

“Voice” Under the Colonial Oppression

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ABSTRACT

As a European classical text admired crazily by feminists, *Jane Eyre*, whose heroine Jane Eyre undoubtedly owns popular recognition for her rebellious female image with strong personality, graced temperament, as well as courage to pursue equality and free love. While shaping a positive image of Jane Eyre, Bronte also creates another distinct female image, Bertha, nothing but a mad silence haunting in the attic of Thornfield Manor. With the colonies of the British Empire declaring their independence one after another from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, this image has been more and more widely and deeply interpreted from new perspectives, among which *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as a re-written post-colonial text of *Jane Eyre*, injects vitality and soul into the mad body, gives a voice to the voiceless “doll”, thus it provides an opportunity for readers to know the back story in the colonial context. This essay will discuss how, and to what extent, this literary text has exposed, challenged the prevailing Eurocentrism.

Keywords: *Wide Sargasso Sea*, post-colonial, “voices”, hidden language

1. THE VOICES OF THE PROTAGONISTS

In the first three parts of the text, the author gives the hero and heroine opportunities to “voice” for themselves. As they take turns getting a voice, readers gradually catch a glimpse of the hero’s aggressor mentality and the heroine’s rebellious spirit.

1.1 From the Other to the Self

Before Antoinette gains a bigger “voice”, her fragmented identity is reconstructed in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which is a powerful challenge to colonial oppression. Born as a creole heiress in Jamaica, Antoinette suffers oppression from British colonists and is belittled as the half-visible image in *Jane Eyre* full of imperialism which “was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English”^[1], where her image is given in the voice of others, such as what she looks like in Jane Eyre’s eyes is “In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not ... tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal”^[2]. From this vivid description, we can see the distinction between Antoinette’s features as a human being and those of animals has been incredibly blurred. However, this image is saved from the imprisoned attic and transformed

from the other at the edge of *Jane Eyre* into the self at the center of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which she is portrayed as a “Creole girl, and she have the sun in her” (Rhys 125). The evolution of this image from the creature of half human and half beast to an independent girl with a large sum of money inherited from her stepfather gives a thorough subversion to the colonial ideology by challenging the binary opposition of civilization and barbarism.

1.2 the Gentleman's Colonist Mentality

This text gives a powerful exposure of the colonial mentality from the “voice” of the colonists represented by the unnamed Englishman, who is Antoinette’s husband. Also, a gentleman in *Jane Eyre*. The second part of *Wide Sargasso Sea* narrated by the Englishman, tells the story between Antoinette and him at great length, exposing his deliberate schemes to insinuate himself into Antoinette’s mind, marriage and eventually life as well as Antoinette’s gradual loss and being brought to England.

During their honeymoon excursion, his impression of surrounding people and wild nature is always accompanied by unease and disgust. Such is his impression of local people compared with Amelie: “A lovely little creature but sly, spiteful, malignant, perhaps, like much else in this place.” (Rhys 45). The intentional

use of “creature” to describe human being shows his superior mindset to belittle and even dehumanize West Indians. What the surrounding scenery looks like in his eyes is “Not only wild but menacing. Those hills would close in on you.” (Rhys 49) and he regards Antoinette’s favorite island as “quite unreal and like a dream.” (Rhys 58), indicating his sense of fear and uncertainty even though he is somewhat privileged in this place colonized by Britain, which reveals that he is resistant inside to being close to this barbaric land opposite to his civilized country. There is a monologue in his narration that confirms his strangeness and isolation to the land, “I was lost and afraid among these enemy trees, so certain of danger that when I heard footsteps and a shout I did not answer.” The footsteps belong to a black servant coming to look for him, who has no smile on his face and when they come near home, “He turned and smiled at me. It was as if he’d put his service mask on the savage reproachful face I had seen.” (Rhys 80), which reminds us that the hostile forest is exactly the colony in colonist’s mind, and the hateful black servant is exactly the image of the colonized indigenous people, and the Englishman cannot recognize cultural environment here at all since he sees the threat to his superiority from the exotic customs and aborigines who ignore him.

In addition to his prejudiced impression of colonial people and scenery, his marriage to Antoinette is essentially a disguised colonial conquest, and Antoinette is the object of his possession. In letters to his father, he keeps informing his father of the latest progress in the “bad bargain” (Rhys 49), suggesting his attitude towards the marriage and what this marriage means to him is that it brings him “thirty thousand pounds without any question or condition” (Rhys 49). Antoinette shows an unwillingness to marry before the planned wedding, to which his first reaction is “I did not relish going back to England in the role of rejected suitor jilted by this Creole girl.” (Rhys 56), showing us the posture of a conqueror with a strong will and confidence to win.

Moreover, his colonial mentality was thoroughly exposed after marriage demonstrated by his growing aversion to Antoinette, from the first time when he silently questions his wife’s identity “Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either” (Rhys 46), to “She never had anything to do with me at all.” (Rhys 55), to “I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did.” (Rhys 69), to change her name to Bertha, to regard her as a dead girl in “I drew the sheet over her gently as if I covered a dead girl.” (Rhys 108), to “bring that worthless girl to play with next door, meant her to hear” (Rhys 121), to see her as “A ghost in the grey daylight.” (Rhys 135), to take her to England, to eventually plan to change her to be “only a memory to be avoided, locked away, and like all memories a legend. Or a lie...” (Rhys 136). What a naked exposure and what an endless desire to conquer! He gets

money accompanied by beautiful girl, young body and love as he wished, but he is not satisfied at all, what he exactly wants is to control and possess her thoroughly as he claims “She’s mad but mine, mine. If she smiles or weeps or both. For me.” (Rhys 131), he makes Antoinette his personal property and defines her according to his own taste, which seems an exposure of England’s colonial rule over the West Indies, stemming from colonial mentality to get and get more.

1.3 Antoinette’s Challenge to Colonial Mentality

The exposure of superior colonial mentality is thorough from the language of the Englishman’s narration, while the challenge to this ideology is reflected by Antoinette’s powerful responses in this process. In the third part of the text, she regains her “voice” after getting a mad woman whose madness is imposed by her husband as Chesler maintains that, “in a patriarchal society, men assign features of madness to women when they do not act and behave according to one’s sex-role stereotype.”^[3] Antoinette’s insanity is not inherited from her mother whose madness is even labelled forcibly as well, but driven by torture and defined as mad. “Mad” Antoinette expresses her obsession for the red dress even though she remembers that her husband told her “it makes me look intemperate and unchaste.” (Rhys 148), which implies her awakening of self-consciousness and her emphasis of self-expression since her behavior has changed a lot compared with that in the second part of the text where she knows her husband likes her to wear white clothes and she thus chooses to “wear the dress you like tonight.” (Rhys 69) to please him. This change can be interpreted as her rebellious spirit and challenge to her husband’s colonial mindset since it seems that Antoinette has changed from a chaste bride wearing a white dress into the “rejected scarlet woman in a red dress”^[4], which indicates the red dress has become a symbol of resistance and self-recognition of the oppressed.

Another potent weapon used by Antoinette is fire and she gives her powerful counterattack through the burning of Thornfield, which echoes the blacks’ burning of Coulibri in the first part. Both the oppressed adopt violent revolution to challenge the oppression of colonial consciousness, which has been affirmed as the only way to end colonial oppression and cultural trauma in the third world according to Fanon who has expressed his advocacy of violence by the colonized people against the colonizer in his work *The Wretched of the Earth*, “struggle undertaken by the people, represents the highest form of national culture”^[5], demonstrating his high affirmation of violent revolution. Antoinette finally escapes from the physical and mental torture through burning the evil place where both her body and soul are imprisoned for too long. She regains spiritual freedom at the cost of her life, which deserves approving since

Antoinette's abandonment of life is exploration of self-recognition rather than a passive avoidance. Moreover, burning Thornfield which symbolizes wealth and status is actually destroying the authority of the colonists, which is the strongest accusation against colonial oppression.

2. THE HIDDEN LANGUAGE OF OTHER "SUBALTERNS"

In addition to giving the discourse power to two protagonists, Jean Rhys endows other oppressed "subalterns" with hidden language termed as "hidden transcripts" ^[6] by Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, which can be found in *Wide Sargasso Sea* in such ways as eyes, actions, deliberate silence and so on.

2.1 Christophine's Abrupt Speech

Christophine is undoubtedly a spokeswoman for black people in West India since she is always brave enough to confront the colonists and never be afraid to challenge colonial mentality forcefully even though she's just a black maid brought here as a "wedding present" (Rhys 6). Christophine gains a voice at the very beginning of the text, and her words "because she pretty like pretty self" (Rhys 3) is quoted as a direct speech by the narrator, Antoinette. This sentence is formally abrupt since its lack of predicate verb is not grammatically correct, at least not a standard English expression, which seems that the author intentionally uses this word to arouse the curiosity of readers. The truth is revealed by Antoinette in the text "though she could speak good English if she wanted to, she took care to talk as they talked." (Rhys 6), from which the fact is that Christophine speaks non-standard English on purpose to be the same as other West Indians. As in *Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*, Spivak refers to a passage from "Caliban" that the colonized benefit from language taught by colonists on the one hand, they learn how to curse using this language on the other hand to conform his point. This view can also explain that Christophine's discordant voice existing in the colonial context, which is not only a challenge to standard English, but also to the sense of superiority of colonists.

Moreover, her challenge to colonial mindset is mainly reflected in the direct conflicts with the Englishman, which began when they first met. The Englishman describes Christophine in this way "She was blacker than most and her clothes, even the handkerchief round her head. She looked at me steadily, not with approval, I thought. We stared at each other for quite a minute. I looked away first and she smiled to herself" (Rhys 51), which seems that Christophine gets the upper hand in the first round of eye confrontation thanks to her

eyes, neither humble nor pushy, breaking the colonists' impression of the oppressed.

Christophine's quarrel with the Englishman to defend Antoinette is the climax of their conflicts, as well as the most powerful challenge to the colonists. From their dialogue narrated by the Englishman, we see Christophine's ultimate victory since his narration is interrupted gradually, tending to agree, repeat and finally just to echo what Christophine says in spite of his transient challenge to her in inner words initially. Emery compares the echo as "the call-and-response songs of black laborers" and draws the conclusion that "as if the culture he has invaded now invades him" ^[7] from the Englishman's behavior, demonstrating that Christophine's challenge has worked and colonists are not invincible. After realizing Christophine's power, especially her skill in the black magic, the Englishman attempts to drive her away by means of law, to which Christophine responds using actions, "She drew herself up tall and straight and put her hands on her hips." (Rhys 126), this description of series of action vividly shape the demeanor and vigor of a brave fighter in face of ambitious and belligerent colonist.

2.2 Baptiste's Silence

Another kind of "hidden transcripts" employed by "subalterns" to challenge the colonial mindset is deliberate "silence", particularly embodied in the confrontation between the Englishman and the black servant Baptiste, who is always polite but not humble at all in front of the Englishman. When the Englishman is lost in the thick forest and then encounters Baptiste who is coming to look for him, he asked him about the road like the French made and get no reply instead of Baptiste's deliberate "silence". However, the fact is that Baptiste grows up on this island, and of course he knows the history of the island inside out and the background of the road. His behavior to deliberately deny the existence of the road three times continuously is a strategy to cut off historical ties of the island and the way in which the Englishman can get access to the history of West India, widening the "gap" of ignorance about this island in the Englishman's mind. For the colonists, they can achieve more complete control over the colonies and eliminate threats stemming from ignorance only when they have a deep understanding of its history, thus it can be said that the bigger the "gap" in colonists' mind is, the greater the threat they will feel. So "silence" has become a weapon to help Baptiste fight against the colonist, a sharp knife to cut off the path of colonial invasion.

3. CONCLUSION

Featured by the postcolonial significance, *Wide Sargasso Sea* exposes and challenges the colonial ideology completely and thoroughly through multiple

“voices” of characters: the hero's “voice” speaks out his colonial mentality, while the heroine reshapes her image with her “voice”, a brave image, besides, the West Indian “subalterns” are endowed with the right to “voice” for themselves in hidden language, telling the back story distorted by the colonists as well as showing the true faces of both Bertha and cruel colonial oppression. Moreover, the “subalterns” get the right to “fight” against the colonist, to challenge their so-called sense of superiority. The combination of “voice” and hidden language makes the post-colonial nature of this text very firm and prominent. On the basis of this paper, some more in-depth research can be carried out. For instance, a comparative study between this text with other post-colonial texts is feasible, which is helpful to shed a new light on research on post-colonial texts.

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