Wide Sargasso Sea: The ‘Un-said’ of Jane Eyre

Ezroua, Mohamed

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0. Introduction:

No reader acquainted with contemporary advances in the field of modern literary criticism would deny the popularity and objectivity of those modern literary theories expounded by Louis Althusser, Jacques Lacan, Pierre Macherey and others. What these theories propose is a new reading of literature, and particularly fiction, as comprising plural discourses: be they 'silent', unspoken, unconscious, marginal or apochryphal. These discourses remain hidden because of social and linguistic factors. They are to be read in the gaps, interstices, and marginalia of the written text. In other words, since every discourse is socially produced and is consequently under constant censorship of 'Ideological State apparatuses' (L. Althusser, 1971), thus forcing authors to select some elements and suppress others, every discourse is, therefore, incomplete. What is written is never the absolute truth about the world. Thus we must recognize the necessity of continual re-reading literature to adjust our understanding and interpretations.

In this paper I intend to discuss Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), in the light of the above theory in a reading which merges both texts into one another. This proposition may appear odd but both the way Jean Rhys's novel is written and the literary approach sketched above strongly encourage this attempt. My reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides me with an interest-

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ting idea to which few critics, I believe, have paid sufficient attention: the significance of the left-out madwoman (Mrs. Rochester) in Jane Eyre. While studying this character and her significance, I will consider the importance of Wide Sargasso Sea as filling in a textual and ideological gap in Jane Eyre. In this context, a reappraisal of other critiques of Jane Eyre is necessary in order to show to what extent critics have been misled by the «ideological project» of the author. The importance of the madwoman in both novels lies not only in her marginalized absence; it also connects the world of the novels with the historical world of the British Empire which was establishing its hegemony over many parts of the world in the 1840's. My discussion of these two texts takes issue not only with some traditionalist critics such as Elizabeth Rigby, Q.D. Leavis, and F. Rachford; but also with more recent and controversial critics such as Terry Eagleton and the feminists.

1. Jane Eyre and its early critics:

Most critics who have dealt with Jane Eyre have centered their interpretations around the two major characters of Jane and Rochester. Whilst critics like Terry Eagleton do bring minor characters into their discussion, they do so only in order to clarify the meanings which they attribute to the major ones.

Among the very early critics of Jane Eyre, Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake (in her scathing review of the novel in the Quarterly Review, LXXX (Decembre, 1848)) condemns Charlotte Brontë for the «highest moral offence a novel writer can commit, that of making an unworthy character interesting in the eyes of the reader....» (Nancy Pell, 1977 : 397). The notoriety of Jane herself even led to the creation of an epithet for such rebellious women: «Jane-Eyrish ladies». Such readings establish a direct relationship between the heroine and the author. What supported these readings are the novel's subtitle: An Autobiography by Currer Bell on the one hand, and the occurrence of scenes in the novel which reflect Charlotte Brontë's own life, on the other. Even though the author herself claimed that the book should not be read as a history of her own life, further biographical interpretations of the novel continued to be published.

Mrs. Gaskell's authoritative The Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857) has always been a rich source for later literary specialists on the Brontës. One of the details which encouraged their biographical interpretations was Jane's love for her tutor Heger in Brussels. It is particularly from 1941 onwards, after the appearance of an excellent book on the Brontës, The Brontës' Web of Childhood by Fannie Rachford (1941), that more biographical and psychological research was directed toward reading Jane Eyre as a source of autobiographical material. Fannie Rachford provides the clue to what has been considered as one of the most enigmatic characters in literature, Mr. Rochester. She says that he is «The dominating
Duke of Zamorna, Byronic (...), racked by passion, revenge, and madness...» (F.E. Rachford, 1941). She supports this contention by reference to the Brontës' childhood writings which created the fantasy world of Angria and the Gondals in which a Rochester-like authority figure dominated. It seems, then, that even outstanding critics like Q.D.Leavis could not avoid this reductionist type of interpretation which pays attention only to the text/author relationship while basing itself on biographical data. This is, in fact, what Q.D.Leavis does in her introduction to the Penguin edition of Jane Eyre, in which, following Fannie Rachford, she establishes an identity relationship between Jane Eyre and Charlotte Brontë's life in many details.

In that introduction, Leavis states that «earlier, unhappy experiences of school at a religious foundation provided the material for the Lowood section...» (Q.D.Leavis, 1966). Further on, she says that Yorkshire readers of the period of the book's publication were able to recognize the Brocklehurst figure, and to identify Helen Burns with Marie Brontë. Thus Leavis's main thrust was to demonstrate how similarities can be traced between Charlotte Brontë and Jane Eyre; between the structure of the novel - on the whole -and the author's life. As regards Thornfield Hall, which most readers see as the central part of the story, Leavis goes on to say:

*It is a combination of the country house; Riding (...) where she (Charlotte Brontë) stayed with her closest friend; Ellen Nussey, in 1832, and a Yorkshire place, North Lees Hall Farm, which she probably visited as a sightseer (...) in 1845. The latter contained a madwoman's character and a legend that the lunatic perished in a fire that burned out the place... (Q.D.Leavis, op.cit).*

Accordingly, this is what served as material for the construction of Bertha's character.

Another autobiographical critic, R.B. Martin (1966), presents the novel as an evolution of Jane's moral and spiritual character: «a progression towards maturity and self-knowledge (...); a final right relationship with God and man.» (R.B.Martin, 1966:58). He goes on to say that Rochester's moral growth is «necessary» to complete Brontë's vision of the world. Here R.B.Martin's interpretation of Jane Eyre naively follows the previously mentioned critics in their linear view of Jane and Rochester as the only important characters, whose relationship constitutes the core of the novel.

When I take issue with these approaches to Jane Eyre for being too heavily biographical, I mean to stress that a reading of Charlotte Brontë's life in the text and a concentration upon the chronological evolution of Jane's life in the novel has made these critics unable to step out of the
narrow boundaries of the importance of this character so as to assess the
equally vital importance of other characters, such as Bertha/Mason/
Rochester (1). Bertha is outstanding through both her absence from and
her repression within the text. The biographical approach to the text
leaves out other social and textual implications of the novel. The weak­
ness of such an approach lies in its simplistic view of what constitutes,
and is implied by, a literary text. This proves to what extent the ideology
of the text has succeeded in misleading many of its readers by directing
them towards what the writer (or what certain critics) wanted them to
read and leave out at the same time.

Once these biographical interpretations of Jane Eyre were nearly
exhausted, notable critical attention began to be based on psychological
and archetypal approaches to the exegesis of the text. A typical example is
Bukhart's assertion that:

There are two principles behind the ordering of events,
the raw materials of which the structure is reared. The
oscillation (...) between the incest wish and the incest
taboo, between the id and the superego...

(Charles Bukhart, 1973:68).

This statement reflects one side of an interpretation based on an
analysis of the psychology of both characters: Jane and Rochester. Jane
Eyre, Bukhart later explains,

Has two choices among men-the sexual Rochester and
the spiritual Rivers. She rejects them both. She holds out
for a Rochester spiritualised and wins...(C. Bukhart, op.cit.)

Another Freudian analysis has been applied to the novel by Richard
Chase, who sees as central what the Brontës feared in their secluded par­
sonage: «sexual and intellectual energy; in Jane Eyre and Wuthering
Heights the universe is concerned as the embodiment of this energy of
elan...» (W.V. O'Conner, 1959:105). Looking at the Brontës in terms of
sexual manifestation of either the writers or their characters would mean
leaving out many other elements of the text which cannot fit in this
paradigm for reasons I shall detail below. As this psychological approach,
like the biographical one, limits itself to the analysis of Jane and Rochester
only, and ignores the importance of the psychology of other marginalized
characters, it remains unconvincing and limited.

On the other hand, the archetypal approach reads the story as an
embodiment of the Nietzschean theory of the unconscious. R.E. Hughes,
applying this theory to Jane Eyre, says that the story provides us with
two levels of symbolism in Nietzsche's archetypes: the Dionysiac and the

(1) I deliberately cite both Bertha's respective surnames in order to draw attention to the
importance of the schism in her cultural identity (between Bertha Mason, the half-cast
Jamaican and Bertha Rochester, the supposedly English lady) in terms of a valid inter­
pretation of the ideology of the novels.
Apollonian. Jane is accordingly «schizophrenic, recurrently mad, and a quondrum paranoiac whose two personalities are dramatized in events which happen outside herself: «She is the combination of «two massive forces; Dionysus and Apollo, who are reconciled through the Orphic mysteries...» (R.E. Hughes, 1964:347). R.E. Hughes' view goes as far as to see Rochester as the God of fertility of Nature, Dionysus and the erotic God. Furthermore, the story is mythicized in the figures of Adam and Eve especially relating to the ending of the story when both Jane and Rochester meet at the pseudo-Edenic garden: Ferndean. This archetypal approach, however, like the previously mapped interpretations of Jane Eyre, focusses on Jane and Rochester at the exclusion of considering the other characters of the novel.

2. Jane Eyre and Sociological Criticism:

Another step in this evolution of the literary approaches to Jane Eyre is a shift from the early emphasis on Charlotte Brontë's life, and Jane and Rochester's characters as the central elements in the text to a search for more sociological meanings and implications. This move has achieved a better understanding of the text because it has, at least, stepped away from the subjectivity of individuals into the historical and sociological determinants which contributed to the genesis of the novel.

Among the sociological critics who approached Jane Eyre, Kathleen Tillotson writes, though she contradicts herself earlier in her book, that the attacks on Jane Eyre were geared by what people read in it «as a voice from the dangerous north and the dangerous class of oppressed or 'outlawed' women; using it as a text on which to hang warnings about female emancipation and rebellious and unChristian spirit in society...» (Tillotson). I, however, question whether it was only Jane's poor class and «outlawed» women who were suppressed by and subversive to the social and political system of the epoch. We should also try to account, then, for the other social conflicts mediated in the novel by characters like Bertha who is suppressed by this very outspoken text.

R.B. Heilman, in contrast, argues for a reading of the novel as a struggle between the rational and the non-rational in life (cf. Nancy Pell, 1977), a similar issue raised by Terry Eagleton in the later part of his analysis. In a comparable discussion, Charles Bukhart sees the story as a historical conflict between rationalism and Byronic Romanticism (C. Bukhart, op.cit.). In these interpretations, the characters who mediate this view are still restricted as revealed by previous analyses to Jane and Rochester.

I feel that these critics offer a limited interpretation of Charlotte Brontë's novel and thereby may mislead its reader when focussing upon the dual relationship between Jane and her hero. Isn't this the very reading the author wanted us to perform? i.e. to read just one side of an imaginary reconciliation of the social contradictions of the 1840's; a
happy marriage between two contradictory characters who would not normally come together in real life, thus providing the reader with a conventionally romantic 'happy ending'. Isn't the purpose of such literary texts to direct us away from fiercer conflicts and from what the text leaves out (suppresses) at the level of its manifest structure? (Cf. P. Macherey and E. Balibar, 1978). What supports this argument is that many bourgeois critics take the text as an example of «inclusiveness and unity» (Margaret Smyth, 1969) which comes with spiritual growth. Unfortunately, they ignore the fact that every text is riddled with the multiplicity of its own contradictions and errors. And thus, this imaginary harmony and reconciliation the novel provides has misled many critics into distorted judgements.

In order to avoid similar pitfalls, the critic must not immerse himself in the manifest text alone, but should try to decipher what lies deep in the unconscious levels of this very text. Like the text of a dream, as Sigmund Freud says, a work of literature comprises two levels: a manifest and a latent content (Cf. S. Freud, 1977). In a literary text, some marginalized elements are, similarly to the very obvious ones, of great importance to us. Sometimes, what makes them more important is their state of being not allowed to come to the conscious surface of the text. As Pierre Macherey, who does not base his analysis on Freud’s dream theory but on the theory of ideology, says:

*To know a literary work (...) means to know what it says without saying it. In fact, a true analysis should uncover what has never been said, or un-said (...). It should aim at the absence of the work which is behind every work and which constitutes it. (...) The work exists primarily, through its determined absences; by what it itself is not... (Translation mine) (P. Macherey, 1966:149).*

I believe that when traditional literary criticism eschews this type of socio-political interpretation of works of art, it leaves aside the very conditions of literary production.

To fill in this gap in the critical tradition, some Marxist critics have directed their research towards the significance of what is left out in texts. Terry Eagleton, whose study of the Brontës must be acknowledged as one of the best analyses in English literary criticism, has adopted a sociological approach in his reading of *Jane Eyre*.

In his analysis, *Myths of Power* (1975), Eagleton, despite the harsh attack directed against him by the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective (Francis Barker et al., eds., 1978), succeeds in presenting a more effective historical consideration of the novel than the aforementioned critics of *Jane Eyre*. In his approach, he establishes a direct relationship between the author, the novel and their contemporary social realities. He notes how the Brontës’ contemporary complex social conflicts, which were at
their most intense near Haworth (close to the centre of the West Riding wool-producing area), are articulated by the Brontës' literary texts. He also exploits Lucien Goldmann's concept of «categorical structures» in order to establish a «crucial nexus between history and fiction» (Terry Eagleton, 1975). To him, accordingly, the core conflict that history consisted of is what Jane Eyre reflects:

*Tensions and alliances between two social classes which dominated the Brontës' world: the industrial Bourgeoisie and the landed gentry or aristocracy. (T. Eagleton, op. cit.)*

And because of the complexity and fluidity of the social relations between these two classes, the Brontës' historical juncture involved lots of political and social turmoil and clashes of power. Powerless individuals had to seek power through a form of affiliation to one of the dominant classes through bourgeois social mobility. This type of analysis is sufficiently convincing but remains unsatisfactory. The notion of the existence of a conflict between two classes only, rigidly and distinctly recognized, would not allow us to account for the representability of the madwoman, Bertha Cosway/Mason/Rochester, who must articulate a form of social reality like Jane herself. To put it otherwise, if Jane as une deracinée expresses the existence of an uprooted social class, what does Bertha as another deracinée, but who mediates worse conditions than Jane's because of her uprootedness, signify?

When T. Eagleton deals with Jane Eyre, he centers upon Jane and Rochester as two individuals representing the two social classes in conflict and who move in the text towards a final reconciliation; an alliance between the landed gentry and the nascent industrial bourgeoisie in the 1840's. Thus his focussing on these characters only makes his analysis reductionist and convergent with the traditional trends of approaches to Jane Eyre, as it does not give much thought to the significance of Bertha and her marginalization.

On the other hand, though being a sociologist of literature, Terry Eagleton does not seem to read in Charlotte Brontë's novel the impact of capital flowing into Britain from abroad (the West Indies) and the repercussions of the changing social and economic realities outside Britain upon the 1840's society. Among these realities was the emergence of rich and destitute creole social groups (if not classes) resulting from both the antislavery laws and the emancipation act which caused many drastic social problems throughout the British Empire. These creoles who rallied themselves to the British are, in fact, as this essay argues, represented by Bertha's fate in Jane Eyre.

3. Bertha: the un-said of Jane Eyre:

How may one account for the oppressed and deracinée woman, Bertha, who is culturally uprooted and finally destroyed at Thornfield.
Hall? It is here that Jean Rhys’s **Wide Sargasso Sea** breaks new ground in the production of an original reading of *Jane Eyre*. By bringing the madwoman out of her social and textual imprisonment into the light for literary criticism, Jean Rhys breaks the subject’s silence and the silence of many critics about that character. Rhys’s achievement also encourages us to note how every form of writing—not only fiction—provides a censorship on literary texts. It is the nature, however, of all literary discourse and criticisms to suppress, leave out, and marginalize parts of the texts they deal with. Yet, the only way to redeem themselves from that unavoidable error is to be aware of and acknowledge the limits of that nature.

**Wide Sargasso Sea** produces Bertha’s history, the **missing centre** of *Jane Eyre*. The latter says nearly nothing about the madwoman apart from her being creole and from Jamaica. Conversely to Jane’s character which is developed at length by Charlotte Brontë from childhood to adolescence to motherhood, Bertha’s story is kept secret and at the margin of the novel. The story as written by Jean Rhys is in three parts.

The first part is narrated by Antoinette Cosway—later called Bertha. Her childhood is shaped by maddening social realities. She was born in the 1830’s in Jamaica, then a British colony, amidst a very complex society of English whites (rich and poor), newly freed slaves, blacks, and creoles. The creole population which was a cross breed of British white settlers and black natives of the land represents in the novel an amalgamation of two different cultures. These creole, especially the very poor ones, are in a critical situation; they are rejected by the rich whites and hated by the native blacks. They belong to neither world. They are not authentic settlers, slave holders, estate owners; nor are they authentic ‘negroes’ newly freed, who would feel some strong cultural links between themselves and the other black population. This state of being cultureless, uprooted and without any concrete identity is the source of their agony. Antoinette, who epitomizes this dilemma, knows nothing about England and is attached to Jamaica; but because her father was English, she cannot live in the West Indies where extreme hatred is directed to her by her own people. In this part of the story, Antoinette’s childhood is haunted by a fear which terrorizes her ethnic group in general. «I never looked at any strange negro...» (J.Rhys : 1966). Antoinette says, «they hated us. They called us white cockroaches.» Elsewhere in the story, she remembers how a little girl followed her once singing: «Go away white cockroach, go away (...), nobody want you...». Furthermore, countless invectives are directed to them: «Look the white niggers. Look the damn white niggers!» Worse than that, they do not receive any social support from the people (whites) who created them:

*We poor like beggars (...) Plenty white people in Jamaica. Real white people, they got money. They did not look at us, nobody see them come near us. Old time white people*
nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger... says Antoinette (J. Rhys, 1978:21).

Antoinette’s narrative is permeated with sad feelings. It is a lament for the loss of a world of wealth, stability and happiness. Her mother, the widow of old Cosway (a slave owner who was ruined by emancipation troubles) marries Mr. Mason, a wealthy Englishman in order to save her children from poverty. Unfortunately, a kind of curse seems to catch up with these poor creoles and consequently hinders them from achieving their means of survival. The community objects to the marriage because they claim the existence of madness in the family. The name «Zombie» given to Antoinette (the mother) and later to Bertha is overloaded with the community superstition. Worse, as it seems, these pressures upon the mother develop in her a violent hatred towards her daughter. She refuses to see her on many occasions, which deprives the young Bertha from a kinship she needs badly as support in her life.

Even when Bertha is taken to a convent by Mr. Mason to be educated and protected, she still finds herself in the midst of the same hostile world:

"Look the crazy girl, you crazy like your mother (...) Your mother walk about with no shoes and stockings on her feet, she sans culotte, she tries to kill her husband (...) She have eyes like Zombie." (J. Rhys, op. cit.)

Besides, the feeling of terror Antoinette has is mingled with another fear created by the belief in a world haunted by strange spirits. It is this superstitious world which influences young Rochester’s mind against her.

The second part of the novel is narrated by the young Rochester who comes to the West Indies from England. In a letter he sends home, he describes his arrival in Jamaica, his meeting with his father’s friends, his sickness because of the weather, and most of all the realization of his father’s plan, his marriage to Bertha. The latter is ‘sold’ to him by his father’s friend, Mason; the marriage is arranged without her knowledge. Both Rochester and Antoinette leave for another island in order to spend their honeymoon, but unfortunately, the quasi-happy atmosphere is disturbed by Rochester’s reception of two anonymous letters informing him about Antoinette’s mother’s madness and how the disease has existed in the family for a long time. Young Rochester’s superstitious mind cannot resist these rumours. What exacerbates the problem is his decision to take Bertha with him to England, a thing she does not like.

The third part of the story brings the reader back to Jane Eyre’s haunted attic in Thornfield Hall in which Bertha Rochester is imprisoned. From there she narrates the last part of her story, the burning of the mansion as a revenge and her tragic death.

Thus Jean Rhys’s novel brings emphasis onto the marginalized cha-
acter in Jane Eyre and reveals the central significance of this character who has gone unnoticed by many critics. However, a question which comes to the reader's mind is: why does Charlotte Brontë marginalize this woman who hides behind the scenes yet always threatens to disrupt the smooth flow of the story?

Bertha's ultimate outburst and her burning of the whole place is highly significant. Pushing her character to the margins of the text seems to be a conscious decision on the side of the author. It is a way of excluding violent elements in society and literary discourse in general. Isn't Bertha the violent threat to the status quo of the British society of the 1840's? The book itself appeared just before the outbreak of the 1840's series of revolutions which swept many Western European countries. Bertha is more violent than Jane, who starts in the novel as a marginal character and whose taming and integration comes at the end of the book. As her violence is too destructive to tame, Bertha's exclusion is therefore necessary.

4. Bertha and the approaches to Jane Eyre:

The few critics who mention the character of Bertha in their analysis see her in peculiar ways. B. Robert Martin (1966), for instance, considers her in religious terms as symbolizing an expiated sin Rochester commits in his life. As for psychological views, Bertha acquires some importance, but only as a part of another character. Freudian sexual interpretations place her not as a separate character as she comes in both novels, but as suppressed psychic manifestations of Jane or Rochester. To Richard Chase, she is «the woman who has given herself blindly and uncompromisingly to the principle of sex and intellect...» (in V.W. O'Connor, 1959). In Terry Eagleton's opinion, she is «Jane's guilt about Rochester's passion (..), a projection of Jane's sexually tormented subconsciousness...» (T.Eagleton, op.cit.). Moreover, because of the masculine features she embodies, he sees her as Rochester's sexual drive.

When the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective approach Bertha, they see her as the libidinal drive which haunts Jane and which «constitutes a punctuation device or notation of the not-said - the Pandora's box of unleashed female libido...» (F. Barker et al., op.cit.). To give Bertha such a limited psychological dimension would mean to reduce her and our view to the consideration of the Jane /Rochester duality: the very intention of the manifest text (see above). Furthermore, this linear view would hinder any reader from giving Bertha her identity and due meaning in the text as determined by its own economics which is - of course - directly linked to the politics and economics of the 1840's.

To a certain extent, the psychological interpretations of Bertha are similar to that interpretation which sees her only as an aesthetic device to serve the gothic atmosphere in the story. Both views render her devoid of any social significance. Nevertheless, the aesthetic meaning given here to
Bertha supports my argument: that she structures the narrative. She serves as a fulcrum around which the whole story is built. From the very beginning of the book, the phenomena of locked-up individuals and mysterious spirits create insecurity and fear among the protagonists and dominate the course of their actions and relationships. In fact, this is one of the major devices linking the beginning of the story to its denouement. The red room at Gateshead Hall and its haunting spirit of dead Mr. Reed can be — structurally — compared to Thornfield Hall’s attic and its being haunted by the mad woman. Suspense in the narrative develops through a technique — to use the Russian Formalists’ key concept — of ‘making strange’. In fact, this is what brings Jane Eyre its aesthetic value. Thus, both the psychological critique, which considers Bertha as a sexual drive, and the formalist analysis which connects her with a gothic textual device, distance the reader from the economics of the madwoman without which Jane Eyre’s economics would remain incomplete.

Because of his inadequate reading of Bertha, Richard Chase is led to some inaccurate interpretations of the end of the novel. Bertha does not actually give herself to Rochester, as he asserts: she is traded by Jonas Mason in order to cover the taint of insanity in the Mason family by gaining, through marriage, the Rochesters’ name. Most critics tend to ignore that Bertha was ‘sold’ for £3,000 to Rochester. Nobody seems to ask: why should it be particularly a woman from the West Indies; a colonized country whose accumulated capital played an important role in the changes that shook the capitalist societies of Western Europe in the 1840’s?

In Jane Eyre, as in other eighteenth and nineteenth century novels like Robinson Crusoe and Mansfield Park, the colonized world (as represented by Madeira and India) remains peripheral; yet it breaks into the text violently through Bertha. A discussion of Jane’s legacy, left to her by her uncle, links the inside of Thornfield Hall to the outside world which is banished from the manifest text: the world of colonialism in the 1840’s.

Jane’s legacy comes from the capital accumulated by her uncle in the West Indies. This money is made through trade, slavery and the exploitation of occupied territories. These inherited funds finally provide Jane with the acceptability and integration within the social circles she aspires to and from which she was rejected when she had neither education nor money. Therefore, if we look closely at both Jane’s legacy and Bertha’s dowry, both of which come from the empire, this will tell us a lot about the nature of Charlotte Brontë’s novel’s genesis and the economics of the English society of the 1840’s.

5. Bertha at the Crossroads of Interpretations:

Bertha, in both Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea, has black blood in her which makes her representative of the colonies and slavery. Also, being half-white, she has the right to be accepted as an acknowledged
member of English society. But because of her culture, she is assumed to be mentally too violent to fit in that milieu. She, herself, does not feel that she belongs to that society into which she is transplanted: «between you and I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where I belong and why was I born at all», she says (Jean Rhys, op.cit.). Her madness must be taken, not merely as a genetic accident, but in terms of her acceptance/rejection of and by that society. Actually, Jean Rhys's novel makes the reader doubt the genuineness of Bertha's madness (Cf. the way she discusses her mother's madness with Rochester). In her version of the story, Bertha tells Rochester that after her father's death, she and her mother and brother were poor and lonely; that their isolation from the other people around them was a result of the way they were looked at. Rochester would sometimes believe her, but not to such an extent as to remove from his mind all the superstitious beliefs he had formulated about her: «I began to wonder how much of all this was true, how much imagined, distorted...» (Jean Rhys, op.cit.). Bertha is, therefore, a victim of the anomalies of a social milieu she is transplanted into. Her status also clarifies the complexity of class relationships in the Brontë's society.

In the 1840's, many creole West Indians joined their 'Mother Country' (U.K.) because of different social and political transformations the Empire was going through. Creole women were imported into Britain because they were married to wealthy merchants, estate owners and slave holders of the West Indies. Consequently, these «half-outsiders» to British culture tried to establish themselves as recognized subjects within that society by allying themselves either with the landed gentry (Cf. T.E. Ward and R.G. Wilson, 1971) through purchasing land, or with the new industrial class by investing in nascent industrial production. Some of these creoles were destitute, others were among the nouveaux riches of the colonies. Thus some of them were accepted and integrated in the society, whereas others remained on the margins. Even the integrated creoles remained connected with the history of slavery and therefore were looked upon as of low origin. In both novels considered here, the weight of this past is very significant in the making of the consciousness of the characters. This bitter past has reduced the creole to a scapegoat. In Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea, mutual hatred goads both sides. It is both Rochester's desire for revenge and Bertha's yearning for a way to let out her frustrations and to express her identity that lead to the final catastrophe:

You hate me and I hate you. We'll see who
hates best(\ldots). I will destroy your hatred...\ldots, says Rochester.
(Jean Rhys, op. cit.)

Hence, Bertha's burning of Thornfield Hall remains deeply symbolic. It is an attempt to destroy the colonial history which created her: a history represented by that imperial mansion owned by Rochester. And by committing suicide, she destroys the false identity she vainly fights
against in Jean Rhys’s novel. This is the identity which is imposed upon her by Rochester, and which is typical of the kind of acculturation imposed by imperialism in many parts of the world.

It is clear from this analysis that Bertha represents an emerging social group which Jane Eyre and the ideology of its time try to suppress. It is the case of a group of people who were created by the Empire and transplanted into Britain. Therefore, any imaginary solution to the conflicting sides in the novel is bound to be different from any Jane/Rochester type of reconciliation. It is only achieved through the destruction of the most violent side, the Berthas. And Rochester’s mutilation becomes significant in terms of a revenge upon the representative of the West Indian colonizers.

In the light of this interpretation, we also note that Terry Eagleton himself is caught up in his own definition of class relations in the 1840’s. His definition cannot acknowledge the existence of the group of people represented by Bertha; a third category created by the Empire. It would not go hand in hand with orthodox Marxist analyses which base themselves on conflicting social polarities and dualisms. But in order to make this interpretation more convincing, I wish to consider some details of the economic and political realities of the colonized West Indies in the period leading up to the publication of Jane Eyre, details which are mediated in the fuller characterisation of Bertha by Jean Rhys.

During the establishment of British rule in Jamaica, two social classes were created: the small-holders and the estate owners. Sugar production and slave ownership as cheap labor were both sources of industry and wealth. The economic situation was flourishing during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; but early in the nineteenth, as other islands were coming into sugar production, the days of prosperity started their decline in the West Indies. The abolition of slavery and the emancipation act badly affected the plantations. Under these economic and social threats, there was no way to avoid the progressive disintegration of the colonial status quo. On the whole, looking at the British society of the 1840’s from the angle of class dualism and conflict would certainly restrain our outlook and marginalize other social groups, such as Bertha’s, which acquired their own importance at that particular historical juncture.

6. Jane Eyre and Feminist Criticism:

From among many texts of the early and mid-nineteenth century which have heroines as their major characters, Jane Eyre has been established by feminist criticism as one of the most important feminist works of literature because of its feminist politics. Jane Eyre’s radical position towards many issues in the dominant ideology of the period, its attacks on conventionality and self-righteousness, Jane’s consciousness through
rebellion, and her defiance of the social order of the epoch have drawn many attacks upon Charlotte Brontë:

Pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition (…) [a] murmuring against the comforts of the rich and the privations of the poor, which (…) is a murmuring against God’s appointment (…). We do not hesitate to say that the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written Jane Eyre...

(Quoted by K. Tillotson, op.cit.)

In reaction to such invective, the feminists have supported Charlotte Brontë’s stand against establishment values; but I would like to take issue with the criteria upon which they base their position.

In the tradition of feminist criticism, the radical Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective concentrate upon Jane Eyre as the only character who mediates a feminist consciousness in the novel. As a marginalized and an outcast individual, she defies many social institutions which oppress her and form a barrier in her way towards her freedom and independent selfhood. Her development in the story is a continual challenge to the Establishment’s ‘symbolic order’. She also deserts Lowood Asylum because she cannot bear the clergyman Brocklehurst’s hell-fire preaching and narrow-path rules. Finally she flees Morton, the Rivers’ home, because St. John Rivers intends her enslavement. Jane Feels suffocated wherever she goes. Escape towards broader horizons, as Patricia Beer says, becomes central to her decisions. But when she finally returns to Thornfield Hall, she no longer feels trapped. Her man is there and the milieu of the gentry she aspires to is present. Her earlier escape from Thornfield is motivated by Rochester's ambiguous feeling toward her rival Blanche Ingram. Jane is poor but she has her roots in the gentry; hence her final union with Rochester in Ferndean mediates what Terry Eagleton calls a historical alliance between two classes.

What the feminists see in Jane Eyre is a critique of patriarchal ideology mediated by Jane as the woman excluded from that society. For instance, Nancy Pell (1977) reads Jane Eyre as a «critique of bourgeois patriarchal authority…». As for the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective, they read the novel as identifying:

Charlotte Brontë’s interrogation of the dominant ideology of love and marriage; but also suggests the Machereyan «not-said» of the novel — what it is not possible for her to «scrutinise and expose», woman as a desiring subject; a sexual subject seeking personal fulfilment within the existing structures of class and kinship, i.e. in a patriarchal capitalist society…(F.Barker et al., op.cit.).
They further say that «the feminism of the text resides in its 'not-said', its attempt to inscribe women as sexual subjects within this system» of kinship and the family to allow for Jane's integration.

In fact, it is the meaning this approach attributes to the 'un-said' of Jane Eyre that this paper elaborates on and differs from. Through this process, it produces a new view of Charlotte Brontë's novel as well as a different perception of how to read literary texts in general. To put it otherwise, the 'unspoken' of Jane Eyre which I, here, deal with is a critique of the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective's analysis. In their approach, they logically defend the 'cause of women, yet they ignore the central importance of the most oppressed woman character: Bertha. The latter is — in fact — more oppressed than Jane, and her silence (she actually does not utter a word in the text!) speaks not only a critique of patriarchy but a critique of colonialism as well.

Even the claim to Jane's feminist politics in the text does not exclude any counter-argument or qualification to the critique of patriarchy in Jane Eyre. To make this point clearer, a consideration of Jane's attitude towards the social situations of other women around her, namely Bertha, is very challenging. Jane's attitude to Bertha is ambiguous if not positively male-oriented. She does not disagree with Rochester's treatment of Bertha. First, she can only see her as a ghost. Second, she feels no sympathy for Grace Pool, who is, as far as Jane knows, the imprisoned woman at Thornfield. Finally, then, though she attacks imprisonment and escapes it, Jane does not think of other women who are under worse conditions than hers within the same system.

Furthermore, her consciousness is individualistic and claims individual rights. Once she is married to Rochester, her fight is over. Ironically enough, what Jane finally decides for is not an escape from a male dominated social structure as some feminists would advance; but a new form of subservience. She joins her lover/beloved as his employee in an unequal relationship justified only by a deceptive notion of love. A very important quotation on which feminist critics base themselves when trying to prove Jane's sympathy for other oppressed women is challenged by her later reaction to the news of Bertha's death:

> Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally; but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer...

*(Charlotte Brontë, 1966: 141)*
Undoubtedly, this quote would be a central clause in a feminist manifesto if considered separately from Jane's reaction to Bertha — as an enslaved woman — in the novel. Besides, to appreciate her politics thus in isolation would be a tremendous interpretative error (cf. also her attitude to Mr. Brocklehurst's wife and daughter at Lowood, and her rival Blanche Ingram in Thornfield). Jane's reaction to Bertha's death when described to her by the innkeeper is limited to «Good God!» She also hates every woman who threatens her man or competes with her for him. Moreover, when Jane, the lawyer, Mr. Wood, and John Green (the clerk) are led by Rochester to see Bertha after the interruption of the marriage ceremony in the Church, Jane's reaction to the scene is surprisingly almost identical with Rochester's. She watches him tying the poor woman to a chair, yet does not feel affected at all. Worse than that, she describes Bertha as a non-human being, as is clearly reflected in her thoughts: «strange wild animal»; «a clothed hyena»; «the maniac bellowed».

Where does Jane Eyre's feminism lie in this respect? Jane's supposed women's rights are those of an individualist who has no awareness of the realities of others. Thus both Jane's denial of and the Feminist Literature Collective's ignoring of Bertha's enslavement as a woman render their politics suspect.

Similarly, the way many other feminist critics consider Bertha shows how they could not eschew the traditional pattern of dealing with Jane Eyre; that is by tracing a historical evolution of Jane's consciousness as the centre of the novel. For instance, Elizabeth Hardwick condemns the part of the novel which deals with the character of Bertha as «the large, gaping flaw in the construction of the story...» (E. Hardwick, 1974) As for Patricia Beer, she interprets Bertha in terms of a symbolism of «sexual rivalry» between older women and younger ones. According to her, this sexual rivalry falls into two categories. In the first, the older women's «role is to interfere with the sexual scheme of the younger women on behalf of their own candidates», as does Lady Ingram. In the second category, «They are activated by simple irritation at the younger women's extenxe and distinctive personality, like Mrs. Reed...» (Patricia Beer, 1974). In her analysis, Beer places Bertha in the second category and refers to her and the act of tearing Jane's veil as signifying this idea. Thus, feminist critics, like traditional ones, ignore the importance of Bertha despite their avowed commitment to the cause of every woman.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, Bertha/Mason/Rochester has been demonstrably neglected by many critics who have tried to interpret Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre. Their consequent misreading of the text stems from a reductionist view of the nature of the literary text which does not take into account the primal importance of the unspoken and the marginalized in literary discourse in general. As I have set out to prove, Bertha's impor-
tance is central to Charlotte Brontë's novel. Thanks to Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea, readers can now read the figure of Bertha as a character who fully mediates and articulates unspoken politics and economics of the text and its epoch. Jean Rhys's novel which stresses Bertha's strong connection with colonialism and the Empire directly links the nature of literature in general with the presence of absences and gaps without which a literary work cannot exist.

References


