



Bertha Mason ‘The Mad Woman in the Attic’: A Subaltern Voice

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“I am no bird; and no nest ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will”

- Charlotte Bronte

Abstract— This paper seeks to analyze the mediums and effects of voice and silence in the life of a female character in the famous Victorian novel, *Jane Eyre*. This minor character that has been termed ‘mad’, ‘crazy’, and ‘violent’, and even though is absolutely essential to the plot, has no representation of her own. Bertha Mason, otherwise known as the ‘Mad woman’ is a typical representation of a woman as a victim of both patriarchy and colonialism. By analyzing the character of Bertha as a victim of social standards, followed by Jean Rhys’ portrayal of her in her postcolonial work *Wide Sargasso Sea*, we are able to discover the subaltern voice of Bertha Mason. This research attempts to explore the inequitable portrayal of Bertha through re-thinking of her not as a madwoman but as a victim and ultimately comprehending the entirety of her madness. The method of investigation for this research is analytical and descriptive.

Keywords— gothic illustration, racial prejudice, sexist notions of female authorship, social standards, subaltern voice, the mad woman in the attic, toxic masculinity.

INTRODUCTION

Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte, first published in 1847 as ‘*Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*’ under the pseudonym of Currer Bell is widely considered a classic. It gave new truthfulness to the Victorian novel with its realistic portrayal of the inner life of a woman, observing her struggles with social standards and natural desires. *Jane Eyre* is a progressive book in many senses, far ahead of its time, it is even deemed feminist as she lived in a time when women were not encouraged to write. Bronte forced Victorian society to redefine sexist notions of female authorship.

While creating one of the most iconic work of literature, Bronte, unknowingly creates one of English literature’s most memorable and controversial character, Rochester’s first wife, Bertha Mason, the madwoman he has confined in the attic of Thornfield hall. Most literary critics have focused on the protagonist Jane and her struggles to gain

social and financial independence and mutual dependency in marriage while considering Bertha Mason, only the dark double of Jane. The study of Bertha, not as an impediment in Jane’s happiness, but as an independent character has drawn comparatively less attention than that as Jane. Through re-thinking of Bertha from a feminist perspective and as a victim of colonialism, social standards, and a subaltern this paper questions the entirety of ‘madness’ of Bertha and exactly how ‘mad’ was Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*?

Portrayal of Bertha in *Jane Eyre*

Charlotte Bronte’s famous Victorian novel, *Jane Eyre* tells us the story of a young governess who possesses intelligence, self-confidence, a will of her own, and moral righteousness. In the novel, there is a monstrous character locked in the attic by her husband Rochester. This

character is Bertha Mason, Rochester's West-Indian-born wife.

Before we find out about Bertha's existence, we are aware of her as an uneasy and even threatening presence. She is the source of the mysterious, mocking laugh that Jane hears. Desperate for freedom from her confinement, she is responsible for setting fire to Mr. Rochester's bed, attacking Mr. Mason, and tearing Jane's veil on the eve of her wedding. When we finally meet her, she is depicted in language that degrades and dehumanizes, she is a 'clothed hyena' a 'figure', described using the neutral pronoun 'it'.

Nevertheless, her plight that of the 'madwoman in the attic, the character behind the title of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's famous study of 19th-century women writers, means that she is an object of sympathy as well as solidarity. Despite being so important to the plot of the novel, interestingly she does not have a single dialogue in her part. All we learn about Bertha is either through Rochester's description of her madness or Jane's apparently biased perception of her.

Jane or rather Bronte takes great measures to lead the readers into believing in the madness of Bertha. But the interesting fact is that there are not enough instances to prove it. In a book that contains almost 400 pages, Bronte has failed to give convincing arguments of Bertha's insanity. A biased account of Jane only associates Bertha with a 'hysterical' and 'demonic' laughter, in an attempt to convince the readers of a flesh-eating animal-like presence in the house. When Jane sees Bertha in the middle of the night, she describes her as a 'savage', even goes to the extent and compares her with a 'German vampire'. The only possible explanation of Bertha's act of insanity would be the effect that years of confinement and isolation would have had over her.

Bertha as the 'other'

The narrative strategies used by Charlotte Bronte designated Bertha as 'other'. She is surrounded by a web of gothic imagery, described as a 'vampire' who threatens to drain Mason's heart. One particularly troubling aspect of Bertha is her psychological instability. Rochester sees her as responsible for her situation. He tells Jane that Bertha 'came from a mad family, with a mother who was a madwoman and a drunkard' but also that 'like a dutiful child she copied her parents in both points'.

Another source of complexity suggesting Bertha's otherness is her ethnicity. She is of Creole origin, the daughter of a white European settler in the West Indies. Bronte does not particularly touch the precise nature of her ethnicity but references to her 'dark' hair and 'discolored',

'black' face along with the fact that her parents wanted her to marry Rochester because he was a 'good race', lead to speculation as to her racial identity. It is interesting to note that even as a White Creole, Bertha would have been seen as the 'other'

Racial prejudice and Gothic illustrations

In the 18th and 19th centuries, many European writers in the West Indies sought to associate Creoles with the native Caribbean population, as a way of distancing them from civilized Europeans. This was particularly the case for Creole women, who were often depicted as self-willed, decadent, and untrustworthy, the very essence of Rochester's description of Bertha.

Bertha's madness is attributed to her features, 'red eyes', 'black hair'. It is made clear that she is from a non-white ethnicity. Even the rumors that go around regarding the presence of a strange woman in the house are of women who do not essentially fit into the Victorian ideal mold.

"What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell; it groveled, 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".

Her portrayal as an insane bestial woman is further problematic as a case of racial prejudice. The novel avoids the fact that people from all cultures would essentially have anger resulting in irrational or unconventional behavior if suppressed by society and treated as passive second-class citizen. Bronte has not allowed madness to linger in pure European blood or to attribute madness to it. Madness is conveniently reserved for women that do not conform to the Victorian code of conduct.

Wide Sargasso Sea: Re-vision of Jane Eyre

Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys is both a response and a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, set in the West Indies and imagining the lives of Bertha Mason and her family. The novel is a response to Bronte's treatment of Mr. Rochester's 'mad' first wife, Bertha, known as Antoinette Cosway before her marriage. Rhys reveals the horrifying reality that might lie behind a man's claim that a woman is mad, and humanizes Bronte's grotesque invention, the now archetypal and symbolic madwoman in the attic. Rhys writes from an entirely different perspective to Bronte, composing a voice, not for Jane but the 'mad woman': Bertha Mason.

Rhys in her book explores the reasons why Bertha Mason went mad. In telling Bertha, or Antoinette's story, Rhys

explores the colonial and patriarchal society that is conditioned by gender and race divisions, reflecting the oppression under colonialism and patriarchy and the identity crisis of the oppressed.

The story of Bertha is re-constructed through a feminist perspective in *Wide Sargasso Sea* where Rhys broke the authority of patriarchy and colonialism. She made the readers realize that Bertha's story is worth listening to. Rhys saw the madwoman in the attic as a racial and gender-based denial of voice. Hence, this novel gives this deserved voice back to its owner.

Marital frustration and Toxic masculinity

After reading *Jane Eyre* and its counter-narrative *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it is clear that Bertha and Rochester married each other under false pretexts and not for love. It is also made clear that marriage to Rochester and his treatment of her lead to a dark and disturbing life for Bertha in England.

As Rochester describes Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, he says that Bertha was famous for her beauty and she was the pride of the town and sought after by many suitors. Hence, his father persuaded him to court her and gain control over her fortune. Although Rochester agrees to his father's command, he was also stupefied by her beauty. In recounting the history of their relationship, in *Jane Eyre*, he says: "*I thought I loved her... Her relatives encouraged me; competitors piqued me, she allured me...oh, I have no respect for myself when I think of that act!... I never loved, I never esteemed, I did not even know her*".

According to Rochester, Bertha suffers from congenital insanity, as he explains this to Jane saying that madness runs in the family. He even claims that she was drunken and promiscuous and that her excesses brought on her madness when she was young. But he cannot exactly provide any proof for his claim since he was not an objective witness. This speculation of Rochester only confirms that he is trying to justify his horrific actions and blame Bertha for her situation, conveniently making Bertha a scapegoat. This toxic masculinity becomes Bertha's downfall.

When one carefully reads *Jane Eyre*, we realize that Bertha's violent acts are always directed towards either Rochester, like biting him, scratching him, setting fire to his room; or the idea of marriage itself. Bertha tears Jane's veil the night before her wedding, but she does not hurt Jane, even though she has the potential to do a lot more. This action hints that Bertha is sane enough to be aware that her husband is planning to enter a bigamous marriage. This also shows her frustration with the idea of marriage. This act also suggests that she is trying to warn Jane what

marriage to Rochester would bring to her. Bertha's violence is also directed towards Mr. Mason because she holds him responsible for tricking her into marrying Rochester.

Bertha's existence is so averse to 19th century standards that Rochester changes her name to depict her attitude. She is forced to change herself from Antoinette to Bertha, which seems the thing to do for a 'mad woman', thus stripping away a part of her identity. She becomes a victim of Rochester's toxic masculinity and her gender allowed him to treat her like a madwoman and with that excuse, lock her up.

It is Rochester's need to dominate his ethnic wife and his cruelty to lock her up and hide her from society is to save his so-called 'respectable' reputation from getting ruined as he married someone below his European status.

The Mad Woman in the Attic: Angel or Monster

Patriarchal images of women who dominate Victorian literature typify the often debated binary oppositions – Angel or Monster. In 1979, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar made a breakthrough in feminist criticism with their work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*. According to Gilbert and Gubar, all female characters in male-authored books can be categorized as either the 'angel' or 'monster'.

The 'angel' character was pure, dispassionate, and submissive, in other words, the ideal female figure in a male-dominated society. In sharp contrast to the angel figure, the 'monster' female was sensual, passionate, rebellious, and decidedly uncontrollable: all qualities that caused a great deal of anxiety among men during the Victorian period.

However, Charlotte Bronte did not limit her characterization to this strict dichotomy between monster and angel. Jane possesses many of the qualities of the so-called angel, she is pure, moral, and has a controlled behavior. Yet at the same time, she is extremely passionate, independent, and courageous. She refuses to submit to a position of inferiority even when faced with a choice between love and autonomy. Moreover, Jane's childhood demonstrates much of the same rebelliousness and anger that characterizes the 'monster'. It is clear that Jane's appearance of control is only something that she has learned during her time in Lowood school, yet she maintains the same fiery spirit that defined her character as a child.

Having said that, with Bertha, Bronte has not been successful when it comes to blending the distinction

between angel and monster. It rather seems that she has purposefully denied Bertha a chance to show her angel spirit. The readers only meet Bertha when she is in the depth of madness, having been confined in the attic and there is not enough interaction between her and the other characters to demonstrate any 'angelic' behavior.

Bronte portrays Bertha as a raging lunatic making readers believe that she deserves exile from society. She does not allow Bertha a chance to justify her actions by not giving her any voice of her own. This makes us question that does Bertha's persona aligns with that of a lunatic or is she simply a victim of patriarchal femininity that men need her to show? 'Angel of the house' versus 'Madwoman in the attic' define tactics used by society to conform women to their patriarchal standards.

After one reads the counter-narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it becomes impossible to not see the 'implied' madness of Bertha, but haven given no voice to her. A book that is considered revolutionary, Bronte's diametrically different representations of the two characters conform to the idea of having an essential madwoman or devil in the house, to affirm the other woman's status as an angel of the house.

Jane is hence, towards the end made to depict the ideal Victorian woman and Bertha comes in as the supposed antagonist who must not fit into this idea. Bronte's different representations of the two characters conform to the good woman, bad woman divide.

Two doubles: Jane and Bertha

Critics have often depicted Bertha as a dark foil of Jane. Bertha, in many ways, is Jane's polar opposite, and has been described by Gilbert and Gubar as Jane's 'truest and darkest double'. She is often considered as a wraith personifying Jane's inner turmoil. Her early appearances occur when Jane is troubled or tense. When Jane starts having doubts about her marriage, it is Bertha who rips up the veil. She only ever acts out when Jane is in a state of emotional turmoil. Bertha's insanity could serve as a warning to Jane of what complete surrender to Rochester could bring about.

Bertha's confinement in the attic mirror Jane's imprisonment in the Red Room as a child, a punishment for her anger and lack of conformity. This doubling motif makes Bertha's role even more complex.

Some suggest that Bertha is a mirror of Jane's tamed and violent spirits, while others argue that she is a metaphor for the repressed female Victorian psyche. But Rhys saw 'the madwoman' not as a symbolic foil of Jane but simply

as a racial and gender-based denial of voice. Rhys gives this deserved and neglected voice back to its owner.

Emancipation through death

Bertha's whole purpose in *Jane Eyre* was to be set apart from Jane in intellect, appearance, delicateness, and sanity. Bronte uses her as 'a throw away' character to cause a distraction as a way to hit a certain romantic climax between Jane and Rochester. She is simply an obstacle between Jane and Rochester's happiness and for their love to culminate and the plot to pace up, it is important for Bertha to die.

Bertha's death increases the mystery even more as she dies without telling the readers anything about her suffering. Even in death, she is seeking emancipation that has been snatched away from her by locking her up in the attic and treated less than a human being. She jumps off the roof, openly affirming her identity one last time while destroying the place where she suffered most. Through her suicide, she rejects the confinement that she had been subjected to.

Some critics might argue that Rochester also suffers a great deal of pain due to Bertha's insanity and that he truly cared for his mentally sick wife as he tries to save her from the fire, disregarding his wellbeing. While doing so he loses his eyesight and a limb, but this so-called heroic act seems to be a deliberate tactic used by Bronte to redeem his character. But while doing so, intentionally trying to once again draw our attention to Bertha's monstrous nature.

Perhaps, Rochester's heroic act of saving Bertha is the result of the guilt of inflicting years of pain on her and an attempt for his absolution. Bertha's death is an attempt to transform Rochester into an acceptable husband, once again simply using Bertha as a tool to rebuild other characters.

It is important to note that while Jane gains freedom from a relationship and mutual dependence, Bertha finds emancipation only through death.

CONCLUSION

Sure, Jane is a groundbreaking, rebellious character in literature and has been talked about everywhere, but the one character who is essential to the plot has no representation of her own. It is important to understand the calculated attempt in portraying Bertha's madness and grotesque nature, but giving no voice to her, propaganda to suppress a woman in the very book that focuses on Jane's years of effort to attain independence.

Bertha's description simply mirrors her anger and proposed alcoholism as a result of imprisonment in a room for years without any interaction with others. Locked away in captivity for so long, she realizes that she does not resemble her old self or any kind of normalcy. Suddenly Bertha's description makes sense, her behavior culminates from experiencing life in a prison without bars after many years of a wealthy lifestyle. She does not understand the imprisonment inflicted upon her, she is simply a victim of patriarchy, colonialism, racial prejudice, and social standards.

The sexual repression, social isolation, and emotional trauma that Bertha undergoes through the hands of Rochester, her family, and society are responsible for Bertha's supposed madness. To conclude, Bertha wasn't always mad, if at all, her confinement had made it so.

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