

# Rebellion and Conformity in Charlotte Bronte's "Jane Eyre" and Jean Rhys' "Wide Sargasso Sea"

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA  
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**REBELLION AND CONFORMITY IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S  
*JANE EYRE* AND JEAN RHYS' *WIDE SARGASSO SEA***

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English  
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## Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to provide an insight into the intertextual relationship between two famous literary heroines – Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, and Jean Rhys’ *Antoinette Cosway*, whose respective journeys to independence and self-affirmation mirror one another in many instances but diverge in the happy epilogue of one and the tragic (and often considered freeing) end of the other protagonist. First and foremost, *Antoinette Cosway* would have never existed without *Jane Eyre*, as Jean Rhys decided to create a heroine out of marginalised Bertha Mason, the famous Madwoman in the attic, the rageful and insane figure of a scorned Creole whose traits reveal a dark instinct in *Jane Eyre* herself, a deep well of suppressed emotion. This thesis, however, builds up on the idea that Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Rhys’ *Antoinette Cosway* are individual characters with both rebellious and conformist traits, and between whom significant connections may be observed, taking into consideration how both of the heroines are posed in relation to the patriarchal society which imposes a particular image of woman on each, along with *Antoinette Cosway*’s postcolonial (female) narrative of madness induced by imperialist society.

**Key words:** *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, madness, Victorian novel, postmodernism

## Introduction

### 1. *Jane Eyre* in the context of Victorian novel, and *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the context of postmodernism

Charlotte Brontë, a Victorian author who wrote in the 1850s, and Jean Rhys, an author whose literary work is marked by the postmodernist thought of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, are involved in a literary dialogue of a most extraordinary kind, extending for over than a century. Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, first published in 1847, was a dialogue between the author and the society in relation to which she endeavoured to affirm her own identity, and a sense of individual and creative freedom; and almost 120 years later, Jean Rhys's search for the affirmation of her own values, just like Brontë, lead her not only to negotiate for it with Caribbean and British society, but to relate her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1965) all the way back to *Jane Eyre*, to expand upon what Brontë's heroine managed to accomplish, and to ignite a passionate response to specifically feminine and postcolonial values to which she thought Brontë failed to do justice.

To understand what makes *Jane Eyre*, a coming of age story about finding own place for a rebellious-like individual in a strictly normative society, and Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* which could in most general terms be described as sharing that premise, first we are ought to mention under what rules and tenets both social and literary the two novels came to be, and under what kind of social and literary conditions Rhys's work became a (necessary) response to the Victorian novel.

Around the time in which *Jane Eyre* was published, the novel as a type of literary production became the most prominent type of such kind, being both adored and loathed by the different groups among the Victorian literary audiences. Up to Victorian era, reading was mostly reserved for the upper classes of the society. However, with the economical evolution and the rising of the literacy rate among the British, the emergence of accessibility to literature resulted in a true boom of Victorian novel. Previously, reading was by most thought of as an act responsible for spreading ideas dangerous to social morality and religion, and of implicitly empowering individuals by spreading knowledge. Even though such attitudes towards reading were upheld by certain groups (notably Evangelical conservatives), at the same time novel rapidly gained popularity among the literate masses. This resulted in the practice of a literary

mass production, which then inevitably led to trivialisation of the novel (David, 2001). In such conditions Charlotte Brontë, along with her sisters Anne and Emily, set out on exercising her literary abilities and writing a novel which would prove her value as an author, distinguished from many trivial examples of such literary kind. This was achieved by Brontë making her heroine take a stand against the gender policy of Victorian society, which above all else wanted to regulate female behaviour by pressuring women to keep up with the standards and expectations imposed on them, and such values as meekness, submission, and passivity; a domesticated presence devoid of all right to her own integrity and expression of (unruly) emotion. This is very well illustrated by an article from 1839, written by Sarah Stickney Ellis, a British author who published a number of books addressing the subject of woman's position in regard to the society and its classes, strongly encouraging women to oblige to the domestic and moral duties they were being subjected to by the patriarchal attitudes at the time. Ellis wrote:

*“In short, the customs of English society have so constituted women the guardians of the comfort of their homes, that, like the Vestals of old, they cannot allow the lamp they cherish to be extinguished... without an equal share of degradation attaching to their names... happily for the women of England, there is a philosophy in this science, by which all their highest and best feelings are called into exercise. Not only must the house be neat and clean, but it must be so ordered as to suit the tastes of all... strict integrity must be maintained by the minutest calculation as to lawful means, and self, and self-gratification, must be made the yielding point in every disputed case. Not only must an appearance of outward order and comfort be kept up, but around every domestic scene there must be a strong wall of confidence, which no internal suspicion can undermine, no external enemy break through.”* (Ellis, 1839)

Ready to (an extent) to tackle the question of a woman in relation to the normative of a passive and submissive domestic image imposed on her by the society, *Jane Eyre* caused quite the stir in the society, proven to provide a (proto)feminist view on the main character's situation. The audience was ready to receive it, but the critics were perhaps even readier than that; and *Jane Eyre* and its story of rebellion and resistance of the heroine's spirit in the eyes of social expectations enraged many but won many hearts as well. In some of its aspects, it is considered revolutionary by the later literary theorists and critics, who recognised the place which *Jane Eyre* takes as one of the key points in the development of women's novel and literature in general.

More than one hundred years later, the literary history recognised the beginning of the times of postmodernism, which was characterised by scepticism towards the reality in the terms of metatextuality, and an admiration for the act of toying with literary tradition in the resurgence of intertextual and metafictional techniques and genres (Solar, 2003).

Around this time an important new discourse in literary theory arises: the postcolonial critique. Shrikant B. Sawant in his work *Postcolonial Theory: Meaning and Significance* quotes: “ ‘Postcolonialism’, in the words of Charles E. Bressler, ‘is an approach to literary analysis that concerns itself particularly with literature written in English in formerly colonized countries.’ ”

Sawant continues to add that the term, post-colonial, which came into use after World War II, is distinctly chronological, and is used to position the literary critique in relation to the period of colonialism. He continues to argue that this kind of literary critique focuses its attention on the effects and consequences of colonisation represented by literature written by the native authors, or literature by other authors which is directly connected to the notion of imperialism and colonisation.

In her famous essay, Gayatri Spivak (*Three Women’s Texts and a Critique on Imperialism*, 1985) states that for the English, imperialism was considered the most important means of cultural representation of England – in relation to themselves. She continues to argue that for a long time literature was disregarded and overlooked as an important means of creating cultural representation(s), and that the recognition of it is crucial in producing narratives of the ‘worlding’ of the colonised societies.

Another crucial school of literary critique, which became connected to the notion of postcolonialism, is the feminist critique. Robert C. Murfin in his essay on *Feminist Criticism and Jane Eyre* defines feminist critique as follows:

*“Feminist criticism comes in many forms, and feminist critics have a variety of goals. Some have been interested in rediscovering the works of women writers overlooked by a masculine-dominated culture. Others have revisited books by male authors and reviewed them from a woman’s point of view to understand how they both reflect and shape the attitudes that have held women back.”*

The importance of applying feminist critique to the notion of literary postcolonialism was evidently important, as the postcolonial critique focused on (re)discovering female authors

in the discourse, and was interested in the female perspective, as well as in the (predominant) male one. However, it is argued by Spivak in the same essay that the “emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism” by its “information-retrieval approach to ‘Third World’ literature”, by employing methodology deemed by Spivak often consciously “‘non-theoretical’... with self-conscious rectitude.” Such an approach often resulted in imposing predominately Eurocentric and Anglocentric feminist views, and misinterpretations of the literary works of the authors of colonial narratives.

Working and creating under such circumstances, Jean Rhys came under the influence of Charlotte Brontë’s novel, and for the reason which Guragain quotes in his work (*The ‘Third Space’*, 2015), had decided on producing a response to the Victorian novel, to say something on the matter of both feminist and imperialist aspects, revealed in the character of the mad Creole, Bertha Mason. *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells the story of Antoinette Mason, a white Creole woman, in her search of her own identity and position in society, followed by her inevitable fall into madness under the excruciating pressure by patriarchal and imperialist society. In the light of affirmation of such literary techniques such as pastiche, parody, and polyphony of narrative voices, and in the emergence of new literary critiques and studies that put the focus on previously silenced and overlooked voices, Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* emerges as a unique work both on its own, and as a response in the intertextual dialogue with *Jane Eyre*.

## **2. The Stamps of Victorianism in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Bertha Mason**

Even though an imperialist and orientalist reading of *Jane Eyre* is not what most of the readers tend to focus on (at least not on their first reading), such aspects of the novel become apparent by the introduction of Bertha Mason as the Madwoman in the attic, a ghostly, gothic figure of an inherently mad Creole woman who is in complete contrast to Jane, a born Englishwoman. By the time of Brontë’s writing, the British Empire had already been one at the top of the most powerful imperialist forces in the world, which means that the author grew up related to the successful and unsuccessful exploit(ation)s of the British in both West and East Indies (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022). Being a member of Victorian society, often considered moralizing and crude because of its double standard towards women and their sexuality, Brontë had all the necessary prerequisites to imagine the character of Bertha – the seeming polar opposite of Jane and the impediment to her marriage to Mr. Rochester – as the



Other, both in terms of race (Bertha being a Creole) and in terms of conformity to the social norms (freely lascivious, deranged behaviour, which allegedly stems from insanity).

It is certainly not surprising, taking into consideration Victorian and imperialist postulates of Brontë's society, how the character of Bertha Mason became who she is: an opposition to Jane in every imaginable circumstance. However, it may not all be as it seems if one dares to dive deep enough under the surface, as it shall be expanded upon in the coming chapters on the characters of Jane Eyre, and Antoinette Cosway. For now, it is important to understand how Bertha Mason comes to represent one thing for Charlotte Brontë, and something entirely different for Jean Rhys who, in the light of the postcolonial, postmodern discourse decided to make Bertha stand for the repressed, marginalised, and for the ones in-between.

### **3. Jean Rhys's Postcolonial Tale, or the Soul Stranded in the Sea of Silence**

In her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, through the use of narrative techniques such as parody, different point-of-view characters and pastiche, Jean Rhys constructs the story of Antoinette Cosway, intended to provide a backstory into the madness of Brontë's Bertha Mason, whom Neşe Şenel (A Postcolonial Reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys, 2014) calls "a silenced character of Brontë", and whose descend into madness she considers a result of being in an unnatural place between two societies, between two cultures – the patriarchal society of the British imperialists to whose norms she cannot be conformed as a white Creole woman, and the colonized society of West Indies (the Caribbean), which doesn't want to claim a white Creole who belongs neither to the invaders, nor to the oppressed.

To show the struggles of a new kind of alienation and "placelessness" (Şenel, 2014) which are imposed upon the in-betweeners left conflicted with their identities after the fall of imperialism, to which Jean Rhys as a white Creole herself relates to an extent, she had chosen to let the silenced Madwoman of Brontë speak and tell her own side of the story. Such is the story in which the victim may in her own words paint all the horrors of the clashing societies which render individuals – standing on the border between and belonging to neither side – irrevocably mad, and mentally deranged beyond any possibility of recovery or redemption. For these individuals, such as one Antoinette Cosway, are doomed from their birth because of who

they are – with the true tragedy being that they are never given the opportunity to develop a true sense of identity, a sense of belonging, a sense of who they are and what they could become.

## **Character Delineation**

### **4. The Modern Heroine?**

In their chapter on Brontë's classical, beloved novel which is (to an extent) considered a piece of early modern feminist literature, Gilbert and Gubar (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 2000) discuss the reception of the novel either as a "moral gothic" or as a classic to whose author literary critique should pay its due, calling it a "distinctively female bildungsroman". They also quote Spivak, saying "that the 'cult text' status of *Jane Eyre* in woman's studies reflects an ideology of 'feminist individualism in the age of imperialism.'" However, Spivak in her aforementioned essay provides a different reading. Because of the postcolonial critique employed in her interpretation, and because of the reasons discussed later on, Spivak diminishes the feminist effect of the novel, stating early on in her essay: "I provide these assurances to allow myself some room to situate feminist individualism in its historical determination rather than simply to canonize it as feminism as such." (Spivak, 1985)

"Plain Jane's story" is essentially the story of a young woman's coming of age and both an attempt at her own growth of character and a search for her place in the society, following her in the steps she takes on the path to maturity and "escape-into-wholeness" (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 2000). This she tries to achieve by undertaking a struggle to prove her own agency and independency as a woman, both in relation to the society and to her romantic interest, Mr. Rochester, who is an interesting amalgamation of both the famed Byronic antihero, and the ideal of the perfect gentleman by the standards of Victorian literary audience (Quinn, 2014). Interestingly enough, on this path *Jane Eyre* paradoxically manages to achieve the confirmation of her aspirations, feminist in their nature, while still remaining comfortably entwined in the safety net of set Victorian norms such as the repression of unconventional passions – female sexuality, anger and desire – and subjecting oneself to the boundaries of the

social customs by not being able or willing to question the reality of gender relations in the society to an extent of revolutionary rebelliousness.

Here in play comes the character of mad Bertha, who is introduced as a representation of all these values drastically opposed to standard Victorian morality, which are revealed and deemed as ‘the dark side’ of female identity: an entirely different take on representation of female spirit than what is expected by its social understanding, but which is still present in Jane’s character. “In Rochester’s narrative the bestialization of Bertha makes literal her degradation by passion, living familiarly with slaves and lovers, and her ineducability...”, says Sue Thomas in her essay, *The Tropical Extravagance of Bertha Mason*, 1999.

It is the monster which lurks beneath the surface, and whose ultimate destiny is not to remain locked away in a dark chamber of Jane’s subconsciousness, but rather eradicated entirely from her character. Eradicating Bertha Mason from Jane Eyre is the most important step for Jane in achieving the wholeness, maturity, and emancipation of her own being. This interpretation is supported by the end of the novel, in which the heroine is rewarded with a happy ending after Bertha Mason ceases to exist – along with the possibility of Jane Rochester, an inferior, doll-like being, the idea of which plagues Jane’s mind prior to the first wedding attempt with Rochester, which ultimately and quite figuratively ends up in flames (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 2000). However, Spivak offers another interpretation of the relationship between the heroine and the Madwoman in the attic, saying that “Through Bertha Mason, the white Jamaican Creole, Bronte renders the human/animal frontier as acceptably indeterminate.” The author points out that presentation of Bertha Mason, the Creole woman, as a dark, animal force present in the mansion, and relegated only to that – an animalistic, gothic presence – undermines the feminist aspect of the novel by confronting Jane Eyre with what is a stereotypical image of a woman from the colonies, only to make Jane win the fight (with what Gilbert and Gubar see as herself, and what Spivak sees as the representation of an ‘Othered’ female individual), by casting Bertha Mason down into the shadow.

In the aforementioned work of literary theory, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the authors present Jane Eyre as “a tale (that) explores the tension between the parlour and the attic, the psychic split between the lady who submits to male dicta and the lunatic who rebels.” As the main heroine of such a story, Jane is followed by oppression in almost every stage of her journey – first in Gateshead, then in Lowood; in Thornfield she finds herself able to exercise her agency to an extent, but the exploit ends in her being forced to, as Gilbert and Gubar say, “confront the

demon of rage who has haunted her since her afternoon in the red-room”, after which she flees to yet another place in which she is expected to yield to the expectations of patriarchal society and Christian morality – to the home of her cousin, St. John’s Rivers.

Over the course of Jane’s journey, she finds herself in contact with other female characters, who act as representations of what she cannot or shouldn’t become. On one side, there are Miss Temple and Helen Burns, whom she encounters in Lowood. Both represent ideals: one of an ideal Victorian woman who exceptionally and vigorously conforms to the norms, and the other who surrenders herself to the power of spiritual excellency such as found in martyrs, which Jane cannot and doesn’t want to attain. On the other side, there are Adèle Varens and Blanche Ingram, dolled-up creatures of conformity to beauty and traits of genteelness traditionally attributed to the female gender; here once again it seems suitable to reference Gilbert and Gubar (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 2000) when they say that the aforementioned characters are all “important negative ‘role-models’ for Jane, and all suggest problems she must overcome before she can reach the independent maturity which is the goal of her pilgrimage.” By taking a firm stand against what such role models represent and affirming herself in what she doesn’t want to be because for her it feels as an enslavement of her spirit, Jane does seem to exhibit a strong desire for emancipation and autonomy of deciding who she is and what she does not want to be for the sake of conforming to others (especially to male characters).

This brings us to Jane Eyre’s relationship with Rochester through which a lot of Jane’s character is revealed. The character of Rochester offers to Jane a stage for proving herself not an inferior, weakling being, but rather a strong female spirit which should not only be seen as Rochester’s equal, but also as the superior, the conqueress and the victress over her own failings, anxieties, and self-doubt. A mutual sense of equality and strength of the other’s character lingers between the two characters throughout the novel – from the inexplicable atmosphere of their first meeting in which both Jane and Rochester envision one another as mythical beings, over a very symbolic act of Jane saving Rochester from his burning bed, to Rochester’s confession to Jane on his own moral failings and a failed relationship with a Frenchwoman, Celine, giving Jane power over him in the moments of vulnerability and deepest sincerity.

However, an interesting subversion of the romantic trope arises with the confirmation of their love towards each other, which puts new obstacles in the way of Jane proving herself

as a woman unyielding to the demands of a society which seeks to extinguish her determined and passionate spirit. Over the course of her engagement to Rochester, Jane feels his perception of her being equal in their relationship slowly fading away, as Rochester starts to become more and more commanding over how she should look, dress, and behave, all according to the social status she was to assume as a new bride to a wealthy gentleman of his position. In Chapter 24 (Brontë, 2016), Rochester says to Jane:

*“I will myself put the diamond chain round your neck, and the circlet on your forehead... I will make world acknowledge you a beauty, too... I will attire my Jane in satin and lace, and she shall have roses in her hair; and I will cover the head I love best with a priceless veil.”*

As Quinn (Sexing the Male, 2014) points out, in order to affirm his own masculinity in relation to their respective roles in their relationship, Rochester tries to impose on Jane the notion of being an “angel in the house”, a perfectly conforming domestic presence which represents a stern foundation for the construction of Victorian understanding of female identity. Thus, Jane finds herself besieged in the most uncomfortable position. Again, in the same Chapter 24, she responds to Rochester to his propositions:

*“And then you won't know me, sir; and I shall not be your Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin's jacket, – a jay in borrowed plumes. I would as soon see you, Mr. Rochester, tricked out in stage-trappings, as myself clad in a court-lady's robe...”*

Whereas she feels marrying the man she loves is expected to bring her happiness, which at the beginning of the novel seemed beyond any possibility of her social standing – firstly as an orphan girl without inheritance, and later as a plain governess – her position as Rochester's bride-to-be only brings more dangerous temptation to show will she fail to stay true to herself or to the societal expectations represented through Rochester's ones.

Here the test of character and female autonomy in the face of patriarchal oppression and social expectancies becomes more complicated than Jane's struggling to abandon Rochester for a chance to remain true to her own sense of freedom and persistence of character. Jane runs away fully knowing that she is to leave her heart behind at Thornfield if she is to save her own integrity; by doing this, she passes the test and is later rewarded not only by the affirmation of her independence, even in terms of financial freedom, but also by true love between her and Rochester finally becoming possible, after he is disfigured and moulded into

a man who now both physically and spiritually needs her, as much as she thought she needed him.

However, in the pivotal test of her endurance in the face of patriarchal oppression, in her darkest hour(s) of utter despair and bitterness before finally resolving to flee Thornfield, Jane finds herself face to face with the dark image of Bertha Mason, who stands in as the symbol of Jane's other self which needs to be defeated in order to completely pass the test. In Chapter 25 (Brontë, 2016), this is how Jane describes her dream-like encounter with the morose presence in the mansion:

*“It seemed, sir, a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back... Fearful and ghastly to me – oh, sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discoloured face – it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments... The lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed; the black eyebrows widely raised over the blood-shoot eyes. Shall I tell you what it reminded me... Of the foul German spectre – the Vampyre.”*

Not only Jane is not even certain that what she saw was a woman, but this figure was “fearful and ghastly”, with features she attributes with nothing but negative connotations of savage, swelled, red, dark, inflated, blood-shot, large etc., reminding her of nothing less than a vampire, the mythical demon known for its undead nature and thirst for the blood of the living (Elridge, 2022). As the vampire rises at night from its grave to hunt for blood, in such a manner Bertha shows up to haunt Jane's sleep with dreadful forefeeling of something dark and dangerous, and ultimately fatal being confined somewhere within her. Very important to note is that Jane glimpses Bertha's countenance by seeing her reflection in a mirror – signifying how one is the reflection of the other.

With the treatment of Bertha Mason in the story, the feminist aspects of *Jane Eyre* as a novel come into question, as Jane battles with her own suppressed feelings, rage, and inability to fully understand them. The good, moral side of Jane wins over and she escapes the torturous nature of her position at Thornfield, escaping both the inferiority of the position of becoming Jane Rochester – and the chance to accept her own female persona as a whole, with both good and ugly, the virtuous and ‘the degenerate’. The problem, from a feminist point of view, lies in the abandonment and eradication of ‘the dark self’ of Jane Eyre, represented by the restricted, voiceless mad Bertha, whose whole existence is a hideous testament to and a warning of the fully rebellious, nonconforming, and unrestrained femininity, a ghostly apparition always

lurking but never in sight, and never acknowledged as real by the highly normalised society of the era. Adding to this, from a postcolonial feminist point of view, Spivak notes that “Bertha's function in *Jane Eyre* is to render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal and thereby to weaken her entitlement under the spirit if not the letter of the Law”, and that “she must play out her role, act 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.”

To save her integrity and freedom, instead of accepting her deepest desires and emotional suffering as a part of her being and mending the traumas and rage which stem from and continue to haunt her ever since her childhood at Gateshead, Jane decides not to reconcile with her suppressed self, but rather run away from it and let it be entirely exterminated in symbolic flames which later engulf Thornfield Hall (a symbol of her suffering and oppression inflicted on her).

This is how Jane as a character with strong feminist tendencies starts conforming to the ruling social norms, which she commits as if out of abashment; she comes very close to becoming a feminist icon, and then her endeavour almost bafflingly falls apart. However, it is not entirely perplexing how and why this came to be from such a strong-minded character, who is stranded on the path of choosing between, at times, devastating alternatives of becoming who she wants, and who the society wants her to be – and who makes the right choice (almost) every time. The feminist spirit of *Jane Eyre* is strong – albeit in individualistic way, with what Spivak credits Brontë – and for it she might very well be considered a character ahead of her time, as her refusal to stay inferior and submissive to societal norms appalled the Victorian critics at the time, causing a great deal of controversy regarding the reception of the novel which was deemed by some even wicked and immoral (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 2000). “The novel shocked contemporaries who denounced it as anti-Christian and even pornographic” (Zare, 1993).

However, in more recent interpretations, while having the luxury of being considered a work of classical literature for generations, *Jane Eyre* doesn't come off as feminist or a representation of female character fighting the social oppression as she was condemned for when the novel was first published. It seems that Charlotte Brontë either didn't want to or couldn't realise the revolutionary potential of her character, as Jane remains only half-baked cookie in the context of feminist representation of female character in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century British literature. If Bertha was given a chance to be spared or transformed into a benevolent, affirming

being, both as a symbol of Jane's other self and as a character of a Creole woman in her own right, maybe Jean Rhys wouldn't feel the need for adopting the concept of the character and taking up the task of transforming it by herself. In this regard, perhaps it truly was necessary for Bertha to die in the story of *Jane Eyre*, only for Antoinette Cosway to be born as a resurrected potential in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which has its own story to tell.

## 5. The Victim and the Culprit

If the Madwoman of *Jane Eyre* was a monstrous thing with no voice, confined to the Attic because of the destructive potential of her madness, then Antoinette Cosway was the one who told the story of oppression and why madness becomes the ultimate haven of a broken being. When Brontë credits Bertha's madness to the inborn defect of her gender and race assuming to the Victorian stereotypes, Rhys presents numerous reasons for why her character's illness cannot simply be explained by such a naturalistic and conforming reason. Antoinette is not mad just because her mother was mad, nor because they are Creole, nor because they are women; in fact, it seems that both hers and her mother's madness stem from the same root – that is the society to which they were born into and to norms of which they are not willing, and even cannot conform to because of their Creole heritage which sets them apart from their social and cultural environment, influenced by the mixture of two vastly different cultures.

Right from the beginning of her story, it is very clear that Antoinette is doomed to a fate such as madness, for she has no place in the world, just as she has no people who would claim her as their own and in relation to which she could build her own identity. "Creole is neither a black nor a white category. Creole possesses the qualities of both black and white races and cultures. In this sense creole marks a break from the black/white, African/European categories of identifications and establishes a new domain – a 'third space'", points out Guragain (The "Third Space", 2015).

In this regard, Neşe Şenel interprets Antoinette's madness both as a rebellion against, and a safe haven from the suppressive culture(s). The white blackness and the black whiteness of her Creole heritage are treated as a disadvantage in relation to both societies: to the English, as much as to the coloured community of the Caribbean. She is "neither ours, nor theirs", and nobody wants to claim her as she is marked by the presence of the other in both her skin and



blood – which makes her, to a greater extent, unaccustomed to showing compliance to social norms in general. Outsiders obey no rules, precisely because of who they are – there are no rules when one is left on “the outside”. As Guragain says: “the division between creole and non-creole marked the desire of colonisers to remove their own products – the creole – from the centre and label them as the ‘Other’”. Antoinette is “the Other”, an outsider from the beginning to the end of her own story – and the world surely tries to make it certain that she doesn’t forget it. From being an outsider in her own family, by being pushed aside by the mother who only cared for her son and not for her daughter, over being driven out from the Coulibri estate with fire like an insect or a “white cockroach”, and finally to being hidden and confined in the attic in gloomy foreign England, Antoinette always and everywhere remains unable to surpass the state of being the other one, the excess, the unwanted baggage which she metaphorically and figuratively becomes for her husband in the end.

Being the outcast of the society is the general reason to her madness, which infects every other aspect of her life, including the intimate one: her relationship to her husband, the unnamed narrator of some of the parts of the second chapter and the one whom a reader of *Jane Eyre* is likely to recognise as Rhys’ idea of what Mr. Rochester could have been to Bertha Mason and how his oppressive, imperial and patriarchal attitudes could have contributed to Antoinette’s fall into madness. The significance of the role Antoinette’s husband plays in pushing her over the edge is presented both metaphorically and literally in his act of imposing the name Bertha on her, which is in a way tied to the mysterious leitmotif of obeah, a magic practice that is a part of Caribbean culture – and which in this aspect parallels Antoinette’s attempt to use Christophine’s potion on him. However, as Şenel points out in her work, the unnamed narrator’s imposing of a new identity on Antoinette parallels the imperialist and colonialist attitudes towards ‘the other one’, stripping them away from their culture and forcing into the position of the submissive one in the relationship between the two societies.

As *Jane Eyre* is a story of progressive self-development of Jane into accomplishing maturity of womanhood and fulfilment of character, *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes the opposite path of revealing a story of gradual degradation of character and fall from humanity into ruin posed by society and its influence through other individuals. Jean Rhys manages to turn this template into a story of the victim who, by her own agency, repeatedly answers oppression with passion, rage, and violence – as an act of the deepest instinct for self-preservation, not destruction – which makes Antoinette Cosway more active on the feminist plan of exercising one’s unrestrained power to protect one’s own being. Interestingly enough, even though Rhys lets

Antoinette unleash the repressed side of her persona in a fight for the perseverance of self, there are some critics who find in her work notions of conformity and submission implied in context intended to be taken as liberating, empowering imagery. However, more will be said of this later; firstly, it is to be analysed how Antoinette is oppressed through different stages in her life, and how feministic tendencies may be measured in the responses of the oppressed.

From early age, Antoinette in her childhood encounters rejection by others and in extent from the society by the way of her relationship to two figures: her mother Anette, and the black girl Tia. Anette, a white Creole woman, suffered rejection and loathing from the local society because of her whiteness and connection to the former white slave owners, which pushed her into a state of complete loneliness, in which she made up comforting fantasies as a response to the gradual mental deterioration – which is very well symbolised by the simultaneous fall to ruin of the Coulibri estate on which the family was living at the time. Later on Anette constantly rejects her daughter, focusing her attention and care to Antoinette's sickly brother, perhaps out of the repressed fear, and inability to recognise the reality of her and her daughter's situation shaped by the cruel society which is soon enough bound to exercise its cruelty on them.

On the other side there is Tia, the girl Antoinette thought she could befriend, and who in turn called her names, took her clothes and was the one to throw a stone at her at the burning of the Coulibri estate. Both of these figures almost seem to be inverted influences of such as found in Miss Temple and Helen Burns for Jane Eyre, only this time, these are not introduced into the story to teach the heroine that there is kindness in the world which for the first time doesn't seem so grey; they act almost as foretellers of what all of Antoinette's future relationships will come down to. Both Anette and Tia show to Antoinette that there is no possibility for a connection between her and the people closest to her, or to the society; with the exception of Christophine, who is still disconnected from Antoinette by being mystified and 'othered', as argued by Şenel.

The one time Antoinette certainly conforms to the norm is the moment of her passive acceptance to the marriage with a foreign, English man whom she doesn't know, and to whom, by the means of marriage, all of her financial assets and independency shall belong by law. Even though the idea of getting married was vague and distant to her, as well as imposed by the men in her family, she subjected herself to the law and norm of the colonisers; and from this one act of compliance which was offered to her, and which she took, she had sealed her destiny.

In this symbolic act the notion of subjugation of the colonized to the coloniser is present, as her husband the Imperialist and the male bounds her, the Creole and the woman, to his will and governance, which exposes itself as the immediate result of the marriage.

It is important to note that Rhys allows Antoinette's husband, the unnamed narrator, to express his own feelings and impressions when he finds himself in the unknown surroundings, where everything is for him too different, too strange, and just too much. It is not hard to sympathise with the unnamed narrator as he finds himself – without his will – in a world entirely different and unknown; it is not hard to see him as a human being plagued by his own complexes and fears, and is possible up to a point even to understand how his differences from his wife and the lack of understanding between them made him gradually more and more repulsed by her, whom he could not comprehend. The problem is, however, that the disgust and animosity he develops towards Antoinette stem mostly from his imperialist point of view towards the other, intertwined with patriarchal expectations, which then in turn build up on the fear of and repulsion to the alien and unknown.

Despite his initial anxieties towards the environment and the marriage which manifest most figuratively in his illness and fever, as well as in his inability to digest Caribbean food, Antoinette's husband manages to try to develop a humane relationship with her, and for a short time it all seems to be going well. But the more he feels 'othered' and isolated by the Caribbean society, the more he starts to impose the way of the English gentry, his ways, on Antoinette, trying to conform her to his norms by alienating her from the black society by altering the way she dresses, and by criticizing her language, customs, and social conducts – which is parallel to Mr. Rochester trying to accustom Jane's appearance and behaviour to suit the expectations of the gentry while they are engaged. He starts out as a being with understandable fears and anxieties which stem from his humanity, but (motivated convincingly enough) develops into a sadistic embodiment of imperialist tyranny and expectations of a patriarchal society.

This sets ground for Antoinette to prove her agency in striking back against the oppressing society embodied in the character of her husband; and while she does truly take up a fight, which results in her fall into madness rather than conforming to the rules, she doesn't spare herself from trying to conform to some norms along the way. As a broken person whom from a young age needed and craved love and acceptance, whereas she mostly found intolerance and rejection, Antoinette truly wanted to find a refuge within her husband. She did so, by trying to conform to the expectations and demands he imposes on her. In this regard, Farhana Haque

(Jean Rhys' *Controversial Post Colonial Text*, 2016) claims that Antoinette "was utterly a rebellious soul fighting against the English, while on the other hand, she was trying to fix herself as perfect as an English girl. From her appearance to her food habits, in everything she tried very hard wanting to be an ideal English woman." Haque then continues to support this thesis by counting the examples of Antoinette trying to identify herself with the British by being repelled by the black Caribbeans, including her "fear of miscegenation when she saw a black servant kiss her mother", and her disgust for the physical manifestation of miscegenation within the corporeal and facial features of the biracial boy who bullied her in her adolescence.

As her relationship with her husband goes from bad to worse, Antoinette tries to make him love her not only by trying to conform to his demand, but by resorting to asking Christophine for a love potion. There is a reason, however, why she didn't consider herself able to divorce him or just run away – she knew all of her financial security by (the English) law belonged to him, and without it to support her struggle for independency and freedom, she wouldn't be able to do much.

As she tries to comply to her husband's expectations and finds only indifference and later even hatred from him, Antoinette in turn grows depressed, paranoid and rageful, which coincides with his behaviour towards her, as they end up reciprocating their violence and aversion towards each other. Antoinette's husband, however, fully assumes his role both as the coloniser to the 'othered' Antoinette and as 'the superior male' in their marital power dynamics. His power lies in his sadistic and vengeful energy which he builds up on the idea of his own superiority to the impure and alien creature, what he comes to see his wife as. In the end, as he turns fully dictating and releases all of his spite on her – deciding he's going back to England, taking his wife with him, and leaving the Caribbean for good in an attempt to break her spirit into submission beyond any chance of reparation – Antoinette symbolically enacts one final act of disobedience and is turned – or, as questioned by Şenel, turns herself – mad. Perhaps in this act which might truly be at least partially willing on her behalf, she gives herself away to insanity as an ultimate act of her own volition. She is, on leaving for England, broken down into the passive state of a marionette of her husband, whose integrity and identity are so disintegrated that she (symbolically) assumes the look and feel of an obedient doll-like creature, the imagery of a pure woman as intended by Victorian society.

The last part of the novel, which is now set in Thornfield, England, most explicitly connects to *Jane Eyre* with the usage of the character of Grace Poole and the literal Madwoman

in the attic. The attic in which Antoinette, now Bertha Mason, spends her days, acts both as the final refuge and confinement for the woman who has been living half in memory of vibrant colours and fumes of the distant past, and half in cold present of her maddening reality. There she is confronted with the utter insanity of Bertha, but sometimes comes to sense as Antoinette. She has no identity, and almost all of her sense of self she gathers from the relationship to her memories and her past. In the deepest state of submission to the colonising society, when she is practically immobilised by being confined in the attic and guarded like a literal prisoner, Antoinette dreams of the past, but as well of the future – or the present. She is haunted by the feeling of purpose in that place, to which she cannot help herself to remember – but then she sees her red dress, with all the scents which remind her of home, and its colour reminding her of something else:

*“But I looked at the dress on the floor and it was as if the fire had spread across the room. It was beautiful and it reminded me of something I must do. I will remember it I thought. I will remember quite soon now.”* (Jean Rhys, 1999)

Her impression of the dress acts as a prompt to a dream which follows immediately after Antoinette’s remarks. She dreams of an episode of her setting fire to Thornfield and escaping to the battlements, where she hears “a man” – her husband – calling to her to make her stand down, back again to the confinement of her dungeon; and in this moment Antoinette, seeing a pool at Coulibri – which functions as the symbol of Antoinette connecting to her childhood and the ultimate path to freedom, reminding her of the time before all the suffering had started, even before Tia had shown her detestation of black Caribbean people – jumps into a place where no one can ever reach her. She wakes up and has now recollected what she must do. Her story ends with her following in the steps of the dream, escaping the attic and wandering the dark passages with a candle in her hand and the goal in her mind. She is, presumably, on her way to set Thornfield on fire and take the liberating leap into her death – and freedom. This is what her madness ultimately comes down to – it makes her ready to finally escape the suffering imposed on her by the society and oppression. When she is left with no other option, she chooses the destruction of self and Thornfield – the symbol of tyranny of both the coloniser and the patriarchal oppressor.

## **6. The Tale of Two Heroines**

Up to this point it was presented how, each in her own right, both Jane Eyre and Antoinette Cosway enact their rebellious and their conforming moments. Both are in search of confirmation of their own identity and freedom, and both employ different means of achieving it, which leaves one of them rewarded, and the other punished for it.

From the very first moment of their respective stories, the heroines are set back, introduced as outcasts, and thrown to the margins of the society. Jane is an orphan, who gets sent away to cold Lowood, where she faces cruelty and subjugation by the cold, patriarchal figure of Mr. Brocklehurst; Antoinette is a Creole, who at her home at Coulibri faces cruelty and rejection both from her mother and the community which surrounds her. Jane has the privilege of being English in an English society, but Antoinette has a privilege (at least for a time) of being a white Creole, and a daughter of landowners. Both are schooled away from their homes, and as this period of their lives ends, that's where their paths start to differ.

Jane leaves Lowood to make use of her education and to find employment; Antoinette is essentially called off to marry a man whom she doesn't know. She inherits money, but it is soon prescribed to her new husband. Jane, however, doesn't have a penny to her name, but is offered the chance of earning it by herself, for herself. In this way Jane assumes a social role which offers more freedom of choice and independency than Antoinette's, even though Antoinette is considered a lady. In Jane's case, Brontë's (intentional or not) awareness of how the notion of financially providing for herself is connected to the idea of female independency becomes important in Jane's assuming of a feminist role. Her first instinct is not to find a husband to secure her position, but rather to *create* this position by herself.

Antoinette was subdued into marrying, which is one of her first important acts of conforming to societal expectations after she has grown up. In a way, she is yielding to the demand that she should be married – and not just married, but married off – by the male figures in her family; Jean Rhys could have made her struggle against it more defiant, but instead decided to opt for a somewhat passive agreement of Antoinette's to the marriage. When her stepfather lets her on on the idea of introducing her to her potential English suitor, Antoinette experiences a horrible forefeeling of what will eventually come to pass; however, the conforming attitude in which she comes to terms with the situation and represses her own feelings is perhaps best revealed in a particular thought of Antoinette's:

“It was like that morning when I found the dead horse. *Say nothing and it may not be true.*” (Jean Rhys, 1999)

Next important point in their stories is their relationship with the main male figure of the respective novels. From the very first meeting with Mr. Rochester, the sense of equality between him and Jane is present either by him accepting her and her actions as her own and independent of his will, either by him explicitly expressing that he feels as if Jane is his equal in everything, except in the fact that she is about twenty years younger and as much as inexperienced. The fact that Jane is a woman never diminishes her in Rochester's eyes, but rather makes him marvel at her and belittle himself for the maturity and integrity of Jane's, which he himself feels as if he cannot achieve. On the other hand, with the introduction of marriage potential between the two, things quickly start to change. Jane is obviously repulsed by and afraid of the idea of a conventional marriage in her society, and the submissive role a woman is expected to assume in relation to her husband; on this level Jane seems to exalt more awareness of oppression imposed on women by the institution of marriage than Antoinette. When Rochester, after the reveal of his marriage to Bertha Mason, offers her the possibility of becoming his plaything in richness and comfort of a foreign land, Jane refuses and finally decides on keeping her integrity and staying true to herself by running away. In the end, she only consents to marriage with Rochester because the unconventionality of it – her having financial independence, Rochester being physically impaired, thus dependent upon her and unable to exercise power over her, and their home being situated in an untamed, secluded area, away from the society – makes her realise a marriage of true and equal minds is now made possible (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000).

Antoinette, on the other side, is othered by her husband from the very first moments of their honeymoon. Of his first impressions of her, the unnamed narrator says:

*“... her eyes which are too large and can be disconcerting. She never blinks at all it seems to me. Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either.”* (Jean Rhys, 1999)

It is clear from the very first that Antoinette is not considered his equal by her husband. He mystifies her, not in a playful way in which Rochester deems Jane a mischievous elf and establishes some kind of a shared jest and understanding between them, but rather he sees in her something strange, different and so unlike him, that he immediately emphasises the fact that she is neither English nor European. In a way, he subtly establishes from the start the impossibility of him seeing her worth as she is not European, and of both of them overcoming their differences and creating a true, meaningful connection. As it was discussed above, their

marriage only goes from bad to worse, from a starting tolerance of and curiosity at each other's differences to passionate hatred which arises from their lack of mutual understanding, which is connected to the fact that Antoinette's husband sees her as something inherently different and lower than himself.

Both of these relationships force the heroines, respectively, to face their darker, repressed selves. While Jane falls short in managing to allow her emotions to surface and express her anger, despair and disappointment at the situation out loud, Antoinette uses those very emotions unrestrictedly after it becomes clear that her and her husband's relationship had gone beyond any possibility of repair. The fact that she lets her emotion consume her and push her into the state of what could be described as alcoholism and depression is the result of Antoinette's not being able to heal her own sanity in a society that doesn't allow her to realise her independency and freedom of choice. The crucial point to take away from here is that Antoinette, no matter how much she breaks under the oppression from the society and from her husband, and no matter how incapable she is of successfully coming to terms with her feelings – so that she may protect her sanity – she had nevertheless succeeded in exerting the potential of her passion and prowess unbound, albeit in a negative, self-destructive manner. It may be argued was there a way for Antoinette to preserve her sanity under the crushing restrictions and expectations imposed on her, but she succeeded in breaking (out) of the frame which she was forcibly being shoved into ever since her childhood.

## **7. Antoinette and Jane as Two Sides of the Same Coin**

Taking into consideration how eerily opposite Jane Eyre and Antoinette Cosway are and how contrasting is the difference in crucial points in their individual character arcs, a question may be proposed: should Antoinette Cosway then be interpreted not only as a response to the colonial and imperialist aspects of *Jane Eyre* (Şenel, 2014), but as the main heroine's alter ego as well?

The way Antoinette's journey as a character is constructed simultaneously mimics various parts of Jane's life, but Antoinette proves herself rebellious and full of prowess at crucial points, where Jane chooses to stay silent, and breed in herself a kind of mute resistance. One truly does have to ask, when considering the (intertextual) connection between the two



characters, isn't Antoinette in a way a mirror image of Jane, but in a way that she does and expresses everything Jane fails to accomplish and articulate? Is Antoinette's painstaking struggle for preserving her identity and integrity as a white Creole woman in the face of oppression by raising her voice a logical and natural evolution of Jane who chooses silent resistance over rebellious mutiny?

The answer may be in the fact that the two characters shouldn't be compared – or that they are not even comparable – on the same ground. As Mardorossian (1999) puts it, “Antoinette Cosway and Jane Eyre were seen as two sides of the same coin: both victims of the workings of a homogenous system of sexual domination.” However, by the mid 1980-s, the interpretations of how one character connects to another started to change, as Mardorossian continues: “a new paradigm examining the articulation of gender along the axes of race, class and nationality emerged.” What happened to the interpretation of how the image of Jane reflects in Antoinette's character or vice versa is that critics started to count in the aspects of race, social standing, and nationality into the equation, whereas before they used to ground their comparison of the two heroines in the fact that both offered a female point of view in relation to the oppression by patriarchal Victorian society. But even in this regard, it is not true that Jane Eyre and Antoinette Cosway found themselves in the same position, as one was a white English woman in the old world of the English, while the other was a white Creole, in the world of the coloniser, in relation to which she was seen as partly belonging to the colonised. Next, the fact that Jane is perceived as belonging to the middle class and Antoinette to the declining Creole elite further widens the gap between the two characters when at first one might have been compelled to see them as the binary opposite of the other.

Taking into consideration the fact that their social situation as well as genetical heritage are as vastly different as some parts of their story echo the struggles of the other, the claim that Antoinette Cosway could be seen as a rebellious and vigorous opposite of Jane Eyre hardly may hold any claim. Both Jane and Antoinette should be perceived as individual characters with their own unique struggles, and not be defined against each other, as far as it may be helped.

## Conclusion

In this work the evidence was provided on how the characters of Jane Eyre and Antoinette Cosway, respectively, showcase their feminine qualities such as strength and endurance in the face of the oppressive patriarchal society, and how they at times still remain conformant to general societal expectations. *Jane Eyre* falls short of being a full-fledged work of feminist literature not because the titular heroine is ultimately rewarded with a (even by the standards of Victorian literature) somewhat conventional ending, but because Jane Eyre does not manage to accept herself in her entirety and come to terms with the full emotional complexity of her being.

Even though in that regard *Wide Sargasso Sea* may seem as a more exact, although tragic, story of one sort of female emotional emancipation, its focus lies more on the destructive potential of the protagonist's female prowess than on making it work to her ultimate advantage in the context of the era (if one chooses not to see Antoinette Cosway's final implied act of defiance as such). Both of the characters function within separate and specifically coloured narratives which seem to be (intertextually) connected to one another, but which are on a deeper level as much disconnected with and independent of each other in certain points such as race and social situation, complexity of which goes beyond any superficial analysis.

Nevertheless, the actions and psychological characterization of the two heroines in relation to their social and financial standing, as well as to the male-female gender dynamics provide a strong groundwork for future interpretations focused on one or more of the numerous levels of complex themes of Brontë's and Rhys's respective works.

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