a life". The result is one of literature's most famous prequels, a novel that seeks to humanize the racially pejorative characterization of a West Indian madwoman. An aesthetic experiment in modernist techniques and a powerful example of feminist and postcolonial writing, *Wide SargassoSea* gives voice to a marginalized character and transforms her original tragic demise into a kind of triumphant heroism. Rhys seeks to uncover an alternate truth, exposing the limits of a literary canon that assumes a shared white heritage in its audience. Rhys explores Bertha's life who Bronte herself acknowledged was left somewhat unexplained.

This exploration takes the form of a three- part narrative, the middle part being in the first-person voice of Rochester (although he is never named), the other two being the voice of

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Antoinette (who will later become the madwoman Bertha of *Jane Eyre*). This narrative structure skews ideals of imperialism by challenging concept of narrative authority, particularly of a white male authority. Delving into the psyche of her principal characters, Rhys examines their fragmented identities and unconscious fears, focusing on an inner world that mirrors the impressions of an evocative physicallandscape. The tripartite structure of the novel, with its shifts in narrative voice and jumps through time and space, affords the book a complex, porous surface that differs markedly from the linear progression found in its nineteenth-century counterpart.

Championed by postcolonial, feminist and modernist critics alike, *Wide Sargasso Sea* struggles against dominant traditions and espouses the cause of the under-represented. Since *Jane Eyre* has long been upheld as a triumph of feminist liberalism, *Wide Sargasso Sea*has complicated the feminist debate. As a postcolonial work, the novel indicts England's exploitative colonial empire, aligning its sympathies with the plight of the Caribbean.

A very significant aspect of this research paper is to discuss*Wide Sargasso Sea*and*JaneEyre*as interdependent texts. As it is pointed out earlier that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is considered Rhys's masterpiece. The important weaknesses in her earlier novels are set right in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It completes her other novels; and it is in itself more complete and more satisfying, and therefore despite its distancing in space and time - even more believable than her earlier novels are.

And yet *Wide Sargasso Sea* is also 'incomplete'. *Jane Eyre* is needed to fill out its meaning, just as *Wide Sargasso Sea* is needed to fill out the meanings of the earlier novels written by Jean Rhys. *Jane Eyre* tells the end of Antoinette's story, as *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells the beginning of Anna's and Marya's, Julia's and Sasha's (The protagonists of novels written by Jean Rhys prior to *Wide SargassoSea).*The incompleteness of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a deliberate and a brilliantly successful device. The reader learns in the last part that Antoinette is Bertha Rochester and she is mad. It is absolutelyappropriate to leave this judgement that she is mad outside her own story: to leave it to *Jane Eyre*. This 'incompleteness', far from being a weakness, works perfectly: it allows the reader to understand that she is aberrant, and yet, within the book itself, to identify

imaginatively with her 'aberrant' point of view.This is the first way in which *Wide Sargasso Sea* goes beyond the achievement of the earlier novels: it tells the whole story and thewhole truth.In an interview, Rhys told that in writing *Wide Sargasso Sea* what she wanted to do was to "write her a life". She did not say that shewanted to give a life to Bronte's Bertha or even that she wanted to explain Bertha or her life. First structural link uniting the two novels is the conspicuously silent unvoiced moment in Bronte’s novel. This is the moment of the Creole madwoman, whose laughter and night visits are her only manifestations in the life she and Jane Eyre share in Thornfield Hall. Rhys's novel seeks to emphasize that the two women do indeed share a text.

Another structural link with Bronte’s novel and a major constraint on Rhys's is the fated quality of Antoinette's life. This element unwinds in Antoinette's literal dreams as they are described serially, beginning in the narrative of her childhood and culminating in the narrative of her life and final actions at Thornfield Hall. Rhys's inclusion of these literal dreams can be seen as one technical response to Bronte’s own use of Jane Eyre's dreams; as such, it emphasizes a sharing of the text.

The third link uniting Bronte's text and Rhys's is the point at which Rhys's novel explicitly intersects Brontes. For a time, the two texts cohabit the same space, when Grace Pool, another of the silent women of *Jane Eyre,*begins to speak in Rhys's novel. Grace Poole'sspeaking voice, which is silent or monosyllabic in Bronte's novel, offers the overt signal of the origin of Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. With Grace Poole's voice, Rhys links her text to Bronte's and bridges Bronte's with her own, entering Bronte's text at the same time, interrupting its narrative arrangement to complete her own. At the close of the novel, we are "with" Antoinette in Thornfield Hall, where Bronte's novel places her and where from the beginning ofAntoinette's dream she was predestined to find herself and to "end" her dream, as that "dream" of Bronte’s directed her to do. Antoinette and Rhys, faithfully execute the scenario of Bronte’s dream, telling us that she has done so: "That was the third time I had my dream, and it ended" (p.149). That

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dream may be ended; her own is not, however, and Antoinette / Rhys's narrative continues to its own conclusion.

Grace Poole's introduction to the culminating narrative also raises a voice for the collective case. Grace Poole's point of view is specifically that of a servant, a position that she is allowed to explicate.The entire introductory passage (pp 145-46) is italicized further emphasizing her voice and point of view. Drawing the other women of Bronte's into a relation to one another, she also places Antoinette in relation to herself and to the others:

"I know better than to say a word. After all the house is big and safe, shelter from the world outside which, say what you like, can be a black and cruel world to a woman. Maybe that's why Istayed on.

The thick walls, she thought. [...] above all the thick walls, keeping away all the things that you have fought till you can fight no more. Yes, may be that's why we all stay- Mrs Eff and Leah and me. All of us except that girl who lives in her own darkness." (p.142)

When the child Antoinette awakens from her first "baddream", she thinks:

"I am safe. There is the corner of the bedroom door and the friendly furniture. There is the tree of life in the garden and the walls green with moss. The barrier of the cliffs and the high mountains. And the barrier of the sea. I am safe.I am safe from strangers" (p.23).

Grace Poole's adult concerns echo the child's sentiments or the other way round: the child's sentiments echo Grace Poole's adult concerns. Interweaving of texts and narrative creates circularity. With Antoinette's childhood dream we are given the forecast of the novel's development and of Antoinette's "fate" as predetermined broadly by Bronte's text.

Rhys's narrator, even as the child Antoinette, both underscores her predestination and suggests the strategic open-endedness of Rhys's narrative method:

"I woke next morning knowing that nothing would be the same. It would change and go on changing." (p.23)

This passage, along with the adult Antoinette's brief description of the shipboard crossing, locates the significance of the novel's title.

Neither the "barrier of the cliffs and the high mountains," the fastness of the island of Dominica, which shelters Antoinette in her own context, nor finally and especially the "barrier of the sea" - the Wide Sargasso Sea - that lies just northeast of her island, between her island and the passage to England, proves a barrier.

When Antoinette woke on board ship, "it was a different sea.Colder. It was that night, I think, that we changed course and lost our way to England". (p.144). Even the original destination-the England she had early imagined with curiosity and interest-is "lost" in the crossing of that sea that is finally no "barrier". She tells us,"This cardboard house where I walk at nightis not England" (p.144).It is the illusory, but by no means benign, legally sanctioned construct of her husband - the "stranger", the "someone who hatedme", as he is called in the first dream (p.23); "the man who hated me", as he is more specifically identified in the last dream (p.155). He is a stranger who crosses geographical "barriers" but who cannot or will not attempt to traverse the cultural and psychological boundaries that separate him from the woman who becomes his wife. In this sense only is the wide Sargasso Sea a "barrier". It marks animpassable psychological boundary. It could have served as a crossingpoint, a conduit; it remains a gulf, impassable except superficially and by force. The "wide Sargasso Sea" marks the place of Rochester's trespass, and of his failing. It is at the same time a barrier that Antoinette-wrenched out of her own context, wherein she had already tried to cross "barriers", of colour, culture and class-discovers to be a means of her own passage to self-discovery.

In the false England to which she was forcibly brought and in which she is forcibly incarcerated, Antoinette finds the means to identify herself. She writes at the end of her dream: "Now at last, I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" (p.152). The joining of Bronte's text and Rhys's "brought" Antoinette to Rochester's and Bronte's "England". It is Rhys's text alone thatdiscovers her. The two dream-texts come together in Part Three of the novel to form a single dream text.This novel becomes the logical culmination of the whole of Rhys's text.

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Antoinette, the "girl who lives in her own darkness",completes the voyage, shielding the flame of the candle with her hand so that it can light her "along the dark passage'. She ultimately reaches at a psychological destination, one consistent with the overall achievement, both cultural and conceptual, that has been actively at work in women's lives and intellectual pursuits for more than a hundred years. Grace Poole's words, quoted above, expressly set the stage for the enactment of what Gilbert and Gubar identify as a characteristically nineteenth-century drama "enclosure and escape".

Rhys carries the drama the crucial step forward. As Grace Poole's introduction concludes, "Yes, maybe that's why we all stay — Mrs Eff and Leah and me. All of us except that girl who lives in her own darkness. [.] she hasn't lost her spirit.She's still fierce. I don't turn my back on her when her eyes have that look. I know it" (p. 142).

It is the "look" in Antoinette's eye where her "spirit", which she has not lost, remains.What is muted in Brontes text becomes the occasion for Rhys's more audible orchestration. She has turned the nineteenth - century plot inside out. The subtext, the hidden plot, becomes the basis for the technique that itself opens the plot, revealing the narrative technique itself to be the key that opens the door to the full display of the plot. Rhys has opposed two elemental idioms in this way. There is the muted idiom of women and there is the dominant idiom of white men. The two are represented in *Wide SargassoSea* by the mutually exclusive contexts we are given for Antoinette and for Rochester. Their contexts are seemingly "fixed"; and they meet but do not blend. The original lack of the one's understanding of the other and of the other's background is called a "dream", something blurred and "unreal". These "dreams", Dominica and England, are blatantly opposed in a verbal interchange early in Rochester's narration:

"Is it true," She [Antoinette] said, "that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so. She said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes, I want to wake up."

"Well", I (Rochester) answered annoyed," that is precisely how your island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream." (p.58)

Christophine suggests Antoinette to leave Rochester but she cannot because she must "dream the end of my dream". Antoinette's dream is the fate that the plot of Bronte's novel has already provided for her. She must seek out the end of the dream that Bronte has foreordained for her.

The other important female voices are Amelie and Tia, both "mirror-images" for her. Tia is the defining mirror image whose recognition awakens Antoinette to herself, and revives her from the dream-as-sleep of Bronte's dream. She is the "looking glass" for the heroine -narrator's resolution of self and narrative.

There are several interconnections between the dreams in Rhys's text and Bronte's. Figures who remain "unspeaking" or silent in Bronte's text are revealed to *Jane Eyre* only in the "looking-glass" of the symbolism of the dream, or in the literal looking-glass of her bedroom at Thornfield Hall. In a "trance-like dream" that occurs after Jane has refused to live with Rochester, she is "transported to the scenes of childhood":

“I dreamt I lay in the red-room at Gateshead; that the night was dark, and my mind impressed with strange fears. The light that long ago had struck me into syncope, recalled in this vision; seemed glidingly to mount the wall, and tremblingly to pause in the centre of the obscure ceiling I lifted up my head to look.... I watched her come ... watched with the strangest anticipation; as though some word of doom were to be written on the disk. She broke forth as never moon yet burst from cloud: a hand first penetrated the sable folds and waved them away; then, not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure, inclining a glorious brow earthward. It gazed and gazed and gazed on me. It spoke to my spirit: immeasurably distant was the tone, yet so near, it whispered in my heart- "My daughter, flee temptation!"

"Mother, I will", Jane answers. Jane Eyre, (p. 281).

The "scenes of childhood" to which Jane Eyre refers, in which her mother, the Moon, appears to her, are, of course, that scene át Gateshead when the child Jane was unjustly and cruelly confined to the "red-room". The result of this experience, as she describes it toRochester, was that for the first time in her life she "became insensible from terror". She provides us with this direct link to

her childhood in her ongoing dream-text, just as Antoinette's dream-text begins in childhood and is directly linked to childhood experiences of the dream and of "reality". Jane's discussion with Rochester concerning the visit from the "form", the "shape" that Jane had never seen before in Thornfield Hall, expressly locates all of these events in the context of the ongoing dream-text that Jane is writing in conjunction with the events of the novel, a dream text that Rhys incorporates into her own. When Rochester suggests that the visit from Bertha - a figure he knows and recognizes is "the creature of an over - stimulated brain", she replies, "Sir, depend on it, my nerves are not at fault; the thing was real: the transaction took place." (Jane Eyre, p. 250)

"And your previous dreams: were they real too?" he questions, just as the Rochester of Rhys's novel more destructively questions Antoinette's "dream" and her "reality". These earlier dreams form"the preface, as Jane says (Jane Eyre, p. 249), to the visitation from Bertha, the form or figure she cannot, and will not, recognize.

Jane's earlier dreams offer details that Rhys incorporates into Rochester's own "dream" of the Dominica he encounters and of the Thornfield Hall "in ruins" that he will come to know. Jane's dreams seem to link past and future within Brontes text, as Rhys's dream - text does on a larger scale incorporating Brontes own text. The earlier dreams of Jane's closely parallel the dreams of the "stranger" that the child Antoinette experiences and the "reality" she encounters in her life with him. For both women, the dreams originate in childhood, they focus on the role of "the mother" in the child's life, and, in her absence or inadequacy on the role of other female caretakers.

The character of Rochester is never named in *Wide Sargasso Sea.* It is only with recourse to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* that we presume to call him by that name. As we have seen in the interweaving of Jane Eyre's dreams into Antoinette's, so we see the character - indeed, some of the very words and ideas of the fictionally and chronologically older Rochester- in the young man Rhys presents. An outline of the young "Rochester's" narrative can be found in that of Bronte's Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. The latter events described in this narrative furnish part of the structure of events in Antoinette's final narrative as well, since her text and Bronte'scoincide at

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that point in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Bronte and her protagonist give the floor to Rochester for the express purpose of allowing him to tell, "his side of the story" to Jane (Eyre, pp. 268-78). The young "Rochester" whom we read in Rhys's novel is a creature of Bronte's Rochester, of his chronological "later" narrative in the fiction, in combination with Rhys's actually later narration. He begins the narration of Part Two of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a nameless man. He is the most complex and fully drawn male Rhys's has ever accomplished. According to Marsha Cummins,

"He is more than a type; he is as complex as Antoinette, treated with understanding Rhys earlier extended only to female characters."

He knows clearly in the beginning of his narrative that he is in an alien territory. His own narrative, in a time prior to the events of Bronte's novel, initially places him in relation to the two women. If he has any identification by name it is as Antoinette's husband, or at least as the man whose "wife" is Antoinette. He says in the third line of the beginning of the narrative:

"There we were, myself, my wife Antoinette and a little half-caste servant who was called Amelie." (p.45)

He possesses something, but it does not give him security or confidence. His narrative is a process of identification that demonstrates an acute concern for place - his place, where he is, how or why he got there, and how to maintain himself.

Antoinette's ("Bertha's") life with Rochester, as his narrative in *Jane Eyre* depicts it, is the life from which Rhys wanted to rescue her by "writing a life" for her- and for Bronte and Jane Eyre in part as well, since Bronte's treatment of Bertha does not vary in its particulars from those provided by Rochester's narrative. In contrast, Rhys's writing of "Rochester's" narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is very much the life that had already been written for him by another woman, Charlotte Bronte, especially as his story of his life, the narrative that Bronte allows Rochester originally, reflects herself to some extent- the woman Bronte within her own historical context. Thus we see the dependency of "Rochester's" narrative on that of his "older brother", the Rochester of *Jane Eyre*. Rhys does not depend on the single authority of such an "origin",

however. She also gives her Rochester a specificity and a simplicity in his longing for "England".

Conclusion:The concluding pages of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however, demonstrate a sisterhood between Antoinette and Jane Eyre. The tie between these two female characters lies not so much in their relations to Rochester as in their shared experiences of abandonment, confinement, and the need to call upon inner images and voices and make them a part of their outer and shared worlds. They become doubles rather than antagonists in *Wide Sargasso Sea* at the same time that Antoinette recovers her lost ties to the Caribbean women she loved as a child. Rhys's work expresses the challenge of dealing with feminist and postcolonial ideology by new uses of style, voice and narrative structure. Schapiro has very aptly remarked,

"In its reworking of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Rhys's novel makes the shift in literary sensibility from the nineteenth to the twentieth century particularly discernible... the collapse of rational order, of stable and conventional structures on all levels,distinguishes Rhys's vision and places it squarely within the modernist tradition."

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