

# A Comparative Study of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* from a Feminist Perspective

Jiang Qian

School of Foreign Languages, Yunnan Normal University, Kunming, Yunnan, P. R. China

1271530736@qq.com

**Keywords:** *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, feminist, patriarchy, colonialism.

**Abstract.** Both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which are novels written by Charlotte Bronte and Jean Rhys, represent the women in any historical period of protesting patriarchy and oppression. This paper is a comparative study of the female character, Bertha Mason, in these two novels from a feminist perspective. Although *Wide Sargasso Sea* appeared as a prequel of *Jane Eyre*, Rhys presented a more advancing and radical feminist thought in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Bertha Mason is a typical representation of woman as victim of both patriarchy and colonialism.

## 1. Introduction

Both *Jane Eyre*, written by Charlotte Bronte, and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, written by Jean Rhys, have made their mark in literary history. Most of the literary critics have focused on the heroine Jane in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, and considered Bertha Mason, the mad woman in the attic, only the dark double of Jane. However, the study of Bertha not as a dark side of Jane, but as an independent character has drawn a comparatively less attention than that of Jane. This paper makes a comparison between the portrayal of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Through a re-thinking of Bertha from a feminist perspective, Bertha, who serves as an obstacle to Jane's happiness in *Jane Eyre*, is realized, particularly in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as a victim of patriarchy and colonialism.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Patriarchy and colonialism in Feminist Criticism.

Feminist theory is very typical in contemporary literature. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf stated that since women's social reality is shaped by gender just as men's, the representation of female experience in literature is also gendered [1]. Thomson also showed that in the patriarchal society, female has been marked by difference, by opposition to male and has been on the less privileged side of male. In a patriarchal society, women are considered inferior to man and lack of independence and do not have their own sense of self [2]. In a patriarchy society, woman is thought to be less human than man, so even the language and representation in the culture are hierarchy. It is men who dominate everything and women usually are obliged to make sacrifices. Thus, women are oppressed.

Thomson further points out that in a feminist view, it is not only women who became oppressed, but also black, poor people also are oppressed in a patriarchal society. Feminist criticism deals with not only gender, but also race, religion, nationality, culture and age. Thus colonialism may also be a target of feminist criticism. "Feminism aims to deconstruct not only the opposition male/female, but all forms of social power, status, inequality and domination." [2]. Feminism, as a critique of all unequal groups in society including male/female, rich/poor, black/white with its focus. Gender relations are closely allied to issues of power status, domination and opportunity, and would seem an appropriate perspective from which to re-read *Jane Eyre* in relation to *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

### 2.2 Re-read *Jane Eyre* in terms of patriarchy and colonialism.

Charlotte Bronte's famous Victorian novel, *Jane Eyre*, tells the story of a young plain governess who possesses intelligence, self-confidence, a will of her own, and moral righteousness. Bronte is

consistently in her novel concerned with male and female equality, and love which created the pairing of these equals. In *Jane Eyre*, an apparently hopeless and horrible maniac character is locked in the attic by her husband Rochester. The character is Bertha Mason, Rochester's West-Indian-born wife. Bertha in the novel is portrayed as an intrusion and a barrier to Jane's marriage. On first reading, it seems that the character Bertha, so unsympathetically portrayed, is merely used to add to the dramatic tension of the novel. Some critics, however, such as Gilbert and Cubar see a deeper role for the character suggesting in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that Bertha characterized Jane's ungoverned passion and rage. She is like the young Jane in the Red Room, early in the novel, locked in solitary confinement, and thus presenting a monstrous equivalent to Jane's dark self [3]. This is an interesting perspective from which one might view the character, Bertha.

However, it is also possible to re-consider Bertha's role from the fresh perspective of patriarchy and colonial society. Kucich says in *Jane Eyre and Imperialism* that "*Jane Eyre* represents British Colonialist issues more strikingly than most other 19th century domestic novels" [4]. Every woman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome oppression. Being not only a woman but also a West-Indian, that is a white Creole, Bertha experienced both women's oppression and racial prejudice. Clearly, Rochester married her for her money. Rochester said in the novel: "I must be provided for by a wealthy marriage....Mr.Mason had a son and a daughter....and he could and would give the latter a fortune of 30,000 pounds." [5]. In that patriarchal society, her money belong to her husband after their marriage. She became totally dependent on Rochester. On returning to England, Rochester locked her in a dark attic for ten years in order to keep their marriage as a secret, which made her illness much worse. However, Rochester explain to Jane his cruel treatment to Bertha that it is a "true Wisdom", the "Hope" showed him to do so, he said to Jane "for it was true Wisdom that consoled me in that hour, and showed me the right path to follow." [5] and "Go," said Hope, "you may take the maniac with you to England; with due attendance and precautions at Thornfield." [5]. These are obviously lies and could only deceive the young pure Jane. A subtext of women's oppression can be seen in these actions and responses.

Almost all the description of Bertha in *Jane Eyre* comes from Rochester's long narration. Rochester did this because he wanted to hold tightly the marriage to Jane, which he had been longing for for a long time. Therefore, his words could not represent true justice to Bertha. He described Bertha, thus "her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger" [5], and "a nature the most gross, impure, depraved I ever saw, was associated with mine, and called by the law and by society part of me" [5]. Rochester despises Bertha's otherness and wanted to find a wife who could offer a "contrast to the fury" [5] and he longed for "the antipodes of the Creole" [5], a wife whom he considered as traditional English wife and without the racial otherness as Bertha did. Bertha became the victim of colonialism just because she was a white Creole. Moreover, Rochester could do anything he wanted to Bertha, simply because he was a man and he wanted nobody to learn about their marriage. From a feminist perspective, therefore, in *Jane Eyre*, Bertha's situation highlights the need for female emancipation and racial equality in a patriarchal and colonial society.

### **2.3 Patriarchy and colonialism in *Wide Sargasso Sea***

Bertha Mason in the attic served as a warning to other rebelling woman against the patriarchy social restrains. Her situation indicated that all woman must accept the social restrains in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. However in more recent times, Jean Rhys, a white Creole herself, wrote the story *Wide Sargasso Sea* from the point of view of Bertha's view. The story is in many ways a re-evaluation of *Jane Eyre*. Jean Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* to show how Bronte's novel excluded the parallel plight of the Creole woman, Bertha Mason [4]. Consequently, Jean Rhys gave a strong voice to Bertha Mason in the story. Bertha is not Bertha in *Jane Eyre* but Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. She is no longer a horrible mad woman in the dark attic, instead, she is a very lively Creole girl with her own spirits, thoughts and love.

Drawing on her own experience, Jean Rhys portrays Bertha's, whose original name was Antoinette, lonely and isolated childhood as a white Creole. Because she was a "white nigger", Rhys,

like Bertha, knew what it was to be hated by both black and white people in a racially divided society. “Black nigger better than white nigger” [6]. After her marriage to Rochester, Rochester receives a dowry of 30,000 pounds. She thus becomes totally dependent on Rochester, in economic as well as in other ways. Rochester views her as his own property, which is typical in a patriarchal society.

Rochester, born in a patriarchal society, found himself a completely stranger in Jamaica. “There was nothing I knew, nothing to comfort me.” [6]. Rochester cannot bear Antoinette’s character, ways of living and other racial differences from him. As a result, he renames her as Bertha, an English girl’s name, which is a typical symbol of patriarchy and colonialism. However Antoinette does not want to accept this imposed image on her. She cries out that “Bertha is not my name, you are trying to make me into some one else, calling me by another name” [6].

When their relationship goes into an alienation situation, Rochester takes an even harsher attitude towards Antoinette. He describes her as a “Vain silly creature” and decides that “she will have no lover, for I do not want her and she will see no other” [6]. He brings her back secretly in England where she remains locked in the cold, dark attic for ten years. He does this just because he could not accept her otherness, and finally Antoinette has been driven into real madness.

Through her portrayal of the relationship between Rochester and Antoinette, Jean Rhys made the implications of patriarchy and colonialism much clearer in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The story of Bertha Mason was reconstructed through a perspective of feminism. *Wide Sargasso Sea* broke the authority of patriarchy and colonialism [7]. Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea* was a villain who was totally opposite to the revering image of Rochester Brontë had portrayed in *Jane Eyre*. Jennings stated that “Bertha is a victim of her husband’s and her society’s double standards as much as and more than Jane” [8].

### 3. Discussion

Reviewing the above mentioned theories as they related to both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it is necessary to involve a rethinking and re-evaluation of the character of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*.

When *Jane Eyre* was first read, most readers may mainly focus on Jane. Jane was considered as an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit. She represented a protest against conventionality. Few thoughts were directed towards Bertha Mason. Bertha in our minds at that time was just an obstacle to Jane and Rochester’s happiness and was finally removed by her own suicide during the fire at Thorn-field. Thus Jane and Rochester could marry each other at last and lead a happy life. Everyone was contented with the ending and forgot about Bertha.

However, it is striking for readers now to read the work of Jean Rhys *Wide Sargasso Sea*. When putting on a feminist glasses and reading *Jane Eyre* again, readers pay much more attention to everything about Bertha.

One of the descriptions of Bertha which drew most attention during reading, was the scene of Bertha emerging into Jane’s bedroom on the night before Jane and Rochester’s wedding day. Bertha did not throw herself to Jane, nor did she scratch or bite Jane as she always did to Rochester. Bertha just “thrust her candle close” to Jane’s face and “extinguished it” [5], then she left quietly without hurting Jane.

Why was she so restrained? Does this mean that she was in good mood that night? Obviously not. Bertha first tore Jane’s wedding veil in two parts and stepped on it on the floor at that night. This action showed that she was in deep anger. She knew that Rochester was going to marry the girl on the bed who was in deep sleep and was totally incapable of defending herself. However, Bertha did not even touch Jane. She just looked at her and left. Is this Bertha the one we learned from Rochester’s words which described her as a “cunning and malignant lunatic” [5]? The answer must surely be no. Rochester described Bertha as a monster in order to hide his injustice doings and thus persuaded Jane to marry him.

From the period of *Jane Eyre* to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the colonies had gained independence from the Great Britain. Jean Rhys created the vivid and meaningful character of the mad woman through a

feminist perspective [9]. Bertha Mason, Antoinette, was a victim of patriarchy and colonialism. She was a woman being oppressed and a victim who could not speak for herself.

#### 4. Conclusion

Both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* represent the voice of women in any historical period of protesting patriarchy and oppression. No matter whether in 19<sup>th</sup> century or in 20<sup>th</sup> century, women continue their searching for independence and equality with men. Bertha Mason is a typical representation of woman as victim of both patriarchy and colonialism. Through rethinking Bertha Mason in these two novels, we can understand that there is not only one way to interpret one literary work. It is our ways of seeing and knowing literary work that make things different. Feminist criticism is a topical contemporary literature theory. However, it is also just one way to look at literature. As readers, we should learn to use a range of literature theory to look more deeply into literature works and learn to read critically.

#### References

- [1] Woolf, V., *A Room of One's Own*. Beijing: Sanlian Publication, 1989.
- [2] Thomson, J., The significance and uses of contemporary literary theory for the teaching of literature, in J. Thomson (Eds.), *Reconstructings Literature Teaching* , pp.3-37, 1992.
- [3] Gilbert, M., S. & Gubar, S., *The Madwoman in The Attic*, London: New Haven and London Yale University, pp.336-371, 1979.
- [4] Kucich, J.(1993). *Jane Eyre* and Imperialism. In Hoeveler D & Lau B (Eds.), *Approaches to Teaching Bronte's Jane Eyre*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America,pp.104-109, 1993.
- [5] Bronte, Ch. *Jane Eyre* Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, pp.287, pp 309-315, 1996.
- [6] Rhys, J., *Wide Sargasso Sea*. NewYors & London: W.W. Norton & Company. INC, pp.24, pp.149, pp.147, pp.165, 1966.
- [7] Jennings, A. 'Viewer, I married him': literature on video. *Language, Literature And the Learner* ,pp. 185-203, 1988.
- [8] Li Yingzi. A Challenge of Patriarchy and Colonialism, A study of *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. *Foreign literature* ,Vol. 12, pp103-105, 2008.
- [9] Wu Mingjin. A Study of the Mad Woman in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Journal of Chinese*, Vol.10. pp. 67-68, 2015.