Women empowered or victimised:  
A gynocritical analysis of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Kübra Baysal  
Kastamonu University, Turkey  
kbaysal@kastamonu.edu.tr

**Abstract**

Written by Jean Rhys in 1966, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a novel presents the background for Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* of 1847. Two novels are indeed intertextual for using the same characters, namely Antoinette and Rochester, with the history of these characters first in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and then *Jane Eyre* forming the basis for respective narratives. However, *Wide Sargasso Sea* comes up with an alternative to *Jane Eyre* when handled with a feminist perspective and puts the emphasis on indigenous people along with their culture under the rule of the white European coloniser. In the comparative analysis of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* through gynocriticism, the paper shall reflect similarities as well as diversities in the texts referring mostly to the female protagonists, Jane and Antoinette, as active or suppressed women characters.

**Key words:** Rhys, Bronte, gynocriticism, indigenous, feminism.

**Introduction**

As women writers struggling in a field dominated by men, Charlotte Bronte and Jean Rhys reflect the problems they encounter in their respective societies through their characters despite their distinct way of handling narration. When compared through a feminist perspective, women protagonists of both novels depict the state of women in a striking way while Rochester undergoes a change from Bronte’s to Rhys’s story.

When the novels are taken into account, Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* is a representative of the Feminine Phase, in which women writers cannot express their rebellious ideas freely. For fear of the banishment from the society, Bronte uses a pseudonym while writing her novel. Likewise seen in the character of Jane Eyre, she is an intelligent child at the beginning of the novel. She questions the incidents and people in her mind that is why she is sent to the terrifying Red Room (6). Searching for her voice in the Victorian society, Jane becomes a governess and proves to be a gallant young woman at Thornfield, which takes Rochester’s immediate attention as he is tired of selfless and ordinary women. In a similar vein, throughout the
narration, feminine descriptions and language manifest the femininity of the text as Jane talks about her affection to Rochester: “He made me love him even without looking at me” (176). Soon the patriarchal character, Rochester replies her affection as he disguises as a gypsy fortune teller to direct Jane towards his path, yet Jane realises that it is Mr. Rochester despite his different look (183). When Jane confesses her love to Rochester, Jane declares that her spirit is equal, which pleases Rochester and makes him propose Jane all the same. “… it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal,—as we are!” (256). Therefore, it is through Jane’s extraordinary character and actions that Bronte accomplishes as a woman writer. So, she both adopts from previous female writings and provides the material for novelists such as Jean Rhys since all female narratives bear the traces of previous writings with the inheritance of “despair” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2010).

Likewise, Jean Rhys writes her novel in the “female” phase according to Showalter’s theory. It is in this period that woman writers feel free to reflect themselves in their writings as exemplified by Wide Sargasso Sea challenging the long-set world of the canonical Jane Eyre. Rhys’ adventure as a woman writer stems from her interest in reading the classical books. Hence, she reads Bronte’s Jane Eyre as a reader and accordingly, decides to write a history to Edward Rochester’s mad/dened wife Bertha Antoinette Mason and gives her a voice to express herself. As part of the female literary tradition, Rhys looks for a model to base her writing upon and she has Charlotte Bronte’s classical novel. She might have needed the female support and solidarity from previous writers during the process of creation and felt the “anxiety of authorship”, in Gilbert and Gubar’s words (2010). She makes an extraordinary interpretation of Jane Eyre and creates a postcolonial prequel to the canonical work, which once again confirms the intertextual nature of two different texts belonging to different cultures and periods. Despite Rhys’ Creole background and Bronte’s English origin, they narrate the suffering of women in distinct contexts because they are both women writing about the universal female problems. However, Rhys turns Jane Eyre into a “writerly text” for it invites the reader to re-examine the details and fill the gaps in the text from Antoinette Cosway’s point of view (Al-Andri 4). In that respect, Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea can in fact be regarded as a deconstruction of the original text in that it represents Edward as a colonial and misogynist personality in contrast with Bronte’s depiction of the Romantic and victimised character, Rochester talking about his wife Bertha as an obstacle to his happiness. Further, as a hybrid between Jamaica and England, Antoinette is accepted by neither side, which explains her loneliness and sensitivity. In her childhood, she has a Martinique friend Tia, with whom she eventually parts ways as she
discriminates Antoinette for her race and humiliates her. Antoinette suffers for being an outcast in her society and observing the suffering of her friend Tia, she feels like seeing herself “in a looking-glass” (41). After her troubled childhood in the nunnery, she marries to Edward Rochester, an English gentleman seeking ways of earning money, thinking she will finally find true happiness. In the end, she is disillusioned and miserable because of her discriminating husband and is locked away in an attic at Thornfield, England, being forced for an isolated life. Therefore, Jean Rhys pens the sad story of Antoinette Mason as she is also a Creole woman and she might have desired to express the problems of women in the postcolonial Jamaica. As a woman, she feels the need to write about women and display her thoughts about English patriarchy in a most sentimental way and without the fear of patriarchal oppression.

As with the feminist criticism, taking the female protagonists into consideration, Jane is the representative of the free and spirited young women struggling to find a respectable place in the society. She feels inferior to Rochester in terms of property as she is the governess of Rochester’s niece, Adele and he is the master of the house. Living in the Victorian Age, she must obey her master and be obedient as well as submissive as a woman. Still, she feels equal to him in her spirit and mind. When she learns about Rochester’s wife and he asks her to be her mistress, she refuses him due to her dignity. “Sir, your wife is living: that is a fact acknowledged this morning by yourself. If I lived with you as you desire, I should then be your mistress: to say otherwise is sophistical—is false” (307). Finally, Jane elevates to Rochester’s position when she inherits a great sum of money. Then on, Bertha Antoinette Mason, Rochester’s mad wife, is presented as a mysterious and dangerous female character in the novel. Her presence is proved when her brother announces that Rochester is married to “[…] Bertha Antoinetta Mason, daughter of Jonas Mason, merchant, and of Antoinetta his wife, a Creole” (293). Soon Jane sees her as well, when Rochester takes her to her attic. She mentions about her as resting on her hands on the floor and roaring like an animal, which not only diminishes Bertha to the position of an animal but also justifies Rochester’s plea for happiness as a young man searching for his soul mate. What is striking in this part is that Antoinetta is treated like an animal “bound to a chair” by force (297).

Just the same, Wide Sargasso Sea introduces many female personalities innovating to the feminist analysis of the text. Principally, the protagonist of the novel, Antoinette Cosway is a great example for the lively woman seeking for a companion, but turned into a monster by the male-oriented society. After the “Emancipation in Jamaica”, former slaves turn bitter against slave traders, one of whom is Antoinette’s father whose burden is left with Antoinette and her Martinique mother, Bertha (17). Both as a girl and a hybrid between two races, she suffers and
gets excluded from other children’s playgrounds and finally, she is sent away after her mother loses her mind. Mr. Mason provides her with a dowry of thirty thousand pounds. Even though she is a beautiful woman full of life, Edward does not appreciate her because she is a Creole woman living in the heart of nature, in her house Coluibri, on an island. She is a true lover of nature and thinks it is “better than people” (25). Especially in the parts where Antoinette is in nature, Rhys ornamens the narration lively and colourful nature through Antoinette’s eyes and thus, presents material for “l’écriture femininity” (Naseri-Sis, 2012, p. 45-47). Further, Antoinette is driven into madness by Rochester’s ignorance and insistence about calling her as Bertha, instead of Antoinette. She becomes Antoinette Bertha Cosway Mason Rochester, expressly manifesting the gradual fragmentation in her identity. She eventually becomes the embodiment of the women suffering in postcolonial countries.

Furthermore, there is major parallelism in the characters of the two protagonists, Jane and Antoinette. Jane has premonition when she dreams about a wild woman ‘ripping her clothes’, who happens to be Bertha in Jane Eyre (208). Likewise, Antoinette has symbolical dreams in nature related to the terrifying power of patriarchy on her. At the end, she sees the fire in her dream and then sets Thornfield on fire with her candle (Rhys, 2010, p. 171). Besides, both characters learn domestic skills like dancing and “embroidery” as women characters learning female conduct (Anderson, 2011, p. 2). Besides, both Jane and Antoinette like to see themselves in the looking glass. As Gilbert and Gubar denote, in “the looking glass” women search for their identity and they can find whatever they are lacking in the reflection or distortion of their own reality (2030). Whenever they are away from the mirror, they become restless and start to lose their voices as in the case of Red Room, where Jane is locked in and Antoinette’s imprisonment in the attic without a mirror.

On the other hand, the major practitioner of the patriarchy in both novels is Edward Rochester, who victimises Antoinette in Wide Sargasso Sea and puts Jane in difficulty in Jane Eyre. When studied in the order of his fictitious history, Rochester gets married to Antoinette Cosway first to become a rich man in the face of the English society. He is the second son of his family, so he must make his own property in his own way. Originating from a patriarchal family and society, he becomes a rich gentleman through a marriage of contract. Even though he sometimes follows his instincts and finds Antoinette attractive, he then abhors her for her simplicity, her connectedness to the nature and her “long, sad, dark, alien” eyes, in short her indigenous looks (61). He pretends to like her even though he hates her in the beginning. As the days go by, he does not bother himself with pretentiousness and shows ignorance to her and pushes her into misery. He decides to shatter her soul.
down because he realises that she is “too strong-minded” to be changed (Naseri-Sis, 2012, p. 46). Then again, he wants to explore and discover the untouched territories of the island as the representative of the colonial mind. As he causes Antoinette’s psychological breakdown, he has the guilty conscience and gets afraid of the things and the elements of nature around him, which recalls Antoinette’s ecofeminist relation to nature as both are evaded and abhorred by Rochester. Because he is a man of culture, he wants to get rid of the natural and go back to England. He calls her Bertha, cheats on her, makes fun of her natural way of life and drives her into madness. Finally, he brings her to England and locks her in an attic at Thornfield, leaving her in endless pain and loathing.

Additionally, it is striking that Edward Rochester in Rhys’ narrative is quite different from the Rochester in Bronte’s novel. He has been the master of the house for nine years, since his brother’s death, which reminds of his settled system of authority at Thornfield. Yet, he rejects the once accepted and applied rules of patriarchy and the Victorian Age, when his feelings for Jane reveal themselves. He fights against the norms of the system after he wants to marry Jane, his “inferior” and “a governess” (Shuang-Ju, 2012, p. 1 & p. 3). He is represented as a victim in Bronte’s text whereas Rhys’ novel changes the interpretation of Bronte’s novel by creating an “anti-Bildungsroman” for Rochester (Kendrick, 1994, p. 204).

**Conclusion**

In short, Charlotte Bronte and Jean Rhys write the problems of women in their own period of time. However their subject matter transcends the limitations of time and place. While Jane Eyre achieves self-fulfilment at the end of the novel, Antoinette Rochester perishes in the hands of the patriarchal society as a woman and a Jamaican. Therefore, the reader encounters two types of Rochester in two novels from two different female novelists’ point of view and takes part in the interpretation process considering the texts. So, it is hardly surprising to discover the new dimensions of the classical text, *Jane Eyre* due to the innovative nature of a modern novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

**References**


**Contact**

Kübra Baysal
Kastamonu Universitesi
Yabancı Diller Bölümü Fazıl Boyner Yüksekokulu Kuzeykent
Kastamonu 37200
Türkiye
kbaysal@kastamonu.edu.tr