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Decolonizing Literary Theory: Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*; as a Caribbean Take on Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract: The paper here is a venture at unraveling the widespread Western dominance in the world of literature, as also in the cultural hemisphere. The paper presents a comparative study of Jean Rhys's "Wide Sargasso Sea" as a response to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, aiming to portray the colonial mindset and its dominance not only in the literary sphere but also in the cultural sphere, as has been evident over the centuries in the context of the theory of Orientalism. The paper here endeavours to dethrone the perpetual significance of the literature coming from the First World Countries. The study here embarks on this journey as a serious response to the predominant literature originating from imperialist nations, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, as exemplified in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. (Luo. L., 2018). Rhys' portrayal of Bertha Mason is a strong retaliation against that of Brontë's delineation of Bertha, a Creole, along with that of *Jane Eyre*, who is significantly a White woman. The paper here seeks to give an equal footing to the literature coming from Third World Countries and also their culture, which had once been resented and considered derogatory, and hence the similar portrayal.

Keywords: orientalism; creolization; marginalized

Introduction

The history of colonization and the emergence and existence of British colonies in the world are essential aspects of the paper at hand. It is a study that participates in

the process of decolonization, which occurs in the form of a literary response to existing First World Literatures at large, as seen in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The analysis is an important step in the entire process of "Rethinking Decolonization" and "Decolonizing Literary Theory" since the emergence of *Wide Sargasso Sea* after Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as a prequel to the novel in the form of a voiceover for the minor character Bertha Mason is a significant contribution to the field: as Jean becomes the voice of the so far marginalized one; thus emerging as the central character in her novel. (Tahmid, 2024). Decolonizing literary theory is nothing but an attempt at the overthrow of the colonial influence and force, not only from the sphere of literature but also that of culture. This is achieved by Jean Rhys very effectively in her work, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, through the medium of language, as a means of imparting appropriate symbolic associations about the colonial response.

The novel has been studied extensively from various angles, becoming part of numerous research studies through the lens of racial and feminist perspectives. The research here undertakes to establish a decolonizing of the literary representation of the character of Bertha Mason through the theory of *Orientalism* as put forth by Edward Said in his phenomenal work *Orientalism*. Furthermore, the history of Creole and Creole identity as a necessary aspect of the British perspective on the Orientals is another significant facet of the study.

Orientalism:

The research embarks upon the journey of "Rethinking Decolonization" through Edward Said's *Orientalism*. He has defined Orientalism in his phenomenal work, *Orientalism*, as follows:

"Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point, Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient-dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short. Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." (Said, 3, 1979.)

Let us go to understand his concept of Orientalism. It becomes clear that the distinction between "the Occident" and "the Orient", that is, "the We" and "the Other", is nothing but that of "the Colonizers" and "the Colonized". Building upon Said's concept, the research undertakes a journey to view Creole identity as a product of colonization. The study seeks to analyze the Creolization of identity in the context of Said's theory of Orientalism, hence, resulting in the Creole being that part of the mass that he refers to as "the Other". Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." (Said, 2, 1979.)

Said uses the terms "we" and "other" in order to refer to the West and the East, respectively. Apart from this, the distinction also lies in the Colonizers and the colonized. Hence, Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* is nothing but a Creole response to the dominant white and imperialistic culture as it appears in Charlotte Brontë's estranged

work *Jane Eyre*. Here, it is the Creole identity that appears as the “other” in Brontë’s novel. The portrayal of Bertha Mason as she appears in *Jane Eyre* is entirely through the eyes of Mr. Rochester, an Occident. This representation of Bertha (Antoinette Cosway) Mason, who is essentially a Creole woman through the eyes of Mr. Rochester, is what forms the core of the study.

The research implores the Creole identity in the light of the theory of Orientalism by viewing the emergence of the various types of Creole identities and their voices taking on the form of the significant “We” in Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a vivid reclamation of Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* that had so far remained the significant “Other”.

Creole:

There is an essay by Barnor Hesse called “Symptomatically Black: A Creolization of the Political,” where he describes the different developments of the term creole and begins with its early establishment in the sixteenth century, which is as follows:

“The term creole was used to refer to particular people. From the sixteenth century onward, initially in the Spanish, Portuguese, and French American colonies, Creole referred to Europeans born in the colony, distinct from those in the metropole; Europeans whose European culture was compromised and curiously shaped by the cross-cultural environment of the colony. Underlying this was an informal distinction between pure Europeans and impure Europeans. Second, creole by the eighteenth century came to describe colonized people born in the colonies, partial descendants of slaves, whose African ancestry was mixed with European slave owners, and whose European culture and lighter pigmentation was born of colonial life.” (37-38 qtd. in Victoria A., 2, 2015.)

This variation in the *creole* identity itself is a fine exemplar of Imperialism. The imperialistic tendency is clearly noted in the words of Mr. Edward Rochester in the remarks made on the family of Antoinette Cosway, all the while referring to her as a Creole. He calls her of Creole descent pejoratively. All his calumnious remarks are the ones that build the identity of Bertha Mason (Antoinette Cosway) in the eyes of the other characters in the novel *Jane Eyre*, who are significantly white. (Tahmid, 2024).

When Mr. Rochester relates his story of the sudden revelation of his secret marriage to a woman hidden in his attic, and who is essentially responsible for all the midnight terror caused at Thornfield Hall, it is again a white man’s description of a Creole woman, which entirely neglects the account of Bertha herself. He refers to her in a demeaning manner, as is visible in the following sentences, when he repeatedly refers to her Creole background: “Bertha Antoinette Mason, daughter of Jonas Mason, merchant, and of Antoinetta his wife, a Creole- Church Spanish Town, Jamaica”. (Bronte, 442, 1846.) “Bertha Mason is mad, and she came of a mad family, idiots, and maniacs through three generations. Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad woman and a drunkard” (Bronte, 445, 1846). Apart from this, we observe him using words like malignant, imbecile, pigmy, and calling her *cruel* and elevating his own character for

not using any kind of cruelty on Bertha and just keeping her trapped in the attic; such is his attitude. He even calls her a fanatic. Further, Mr. Rochester's comparison of Bertha to Jane by calling Jane a 'wind fresh from Europe' and 'sweet wind' brings out the striking contrast of opinions regarding the *Mixed race* and that of a *Pure English* one. His later remark and the necessity to conceal the marriage and hence any links with Bertha are another significant pointer towards his attitude.

It is not just the relegation of Mr. Rochester that informs the research, but the reaction that the story elicits from the other significant characters in question in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. In pursuing Jane, the protagonist of Brontë's novel, a White English woman, Mr. Rochester keeps Bertha out of mention. The history is relegated to him, again, a White man who has been involved in numerous notorious relationships. However, it is his account of Bertha Mason that is considered more reliable and honorable, which is what one comes across in *Jane Eyre*.

For if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main" circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. (Said, 11, 1979.)

So also is the case with Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, a White European. One can also not negate the fact that Charlotte Brontë, a white woman, writes the novel. This entire imperialistic and the Orient and Occident operation, and so also the working of the 'we' and 'other' concepts, results in the creation of a forever alias of "the madwoman in the attic" who visibly remains subverted.

However, with Jean Rhys, this madwoman, so far without a voice of her own, gains a voice in her outstanding work, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rhys, herself being a Dominican writer, is a more fitting speaker, a voice fit to be Bertha (Antoinette) Mason's own. The orientalist aspect of *Jane Eyre* appears in the form of Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the form of the author who is Dominican; henceforth becoming the voice of Bertha Mason, so far unheard of. A voice that was left unsaid or subverted by a more imposing voice of Mr. Rochester coming from an Imperialistic nation.

The research explores the concept of Creole identity through the lens of Orientalism, as an analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea* clearly highlights the drastic difference between being a Creole on one hand and a Pure European or Black, or in this case, purely Jamaican, on the other. This can be gathered from the research carried out on creoles by Marin Victoria, in which she makes the following statement: "Rhys poignantly examines the critical issues faced by Creoles during her time and how that heavily influences her decision to write *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a way of speaking for the community of Creoles." (Victoria. A., 15, 2015.) In Rhys's " *Wide Sargasso Sea* Bertha becomes the speaker of her own story. In her book, which narrates the account of Antoinette Cosway Mason (Bertha), we come to understand the reasons that drive her to madness, as well as the other side of the nature of Mr. Edward Rochester, which has

been portrayed in a different light through the character of Jane in *Jane Eyre*. A comparative analysis clearly shows the difference in attitude and the deferential treatment offered to Bertha compared to Jane. As a reader, a drastic change in attitude is viewed in Rochester's treatment of first Bertha and then that of Jane, which one cannot help but allude to his views about Mixed race and Pure English ones. His remark in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, while alluding to Antoinette, his wife, was as follows, which brings out a similar attitude, careless and demeaning: "Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either". (Rhys, 39, 1966) Rhys, in her attempt at delineating Antoinette and her Creole identity, and through her giving voice to other Creole characters, also has made use of a language that gives voice to its Creole characters by way of Creole language in contrast to the one that is purely English, as is used by Brontë in *Jane Eyre*. The decolonizing of literary representation is something that happens not only at the thematic but also at the narrative and linguistic levels. The language and the symbols are all native to her land rather than English. The process of Creolization and the establishment of the reversal of the position of 'the We' and 'the Other' as described by Edward Said is the core of the study.

In his book, he discusses how Orientals are speaking up for themselves and, consequently, becoming the narrators of their own story—a story that has been told through the eyes of Occidentals so far. This narrative has consistently privileged the Occidental perspective, resulting in the Orient being viewed through its lens. It is high time that the marginalized sections take a stand for themselves in the literary arena and be their own voice. Thus, the process of literary decolonization unfolds as Rhys gives the character of Bertha Mason, who has been subverted and unheard. This voice becomes her own and poignantly triumphs, making her the unbeatable hero of her own story.

Conclusion:

The research thus seeks to analyze *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a fitting response to *Jane Eyre*, an exemplar of the Western Imperialistic and once-dominant culture. The concept of the "we" and the "other," as implored by Said in his extraordinary work *Orientalism*, forms the basis of the research, examining the relationship between the Orient and the Occident and connecting it to the Creole identity, as the creation and emergence of Creole is inextricably linked to colonialism.

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