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Women within Precincts—*The Madwoman in the Attic* and the Application of the Feminist Critical Framework to *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract:

*Theoretical frameworks enhance understanding of literary texts. Their applications to works of art are indispensable in unearthing hidden ideologies and to comprehend socio-cultural circumstances. *The Madwoman in the Attic* was a landmark work in the history of women's studies. So was, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Jane Eyre*, happened to be the inspiration behind the creation of these texts. The character of Bertha Mason emanates as one who symbolizes all that when a woman suffers when imprisoned at the hands of a dominating and terrorizing male. She is not only a victim at the hands of the man but also of the society she belongs to. In this case, she is a Victorian woman entrapped within a marriage of her times that was indifferent to the sensibilities of a woman and denied freedom to her. This paper examines*

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*the predicaments of Bertha Mason and thereby endeavours to understand the utility and
significance of the feminist critical theory.*

KEYWORDS: *Feminism, Carribean, Literary Theory, Victorianism, Bertha Mason, The
Madwoman in the Attic, Jean Rhys, Jane Eyre*

The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism states:

In view of current changes, it is worth pausing for a moment to reconsider the configuration and meaning of “theory”.... It entails a mode of questioning and analysis that goes beyond the earlier New Critical research into the “literariness” of literature. Because of the effects of poststructuralism, cultural studies, and the new social movements, especially the women’s and civil rights movements, theory now entails skepticism toward systems, institutions, and norms a readiness to take critical stands and to engage in resistance;... and a habit of linking local and personal practices to the larger economic, political, historical, and ethical forces of culture. (xxxiii)

Literary theories offer frameworks for analysis of works of art. They are, so to speak, spectacles that provide intelligibility, precision and lucidity in terms of recognizing ideologies veiled underneath texts. Through relating social, political and cultural dealings in the society, theory facilitates a healthier explication and purpose of literature. This paper probes Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* as illustration of women cramped within precincts. All the three works have been discussed by critics at length. The story of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte led to the germination of both criticism and rewriting.

The incarceration of women has been examined in numerous works of art. Feminist critics have deliberated over concealed dogmas beneath works. The subsequent paradigms,

interpretations of suppression/repression/exploitation of women; analysis of demonstration of power by men have been well received by readers and critics. The evidence tendered by such critics is persuasive and compelling and they underline the significance of applying such literary frames to similar works of art. The result is the revelation of ideologies engendered in cultures and literature. *Jane Eyre* invited critics and writers to ponder over the imprisonment of Bertha Mason, daughter of a Creole woman married to Mr. Rochester, a British. The proposition is not only of captivity of a woman but also an allusion to the British domination of colonial people. Bertha Mason has also been seen as the double of Jane. Therefore, the theory of psychoanalysis also surfaces. A critical analysis of the text suggests not just feminism but also imperialism and psychoanalysis as theoretical frames that can be used to comprehend the work. This makes the text rich in terms of literary, theoretical and cultural studies. The multiple layers and insinuations in the novel gave birth to a very fascinating and thought provoking novel— *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. The reinterpretation and reinvention of the character of Bertha Mason became a subject of decisive study by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their celebrated criticism *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination*. The work is an authoritative instance of feminist redrafting of the canonical text. The examination and re-examination of the Victorian novel presented before readers, the possibility of the ‘other’ side of the story and thus exploded the myopic vision, for instance, provided by the plot in *Jane Eyre*. The work of Gilbert and Gubar unfastened new vistas of feminism—the manner in which a male character could violate a woman’s consciousness and individuality.

Instead of blindly taking in what the original writer writes, Jean Rhys resisted the surface connotation; and deduced meanings that were buried inside the text and screened from readers. To comprehend the context of *Jane Eyre*, the historical circumstances, have also been taken sight of. The dreadfulness of the institution of marriage during the Victorian era also comes to the fore. Historically, this dimension is significant in understanding that women were ensnared within cultural institutions. Marriage, religion, society and culture—all contrived in trapping women from which there was no acquittal. Bertha Mason, hence, symbolizes the predicaments embedded in the Victorian marriage and also the condition of the colonized. It is known to all that the colonizers described the colonised in animalistic terms. In chapter 26 of *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is described in terms of an animal:

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In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face.... A fierce cry...the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind-feet....The maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage, and gazed wildly at her visitors. (310)

Bertha Mason is referred to as 'it' in most of the quoted sentences. In that sense, she is a thing, an object. She is uncivilized, uncontrollable, unkempt and wild. She walks not like a human being but an animal, on all fours. She makes incomprehensible sounds. Indignity to Bertha Mason is granted liberally. Here it would be noteworthy to consider Frantz Fanon's analysis about the White perception of the Africans in his *The Wretched of the Earth*:

At times this Manichean mania goes to its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the native, or to speak plainly it turns him into an animal. In fact, the terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man's reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations.... Those hordes of vital statistics, those hysterical masses, those faces bereft of all humanity, those distended bodies which are like nothing on earth, that mob without beginning or end, those children who seem to belong to nobody, that laziness stretched out in the sun, that vegetative rhythm of life — all this forms part of the colonial vocabulary. (32-33)

It was natural in the case of the imperialists to depict the colonized as animals—creatures or things that existed to be enjoyed, made to work mercilessly, exploited and imprisoned. While Bertha Mason is seen as an animal, in fact a monster, Jane is seen as an angel, a noble creature who conforms to Victorian standards of courtesy and graciousness. She is offered as a contrast to Bertha. Both are pitted against each other. While one is white, the other is black—the colours mentioned here of course, refer to the societal assessment of the two women and not to the actual colour. However, the two women also hail from two divergent races. Hence, it wouldn't be incorrect to refer to their actual colour as well. In fact, the reference to Creole descent is a natural allusion to race too.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their celebrated *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer in the Nineteenth Century Imagination*, have recognized two extreme ways in which women are portrayed by men. Either she is an angel or she is a monster (17). Vanessa Joosen refers to the same “mythic masks” (216) and states “On the one hand, they discern the pervasive idealist image of the angel, the woman who is active, aggressive, and unfeminine. In Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, the enraged monster is Bertha Mason...” (216). Jane on the other hand, is the angel—an exemplar of what a Victorian woman was expected or projected to be. The study of ‘the madwoman’ (like Bertha Mason) and the subsequent theory enunciated by Gilbert and Gubar have been alluded to by several critics. To categorize women as psychos, psychotic by nature, mad, crazy or other terms suggesting various levels of dementia; because they cannot conform to conventional standards (often set by men) is a common phenomena in cultures. Many a times, during trials of rape victims, the defense is seen either assassinating the victim’s character or trying to prove the mental instability of the victim. She is seen as the ‘other’. Fortunately, in India, the Supreme Court has vindicated the use of such arguments to protect or defend the perpetrators. Nevertheless, such routes to protect the man are a pervasive truth. When a woman succumbs to society, she is good; but if she dares to think or act differently, she is invariably an ogre, the ugly one.

Patrizia Bettella in her analysis of the portrayal of women in Italian Poetry talks about the “development of a literary female type, to account for the presence of the ugly woman in a tradition moulded by male writers, and to unveil the stereotypes, the clichés, and the antifeminist bias that have shaped the image of woman as either beautiful and good or ugly and bad and transgressive” (4). The cultural and literary context is Italy, but the feminist idea of angel and monster is applicable to all the cultures of the world that treat women thus. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the woman protagonist is treated/seen like a monster. She is ugly, perhaps mysterious since she doesn’t conform to society’s norms. French feminist, Simone De Beauvoir asserts in the context of a woman being seen as a mystery stating:

To say that woman is mystery is to say, not that she is silent, but that her language is not understood; she is there, but hidden behind veils; she exists beyond these uncertain appearances. What is she? Angel, demon, one inspired, an actress? It may be supposed either that there are answers to these questions which are impossible to discover, or rather, that no answer is adequate because a

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fundamental ambiguity marks the feminine being; and perhaps in her she is even for herself quite indefinable: a sphinx. (1410)

We find the echo of the idea of a woman being perceived in two parallel ways. She either epitomizes evil or virtuosity. Feminists across cultures have observed these divergences. Whatever a woman's image, she is made vulnerable through subversion. Rochester is unjust to both Bertha and Jane. He hides his first marriage from Jane and when his reality comes to light he has the gumption to justify it "Bigamy is an ugly word!—I meant, however, to be a bigamist; but fate has out-manoeuvred me, or Providence has checked me" (308). Rationalizing his misdeed and substantiating it with false reasons comes naturally to Rochester and he has no qualms about the transgression. Self-centeredness as to possessing a woman his fancy catches is apparent to the readers. To achieve his goal, Rochester has no reservations or fears to conceal his reality. Bertha Mason has no justification to make. She is wrong no matter what her actuality and circumstances are. As suggested by feminists, a woman in such situations is either 'black' or 'white'. There is no 'grey' shade in her nature whereas a man is given benefit of doubt by the others in society. This demeanour is widespread in most cultures. The woman, therefore, has no escape or prospect to explain herself since she is prejudged by society.

It is interesting that Jean Rhys identified the fissure in the original novel in the characterization of Bertha Mason. The space invading in the case of her underdeveloped character activated a plot that was almost a prequel as a story to *Jane Eyre*. Why is Bertha Mason the way she is? There is no illumination on the matter. She is just like that, has always been—according to *Jane Eyre*; and the readers are expected to trust the writer. However, the text by sheer obviousness of gap creates another text through an interesting intertextual enlargement. Intertextuality in the context led to the creation of an entirely innovative text. According to Wolfgang G Muller:

Generally speaking, it is aesthetically and ontologically impossible to have identical characters in literary works by different authors. If an author takes over a character from a work by another author into his text, putting it into his own uses, this procedure may have a parodistic, satirical, corrective or censorious function and imply literary or social and political criticism. So, in presenting the Jamaican prehistory of Bertha Mason and Edward Rochester, Jean Rhys, though indebted to

Charlotte Bronte's characters, does not just borrow them, but rather constructs her versions of them. (65)

Precisely, Jean Rhys has picked up the original novel and customized it in her own way to elucidate her point of view. She brings in the West Indian colonial history to explicate Bertha Mason's background and mental state. She recreates through envisioning and re-visioning the characters, creating a convincing whole new standpoint.

It would be pertinent to mention that Mr. Rochester tries to position both Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre in disparity when he says, "'That is *my wife*," said he. "Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know—such are the endearments which are to solace my leisure hours! And THIS is what I wished to have" (laying his hand on my shoulder): "this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon" (311). The statement is unassailable and conceited in stance. Bertha Mason is deprecated as one who fails to satisfy his conjugal desires. She is hence fit to be discarded. She is a pastime as he refers to his "leisure hours" (311) in the quoted sentence. Simultaneously, Rochester states his choice, that of marrying and living with Jane. She has no occasion to choose but merely and docilely accept him. It is almost as if Rochester believes that he will be allowed to have what he wants. Whether Jane consents or not is beside the point. His monstrosity is made to appear less as compared with that of Bertha Mason who is portrayed as one having caused jeopardy to him. Therefore, he plays the victim and hopes to garner the sympathy of the British society.

Rochester had concealed his first marriage from Jane. What he implies is that he imprisoned Bertha since she was mad. Nevertheless, the suspicion that emanates is whether Bertha became mad and consequently imprisoned; or whether she lost her sanity because she was imprisoned. The ambiguity in the work becomes a perpetual question. During the meeting, Bertha tears Jane's bridal veil and this can be symbolically interpreted as a loathing of the institution of marriage in the Victorian era. Thornfield, where Bertha is imprisoned can be seen as British society which denied freedom to women. By conditioning them into accepting their lot, society actually disallows them the autonomy to lead life as per their wishes and discretion. It is society that decides what was true in the case of Bertha, not Jane. She is a mere bystander to the outrageous veracity thrown violently before her. It is her wedding day and supposed to be an event of delight and anticipation. Tables turn and she becomes an observer—sidelined and dismissed from voicing her views. In the episode where Rochester is justifying and proving his

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‘innocence’, people from Thornfield become witnesses to the event. Not one tries to support any woman of the two protagonists, in any way. Both Bertha and Jane, hence are victims of not only Rochester but also the British society and culture. The incontrovertible and pressure of the situation is enormous.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the female protagonist is Antoinette renamed as Bertha when she is locked away in the attic by Mr. Rochester. Until the second part of the novel, Mr Rochester is not named and is only obliquely implied to highlight the story and character of Antoinette. Their marriage is an arranged one and Mr. Rochester marries Antoinette after he is proffered 30,000 pounds by Richard Mason—Bertha’s stepbrother. So the whole episode is a mere transaction and does not share the sanctity bestowed upon the institution of marriage. They stay initially in the Carribean islands. In the course of their relationship gradually, Mr. Rochester discovers symptoms of insanity in Antoinette. He takes her to England. It is here that Antoinette is locked in the garret room and loses all sense of time and place. She is also oblivious to the fact that she is in England.

The entire novel is a tripartite structure narrated in the stream of consciousness technique to render the mental state of Antoinette as naturally as possible. The method allows the writer to delve deep into the psyche of the character; and confront the canon to produce a work that is a powerful rewriting of a colonial woman with fragmented identity. The plot brings to the fore the tragic story of a marginalized woman. The result is the exhaustive development of a sidelined, helpless character suffering at the hands of a merciless husband who batters and traumatizes her. He shatters her identity that includes even her name. She is renamed Bertha after she arrives at Thornfield. It is interesting to observe that the idea of splintered identity is underscored through the mirror motif. In the third part, Antoinette finds that there are no mirrors in the house and she thinks:

There is no looking glass here and I don't know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us—hard, cold and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I? (107)

She is lost, looks demented and is unaware of her surroundings. Disorientation in Bertha Mason is perceptible. There is powerlessness, feebleness and bewilderment at the reflection. In the original work, that is *Jane Eyre*, we find that Jane finds herself transformed when she looks at herself in the mirror. She says:

While arranging my hair, I looked at my face in the glass, and felt it was no longer plain: there was hope in its aspect and life in its colour; and my eyes seemed as if they had beheld the fount of fruition, and borrowed beams from the lustrous ripple. I had often been unwilling to look at my master, because I feared he could not be pleased at my look; but I was sure I might lift my face to his now, and not cool his affection by its expression. I took a plain but clean and light summer dress from my drawer and put it on: it seemed no attire had ever so well become me, because none had I ever worn in so blissful a mood. (342)

It is almost as if Jane finds a new life and reason to live when she sees herself in the mirror. It is rejuvenation, in fact a renewal of her 'self'. She is almost a Goddess—tranquil, composed, confident and beautiful. In contrast, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette has no sense of who she is, where she was and what she was doing in the house. The mirror motif therefore is used to emphasize the suggestion of identity and losing it. Jacques Lacan in his essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative" states "We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*" (1286). Clearly, as Lacan points out, mirror images lead to personal creation of identity. If the reflection is acceptable/appealing, the image is also acceptable/appealing. If not, there is a disconnection between the real and the unreal, that is the reflection which is not corporeal, just a mirage. The mirror motif, therefore, is not just a prop in the novel but a medium of elaboration on the personalities of the protagonists. What happens when women are ensconced within boundaries? Is there a way of flight from the situation? Do they have choice? And if they do, are they able to truly exercise their autonomy? These are questions with no easy answers. However, the creation of texts mentioned in this paper at least throw open questions of import related to women, feminism and new frontiers in literary theories.

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A close examination of the three works discussed in this paper reveals the interconnection, intertextuality and critical application of theory in literature. The end result of such application of literary theory is enrichment of intellectual comprehension of works of art. On one hand they disclose hidden notions and on the other they help facilitate a new perspective on marginalized characters. No one protagonist can take over the text. Society, culture, marginals and even history become central to the plot. A mere exposition of a story and understanding it is to summarize. A lot of reading between the lines is lost in the process. Literary theories explode the possibility of such simplistic appreciation and inquire into the nature of the text, its context and the frictions inherent within the text.

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