

The Others in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*: A Postcolonial-Orientalist and Feminist Reading

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Abstract

There are different forms of othering in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*: one which results from Jane's ambiguous position in terms of class hierarchies and another generated by Bertha's presence as a colonized subject. In both cases, femininity amplifies gender-specific repercussions in these othering processes. However, while Brontë creates a female character in Jane who triumphs over the challenges posed by Victorian society's class and gender hierarchies, i.e., the status as other of governesses and women, problematic as it is in its final solidification of the status quo, Bertha reflects the dominant, Eurocentric ideologies of nineteenth century England concerning race and the racial other. She is the colonized and racial other, a madwoman who threatens British men as embodied in Mr. Rochester, and women embodied as in Jane, and her final self-destruction for Jane's sake are poignant plot devices to this end. This paper offers a comparative reading of two female characters' othered status in Victorian British society in relation to the dominant ideologies of the era concerning gender, class and race. I argue that whereas Brontë, following a feminist reading of her novel, fictively assuages the othered status of British women in the characterization of Jane, who triumphs in resisting society's rigid class boundaries and women's subordinate position in terms of legal and financial matters, does not grant a similarly fictive emancipatory view to Bertha as the colonized and racial other. This is an obvious and clear indication of Brontë's limitations concerning feminist activism and inclusiveness as her implication in advancing the dominant, imperialist discourse.

Keywords: *Jane Eyre*, post-colonialism-orientalism, the other, class and gender, feminist criticism.

Charlotte Brontë'nin *Jane Eyre* Adlı Romanının Postkolonyal-Oryantalist ve Feminist Okuması: "Ötekiler"

Öz

Bu makale ondokuzuncu yüzyıl Viktorya Dönemi İngiliz Edebiyatı'nın önemli isimlerinden Charlotte Brontë'nin *Jane Eyre* isimli romanında "öteki" ve "ötekileştirme" konusunu inceler. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, sınıf ve cinsiyet konularını irdelemede kullanılan Feminist teori romanın ana karakteri olan Jane'in toplumdaki ötekileştirilmiş konumunun incelenmesinde kullanılırken; romandaki Bertha karakterinin çözümlemesinde

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ise Postcolonial-Orientalist teoriden yararlanılmıştır. Bu iki kadın karakterin karşılaştırmalı bir “öteki” okumasının yapıldığı bu makalenin ulaştığı sonuç ise yazarın dönemin İngiliz toplumunda yerleşmiş bulunan cinsiyet ve sınıf ayrımcılığına karşıt—zayıf olsa da—eleştirel bir tutum geliştirmesine rağmen, benzer bir serbestleştirici ve teskin edici tutum ırksal öteki olarak konumlandırılan İngiliz kolonisinden gelen Bertha için gösterilmemiştir. Bu da Edward Said’in iddia ettiği üzere, İngiliz emperyalizminin doruk noktasını yaşadığı ondokuzuncu yüzyılda, edebiyatın baskın politik inanışlar ve olgular çerçevesinde şekillenmiş olabileceğine örnek teşkil etmesi bakımından önemlidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Jane Eyre*, sömürgecilik-oryantalizm, öteki, sınıf ve cinsiyet, feminist eleştiri.

INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) constitutes one of the most memorable and significant examples of Edward Said's concept of contrapuntal reading as an illustration of the contextual circumstances of a text's production, as it showcases the often overlooked relation between slavery, colonization and imperial wealth. This is embodied in Sir Thomas Bertram's "dead silence" to his niece Fanny's inquiries about the slave trade as an affluent English aristocrat sitting on income from his sugar plantations worked by slaves on the island of Antigua in the Caribbean (Said, 1994, p. 88-89, 96). While Fanny's indignation with the slave trade can be overlooked as a passing remark with no specific plot purpose, thirty-three years later, in 1847, Charlotte Brontë, another prominent Victorian novelist, published *Jane Eyre*, in which her use of Bertha Mason, a Creole woman from the British colonies in the West Indies, as one of the main characters and the secret wife of Mr. Rochester, can be read as an indication of growing public awareness about the British Empire's involvement in colonialism and slavery. Despite marginalized and sporadic voices of protest raised by abolitionists in Britain—usually alongside campaigns for women's emancipation—one can safely say that the dominant, imperialist ideology of the era and its societal implications, such as rise in national pride and colonial ambition as well as belief in racial hierarchies, remained intact and was invariably reflected in nineteenth century British literature, including *Jane Eyre*.

Those who held anti-slavery sentiments that foregrounded the plight of the colonized others in the Victorian era were often also involved in women's emancipation initiatives to unbound the era's fairer sex from their inferior status as other in terms of class and gender. It is also well-known that the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 was passed largely due to pressure and petitions from women in the London Female Anti-Slavery Society. As such, there appears to be an ostensible affinity between the othered status of women and colonized people in Victorian Britain's mainstream public sentiment, which is ignored or at best overlooked in *Jane Eyre*.

In addition to the feminist readings this analysis offers, based on Jane's status in Victorian society in terms of gender and class,¹ it also employs the postcolonial literary analysis theory of contrapuntal reading, which investigates the contextual circumstances of a text's production, as Said conceptualized in his theory of orientalism. It examines the fictional character of Bertha Mason through the ideas of the colonized other in juxtaposition to the protagonist, Jane Eyre, and her othered status in terms of gender and class in nineteenth century British society. As a result, this paper attempts to shed light on the often-overlooked relations between imperialist practices and literary representations both in characterizations as well as narratives. In line with postcolonial literary scholar Gayatri Spivak's argument that draws attention to the instrumentality of nineteenth century British literature and feminist criticism's complicity in reproducing the "axioms of imperialism", this study aims to draw attention to the novel's incongruous and conflictory handling of the society's others in terms of gender, class and race (1985, p. 243)

The argument of the paper is that while Brontë, in connection with a feminist viewpoint, fictively assuages the othered status of British women in the characterization of Jane, who triumphs in resisting rigid class boundaries and women's subordinate legal and

¹ For a detailed discussion of class in Victorian society in connection with the novel, see Jina Politi's "Jane Eyre Class-ified" (Politi, 1997).

financial positions, does not offer a similar, fictive emancipatory view to the colonized and racial other in Bertha. As a result, in the novel despite toned-down criticism leveled at the patriarchy and aristocracy, Brontë's position in the dominant, Eurocentric, imperialist discourse is disturbingly evident.

Even though social attempts to abolish slavery in Britain and its colonies were underway as early as the end of the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century was the height of the British Empire's amassing of overseas territories and advancement of the Atlantic slave trade. From 1700 to 1810, British merchants are said to have been responsible for dislocating almost three million Africans from their homelands to be sold as slaves in the Americas, including the West Indies.

Through the middle of the nineteenth century in which Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre*, the notion of white superiority over colonized indigenous people had already strengthened its strong position in popular culture, which as we will see, at the end of the century culminated into a total justification for Britain's imperialist rule over its colonies through Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" (1899). The characterization of Bertha as devilishly insane and animalistic, or as "the mad woman in the attic" to use feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's coinage, obviously renders the narrator's position problematic toward the racial other from the British colonies (2000, p. 596).

Despite the frustration of Austen's Fanny Price with slavery, the indifference shown by Brontë's protagonist, Jane Eyre, to Bertha's racial othering and its colonialist implications come off as disturbingly out of character given Jane's protests of and resistance to gender prejudices, such as Victorian patriarchal views of women, and social injustices, e.g., class hierarchies and the poverty of the working class. However problematic, given the historical context of the era in which the dominant ideological discourse promoted imperial ambitions, the right to rule over indigenous peoples and the racial superiority of whites, Jane's thoughts and actions concerning the other are understandably bounded in the norm that uniformly inculcates a Eurocentric view of the racial and ethnic other.

Jane as the other: A heroine in opposition to class hierarchies and gender assumptions

Published under the male pseudonym Currer Bell, Brontë's *Jane Eyre* received literary acclaim and came to be recognized as a text critiquing Victorian assumptions and regulations of gender and class. In this *bildungsroman*, readers witness a child's maturation into adulthood after attending a boarding school, her employment as a governess and then marriage to a wealthy gentleman she fell in love with. Laden with autobiographical elements from the author's own life—Jane is an orphan, whereas Brontë lost her mother when she was five years old, both were educated at boarding schools and then worked as governesses at wealthy houses—the novel depicts a strong female protagonist of principles triumphing over the obstacles encountered in life, most glaringly her othered status in terms of gender and class.

England in the nineteenth century was a highly class-conscious society. The social classes, especially the upper class, aristocracy and gentry, which were expected to observe rigid class expectations and behavior patterns, were very protective of social boundaries. However, even though Edward Rochester is from an aristocratic background he deviates

from the norm with his preference for Jane, a humble, middle-class governess, over wealthy aristocrat Blanche Ingram.

Marriages were determined accordingly in class-stratified Victorian society: every individual was expected to stay within his or her class and deviation from it by marrying one of a lower class resulted in rejection by the family or of any right to the family name and/or inheritance. Jane's diseased mother, for instance, lowers her socio-economic standing by marrying Jane's father, a poor, working-class clergyman. In addition to that, any deviation from constructed norms was perceived as reactionary and abnormal, thus necessitating the label of other. Jane's ideas that defy these rigid preconceptions and ideas—specifically her strong belief in marriage between kindred souls and equal minds regardless of class, title or wealth—therefore can be read as challenges to the established class expectations. Her belief in self-worth despite social status, especially through education and character, also is a well-thought critique of Victorian society in which individuals are evaluated and judged according to their social standing and class. This can also be read as a challenge to the status quo. Millicent Bell argues in "Jane Eyre: The Tale of the Governess" that this is very much like the construction of a utopian society in which "her creator desires her heroine's achievement of the utopian ideal of union in which men and women, rich and poor, are no longer categories separated by iron barriers" (1996, p. 269).

Throughout the novel, Jane oscillates between classes, from the low status of being an orphan with no wealth to ultimately an upper-class, married woman. After attaining middle-class status as a governess teaching at an aristocratic household in Thornfield, she later declines to the status of beggar upon fleeing penniless from Mr. Rochester's mansion. After inheriting money and the family name from a deceased uncle, she ultimately establishes herself as an upper-class, married woman, reuniting with a maimed Rochester. The protagonist's movement between classes, a result of her circumstances in life, i.e., her lowly birth, good education (gentle breeding) and intellect, contrarily render her socio-economic position ambiguous and precarious. Through Jane's constant challenging of her ambiguous social standing, Brontë suggests that education, morality, manners and intellect should be the true determinants of one's worth despite society's insistence on preserving rigid class boundaries. For instance, the narrator relates Jane's ostracization as a young, orphaned child while living at the house of her wealthy aunt Mrs. Reed, who offers occasional reminders of her low social status: "And you ought not to think yourself on an equality with the Misses Reeds and Master Reeds, . . . They will have a great deal of money and you will have none: it is your place to be humble and, try to make yourself agreeable to them" (Brontë, 2001, p. 10).

Emulating her mother's condescending views to perform "his duty" to preserve his class from intruders, John Reed's harsh and coldhearted conduct also reminds Jane of her low position. For instance, one can detect how preconceptions that education and learning are reserved for the upper class inform John's condescending remarks to Jane. Here, too, is an implicit critique of Victorian inheritance laws that favored first-born sons over daughters: "You have no business to take our books; you are a dependent, mamma says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us, and eat the same meals we do, and wear clothes at our mamma's expense. Now, I'll teach you to rummage my book-shelves: for they are mine; all the house belongs to me, or will do in a few years" (8).

Throughout the novel, despite Jane's endeavors to fit in with the upper class, where she believes she truly belongs, reminders of Jane's social standing do not only come from the members of higher classes. For instance, Miss Abbot cruelly remind Jane of her position, even though she herself belongs to the working class, when she says, "you are less than a servant" (9).

Brontë employs Jane's education at Lowood boarding school, her intellect and her moral resolution as a means to raise her above ambiguous positioning in terms of rank, wealth and title. In her fight against the odds, her desire to be an independent woman can be read as a criticism of Victorian patriarchal assumptions that required female subordination (*Angel in the House*) and the inferiority of women to men. This is shown both when she goes to Lowood as a boarding student and when she flees Thornfield so as not to become Mr. Rochester's mistress. Jane's determination to rebel against the injustices largely created by the unjust formation of social class—in her case, the direly ambiguous socio-economic standing of governesses—is important in her struggles against conventions.

Jane is conflicted about where she stands, having been orphaned as a child and with ambiguous family standing but with a good education and gentle breeding. She is sophisticated and cultured enough to be a member of the upper class, but belongs to the working class because of her birth and occupation. The fact that their condescending upper-class employers treated governesses poorly while expecting them to sustain a high standard of aristocratic culture only strengthens Jane's defiance of class injustices. As such, the novel becomes a Victorian woman's struggle to change the status quo regarding class hierarchy.

This critique of the condition of governesses in the novel obviously has some autobiographical connections to Brontë's life. Like Jane, Brontë worked as a governess and lived with wealthy families, privately tutoring their children for some time. However, she failed miserably in her two positions as a governess due to her dislike of the conditions, which led her and her sisters to establish their own school, which was also unsuccessful. The status of governesses in Brontë's era was not pleasant at all. Wealthy children saw them as nuisances, themselves scorned by their parents, and no due reverence was granted to these women for their education. They were treated even worse than nurses and domestic servants.

Thus, through Jane's experiences as a governess, Brontë criticizes the grim situation of governesses with the ambivalence shown them concerning their standing in society as the center of her criticism. Girls who would become governesses were educated to the same level as members of the upper class, so therefore, they do not belong to the poor working class in terms of sophistication and taste, but are still considered inferior to members of the upper class, as governesses are economically dependent on their benefactors in a relationship which proved to be crushingly humiliating to many. In other words, even though a governess has attained the same education and manners as an aristocrat, she is socio-economically placed within the working class due to financial setbacks and lack of a family name.

Some examples from the novel better illustrate this point. Upon her first arrival to Thornfield as a governess, Jane is surprised by the intimate welcome from Miss Fairfax, whom she thought to belong to the upper class, only later to learn that she was no more than "a dependent like myself" (Brontë, 2001, p. 85). Jane's ironic mistaking of Miss Fairfax, the

housekeeper, for an aristocrat is in fact an intelligently calculated criticism of the higher classes for their unfavorable view of governesses, as she says, "I little expected such a reception; I anticipated only coldness and stiffness: this is not like what I have heard of the treatment of governesses, but I must not exult too soon" (82). Jane was in fact right not to jubilate too soon, as in the presence of aristocratic guests at Thornfield, including the would-be wife of Mr. Rochester, Blanche Ingham, and her mother, she was terribly scorned because of her occupation. In her derogatory remarks, Ingham harshly reminds Jane of her place by calling governesses a tribe and a "nuisance" and then goes on to say how she and her siblings used to mock their governess as children. Moreover, her mother builds on these scornful remarks thrown at Jane's person and rank, and erupts ruthlessly saying, "in hers I see all the faults of her class" (151).

In "The Tale of the Governess", Millicent Bell points to the undesirable conditions of governesses in the Victorian era, as "throughout the first half of the nineteenth century and to a degree even in later decades, a governess was likely to be someone who suffered what modern sociologists call 'status incongruity' in being neither a member of her employer's class nor exactly a servant" (1996, p. 294). Similarly, Brontë revealed her unfavorable view of governesses' position in society, their misery and unfair treatment at the hands of their wealthy employers in a letter from 1848 to a friend, S. Williams:

[The] governess lived amongst them [the family] a life of inexpressible misery; tyrannized over, finding her efforts to please and teach utterly vain, chagrined, distressed, worried, worried-so badgered so trodden-on, that she ceased almost at last to know herself and wandered in what despicable, trembling frame her oppressed mind was prisoned—and could not realize the idea of evermore being treated with respect and regarded with affection—till she finally resigned her situation and went away quite broken in spirit and reduced to the verge of decline in health. (Brontë, 2010, p. 107)

Therefore, Jane's resolution to share her newly acquired inheritance with her female cousins can be interpreted as a generous attempt to rescue them from the troublesome burden of being a governess or dependent to survive economically.

Jane's position as an other in society has also been identified and stressed by many literary critics. For instance, in "Inside and Outside: Jane Eyre and Marginalization Through Labeling" John Peters argues that because of her "subversion of established cultural norms" Jane Eyre is viewed as "a social outsider" in the novel and accordingly marginalized as a threat to other characters and society (1996, p. 57). Therefore, as Peters shows with examples from the text, other characters ostracize Jane either through derogatory labels and addresses or by excluding her from their social circles. Jane is seen as an "other" both because of her economic status as well as her deviation from norms and the ideal, including appearances. Jane, for example, is not the epitome of the ideal Victorian child, neither physically nor behaviorally. She is not considered beautiful: she does not possess the hallmarks of ideal beauty, e.g., blonde hair and blue eyes; she is not obedient; she speaks up against her elders' thoughts and actions. Her long-held idea of counter-action against injustice since childhood exemplifies her reactionary traits, as exemplified when she says, "when we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard; I am sure we should—so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again" (Brontë, 2001, p. 48).

Although she is ordered to remain silent until she learns to be more sociable and childlike, her refusal to be an angelic child who shows silent obedience to her elders, no matter how unjust they are toward her, is a good example of her difference. Peters makes similar observations. According to him, one of the reasons Jane is marginalized is the fact that “she does not fit into any recognizable category” because “even at Thornfield, by the very nature of her being a governess, she does not easily fit into the established roles of either gentry or servants. As a governess, she is a dependent; yet she is better born and better bred than the other servants” (1996, p. 59). Another reason is that she is always seen to challenge society and its prescriptions. She is not a submissive child, she dares to marry up and at the same time wants to maintain her independence.

Jane’s objection to rigid class structures manifests itself in her defiance of class sanctions concerning marriage, as well. Brontë presents us with a character caught between her desires for the man she loves and the social expectations she has to abide by. Although she seems emotionally attached to Mr. Rochester, she is checked by the dominant Victorian perception that masters do not marry their governesses. The below passage is a good example of Jane’s reasoning and her inner struggles as a woman who is caught between open rebellion against class hierarchies and silent acceptance of their imposing existence:

You’re of importance to him anyway? Go!—your folly sickens me. And you have derived pleasure from occasional tokens of preference—equivocal tokens shown by a gentleman of family ... to a dependent and a novice. How dared you? ... It does good to no woman to be flattered by her superior, who cannot possibly intend to marry her; and it is madness in all women to let a secret love kindle within them. (Brontë, 2001, p. 136-7)

During such deliberations, Jane momentarily gives in to class pressures and established norms when she decides to maintain distance in her relationship with Mr. Rochester. That is why she concludes that an employer-employee connection can be the only acceptable relationship between them when she says, “You have nothing to do with the master of Thornfield, further than to receive the salary he gives you” (138). Consequently, with cruelly and ever-present reminders of strict class expectations, any romantic involvement with Mr. Rochester seems unthinkable for her, as she says of him, “He is not of your order: keep to your caste (Brontë, 2001, p. 138). Other characters also uniformly warn her about the impossibility of such a union. Miss Fairfax, the housekeeper, for instance, believes that marriage between Mr. Rochester and Jane would be out of the question when she explains, “Gentlemen in his station are not accustomed to marry their governesses” (226).

Within herself, however, in rejecting society’s class-conscious constraints on marriage and love, Jane supports the idea of real love between two “soul mates” regardless of rank or wealth. She cannot understand why people agree to loveless marriages and instead pursue wealth, rank and title. To her, people should not be judged or reprimanded for acquiescing to such unions, and rather that judgement and censure should fall on society at large for cherishing and enhancing those ideas. Therefore she tries to make reason of the possible union between Miss Ingram and Mr. Rochester saying that they should not be blamed “for acting in conformity to ideas and principles instilled into them” because “doubtless from childhood, all their class held these principles” (160). However, Jane does not forgo raising her objection when she says, “were I a gentleman like him, I would take to my bosom only such a wife as I could love” (160). Concluding that Blanche Ingham can only be his wife for “political reasons,” or her rank and “connections suiting him”, Jane discards the class

restrictions she sees as arbitrary by highlighting the existence of real love and companionship between herself and Mr. Rochester: "He is not of their kind. I believe he is of mine;—I am sure he is—I feel akin to him, I understand the language of his countenance and movements; though rank and wealth sever us widely" (149).

Here, the reader witnesses an inner conflict taking place. Recanting her previous resolution about the impossibility of union between them—and to abide by the social expectations—Jane decides not to commit "a blasphemy against nature" and therefore suppressing her love for Mr. Rochester (149). In that sense, it is evident that Jane defies society's established prescriptions concerning marriage in terms of class and rank. Therefore, Jane's challenge to forced marriages within one's class is noteworthy for its time because she believes that marriage should be a union of love between intellectually equals and kindred souls, not something determined by class boundaries.

Even though Jane's opposition to the class hierarchies that undermine the position of governesses as well as society's marriage assumptions may come off as revolutionary for its time, the reader can easily detect ambivalences, hesitations and setbacks in her opposition to the status quo, which ultimately becomes a testament to the extent Jane, as a Victorian woman, is able to think outside the rigidly constructed ideology of class and is consequently bound by unconscious limitations. For example, holding an ambiguous socio-economic standing, Jane desires to move up the social ladder and place herself within the upper class. That is the reason why she sees the idea of being poor as unpleasant. To her, "poverty is synonymous with degradation" (20).

In one scene upon her flight from Thornfield, when asked by the physician to go to her poor relatives to find company, she is extremely disturbed by the idea of becoming one of them and says, "I could not see how the poor people had the means of being kind; and to learn to speak like them, to adopt their manners, to be uneducated, to grow up like one of poor women I saw sometimes nursing their children or washing their clothes at the cottage doors of Gateshead: no, I was not heroic enough to purchase liberty at the price of caste" (20). We understand from her remarks that Jane is intrinsically horrified by the idea of belonging to the "vulgar masses" of the working class, which leads us to question the sincerity of her rebellion to erase the extant class boundaries between the working and upper classes.

Jane maintains similar views of working people even after living among them as a teacher educating peasant children to survive. Even though, to her credit, Jane makes a concerted effort to overcome this feeling—which she at least knows she should not feel, but cannot help it—one can easily detect traces of a class-conscious categorization of people in Jane's view of the villagers. As a result, she continuously has to remind herself of the fact that "these coarsely clad little peasants are of flesh and blood as good as the scions of gentlest genealogy" (306). Whereas she does attempt to see these rough, working people as human beings, it is evident that she is not an idealist when it comes to furthering their education. Working as their teacher is not professionally rewarding for her, as she reluctantly says she "will find *some* happiness" in helping them, although evidently not much. She cannot overlook or repress the dominant ideas concerning the poor prescribed by society: they are coarse, devoid of refined behavior and incapable of learning or genteel behavior. She seems to regret the fact that she is a school mistress for impoverished peasant children.

Pondering her low position, Jane says, “Was I very gleeful, settled, content during the hours I passed in yonder bare, humble school-room this morning and afternoon? Not to deceive myself ... I felt degraded. I doubted I had taken a step which sank instead of raising me in the scale of social existence” (306). One cannot deny that she is good-willed. Nevertheless, her personal thoughts reveal the class ideologies of the era and their effects on people’s views and perceptions of others. For instance, she likes to “live amidst general regard, though it be but the regard of working people” (312). The same is true for Miss Fairfax, who is particularly rigid concerning class boundaries. She accepts that Leah and John are “decent people”, yet she sends them to their “right place” when she says, “you see they are only servants, and one can’t converse with them on terms of equality: one must keep them at due distance” (82).

Very much like Jane’s problematic stance on Bertha as the racial other, her critique of class and gender is framed by prevailing social norms and, correspondingly, her ideas reflect an ambivalent view of the current social structures. She neither wants to be a part of the poor working class—disassociating herself in her reference to them as the “uneducated masses”—nor can she bear the injustice and cruelty imposed on these people by the higher classes. Consequently, her jubilation with the news of her inheritance comes as no surprise, because the money from her deceased uncle “is a fine thing ... to be lifted from indigence to wealth--- a very fine thing” (325), in turn raising her up the social scale.

At the end of the novel, upon seeing the protagonist inheriting money and solidifying her upper-class status, the reader thus might wonder to what degree Jane is able to question and transform the prevalent class structures. Although Jane sets out to challenge the ideological machinations of a classed society in terms of class stratification and gender, it is evident that her success in doing so is limited, as she is hardly able to move beyond self-interest when she solidifies her position as a member of the upper class with a life of leisure at the end. This dilemma is highlighted by other literary academics, as well. Jina Politi argues in “Jane Eyre Class-ified”:

Jane consciously voices her ideology, set out to liberate woman from the representations in which patriarchal Victorian Ideology held her. She also set out to vindicate socially underprivileged women. Yet Jane Eyre comes to celebrate the very ethos upon which bourgeois capitalism and its patriarchal ideology rest [and so] the novel’s movement is not towards liberation. It is toward a tidying, a consolidating of class positions. Jane’s actions are decided according to practical motivations and the most favorable consequences. (1997, p. 90)

Susan Meyer’s argument is in line with Politi’s and, like her, Meyer does not consider *Jane Eyre* to be a revolutionary Victorian novel in a broader sense. She remarks that whereas the novel argues rhetorically for “the need for broader redistribution of wealth [and] gender equality ... [it] specifically limits the recipient of this newly equalized wealth to one group, the lower middle class” (Meyer, 1997, p. 104). In other words, Brontë is wholly unable to form criticism to undermine the classed social system. She is only able to point out specific ambivalences that result in injustices. Thus, as a Victorian female character, Jane maneuvers within the classed society, definitely not wanting to be a member of the poor working class and instead desiring to be a wealthy, independent woman of the gentry. She eventually gets decisive independence through her inheritance of her uncle’s wealth, which places her within the upper class.

"Mad Woman in the Attic" Bertha as the Colonized and Racial Other

Brontë's mad female character in *Jane Eyre* exemplifies the central concept of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's praised *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000), a notable feminist literary criticism of Victorian novels. Gilbert and Gubar's feminist critique locates Bertha Mason as the madwoman, locked in the attic as Jane's double who symbolizes Victorian women's furious resistance to social prescriptions and patriarchal pressures. Considering the novel being "*pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition*", Gilbert and Gubar therefore see it as a subversion of the notion of the Angel in the House to that of the monster. For them, Brontë attempts to criticize men's literal and figurative confinement of Victorian women through the introduction of an insane woman character married to the Byronic hero, Mr. Rochester.

Even though this feminist reading may prove useful when questioning the social construction of femininity and authorship during the Victorian era as well as locating Victorian women's low social and financial position—especially financial injustice for married women who had to relinquish their rights to property to their husband as a result of coverture—and confinement to the home as the Angel in the House, Bertha is not a double for Jane, but her foil. She is Jane's other whose violent nature, uncontrolled passion, sexuality and blackness contrast sharply with Jane—a white English woman with moral convictions who is simply wayward, in a place to be the moral compass to the vagabond Mr. Rochester. As Jane's conformist and superficial challenges to the rigid class expectations prove problematic and conflictory at the end, her use of racial slurs through allusions to Bertha's blackness, madness and monstrosity equally render the characterization of the colonized other disturbing and troubled. Therefore, rather than a feminist reading, a post-colonial character analysis of Bertha proves more useful in understanding the imperialist and racial undertones informing the novel.

Bertha Mason's existence as a beautiful but dark-complexioned Creole woman from a prominent West Indies family in *Jane Eyre* serves both as a reminder of the colonial expansion of the British Empire and source of colonial wealth in the nineteenth century as well as the pervasiveness of the era's dominant, imperialistic discourse and perceived superiority of Englishness. The novel includes prejudices concerning racial differences and the superiority of the white race through abundant references to blackness. Having been raised in a time in which "the British still saw themselves as 'humane masters' over all 'dark peoples'... although British society abolished slavery, it "still thought of the black race as dependent and less capable in all aspects of intelligence and morality is quick to show prejudice in any difference in religion and culture" (Watson, 2001, p. 451). Unfortunately, judging from the descriptions and characterization of Bertha, Brontë equates blackness with monstrosity. For instance, Jane's description of Bertha to Mr. Rochester after her first encounter with her, negatively emphasizes her dark features and also, by attributing some monstrous characteristics to her, she says that Bertha's features are "fearful and ghastly to me—oh sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discolored face—it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments" (Brontë, 2001, p. 242). She further adds Bertha "was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed, the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes" (242). Bertha reminds her "of the foul German spectre—the Vampyre." In response, Mr. Rochester approves of her description of Bertha and refers to having a "swelled black face" (243). In doing so, Brontë attributes negative implications to blackness in terms of both physical

beauty and personal characteristics. Here it is important to note that her association to a “savage,” the term used to refer to colonial subjects, with this negative portrayal of blackness illustrates the mentality of nineteenth century imperial Britain, which produced degrading stereotypes to describe the other.

These belittling generalizations are prevalent in a great many discourses, especially literary discourse. Gayatri Spivak argues in “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” that British novels of the nineteenth century should not be read without considering the imperialist agenda and its implications both on society and the individual. According to her, “it should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism ... was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English,” as literature reproduces the very ideology of imperialism. Furthermore, she laments that feminist criticism also “reproduces the axioms of imperialism” (1985, p. 243).

It is then very normal to expect to see such kind of sweeping generalizations about colonized people imprinted on the minds of the English public at the height of British imperialism in the Victorian era. That is the reason why Rochester traces madness in Bertha’s family, albeit excluding her father since he is a white Englishman who is a friend of his father. Almost all of her entire family seems to be afflicted by this madness to some extent. The bride’s mother “was only mad, and shut up in a lunatic asylum. There was a younger brother, too, a complete dumb idiot. The elder one ... will probably be in the same state one day” (Brontë, 2001, p. 260-61). It is also interesting that this tracing of maternal lineage of madness inevitably raises the assumption that it is an affliction of the colonized natives.

It is clear that Brontë’s demeaning view of blackness functions as a means of racial othering. Bertha’s mixed racial background, through an emphasis on blackness, situates her as the racial other, exemplifying the power of the dominance of ideas regarding colonized people’s supposed inferiority. In “Images of Blackness” (2001), Watson discusses unconscious or conscious racial implications concerning issues of blackness and race in two major works by two of the Brontë sisters, *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. His conclusion is that despite the abolition of slavery in 1834 in Britain, Brontë’s personal accounts exemplify that the English still maintained ideas of racial superiority over dark people, which is important in understanding the enduring effect of the racial prejudices of the time and their incorporation in Brontë’s text. That is why, as Watson shows, ideal beauty was measured by Anglo-Saxon, i.e., British, standards, which maintained skin color and race as prerequisites. Therefore, anyone in contrast to these standards is perceived as the other through attributions of wickedness and evil. Watson comments that blackness is repulsive to the authors: “The reclusive sisters are obsessed with a physical beauty that is based on Anglo-Saxon standards; therefore, it is not too farfetched to assume that a ‘dark’ or Negroid face would probably have been very revolting and frightening to them” (Watson, 2001, p. 452). He further adds that both novels “contain some very interesting characters, statements and words that strongly hint of the possibility that, to [the Brontë sisters], all things ‘black’ symbolized inferiority, madness and evil” (452).

An example of the association of blackness with evil from *Jane Eyre* is, like Bertha Mason, Mrs. Fairfax’s description of Blanche Ingram with adjectives stressing her large, dark figure. Blanche is “tall, fine bust, sloping shoulders, long, graceful neck; olive complexion,

dark and clear; noble features, eyes rather like Mr. Rochester's: large and black, and as brilliant as her jewels. And then she had such a fine head of hair; raven-black" (Brontë, 2001, p. 135).

In addition to connotations of evil and madness, blackness is also identified with sexual promiscuity. In nineteenth century British colonialist context, in line with the era's orientalist rhetoric, developed a tradition of identifying traits outside the Victorian ideal and accepted norms to the colonized or Eastern other. Therefore, while a proper Victorian lady is understood to be a dutiful wife with her restricted, or preferably non-existent, sexual desires, the female other from the colonies or the East is presented to be the opposite, with intense sexual desire and exotic charms. This is why, for instance, Mr. Rochester's description of Bertha upon their first encounter suggests the sensual and destructive theme of a *femme fatale*: "Miss Mason was the boast of Spanish Town for her beauty: and this was no lie. I found her a fine woman, in the style of Blanche Ingram; tall, dark, and majestic" (260). Enchanted by her seductive beauty, Mr. Rochester presents himself as the gullible victim of "this lavish woman":

They showed her to me in parties, splendidly dressed ... she flattered me, and lavishly displayed for my pleasure her charms and accomplishments. All the men in her circle seemed to admire her and envy me. I was dazzled, stimulated: my senses were excited; and being ignorant, raw and inexperienced, I thought I loved her" (260).

Here, too, it is interesting to note that Victorians' conceptions of Oriental beauty and dress were conflated with the colonized. Blanche Ingram's black eyes, like those of an Eastern woman, only add to her exoticism. In addition to physical traits, dress is marked as an important factor setting the Victorian lady from the Oriental other. Here, as an indicator of *Turquerie*² as fashion, it is interesting to note the prevalence of terms pertaining to Ottoman culture. Brontë compares and contrasts the ideal Victorian lady embodied in Jane, intelligent and austere, with the Oriental woman, sensual and simple-minded. Therefore, as a gesture of admiration, Mr. Rochester congratulates Jane, preferring her simple and plain "Lowood frocks" to "the Grand Turk's whole seraglio; gazelle eyes, houri forms, and all!" (229).

Imbued with orientalist ideas of debased Eastern women as sex objects in the harem, Brontë illustrates the moral transformation in Mr. Rochester initiated by Jane, from a philanderer to a loyal lover, through problematic juxtaposition of Oriental sensuality and Victorian lady hood and morality. Equally problematic is Brontë's binary exclusion of beauty and intelligence. This is why both Blanche and Bertha show low intellectual achievements: while Bertha has a "pigmy intellect", Blanche proves to be mentally unfit to be Mr. Rochester's equal.

Orientalist references in the novel do not stop at dress and bodily features. Bertha's famous room in the attic draws on perceptions of exotic Oriental locales and decoration in Victorian society. Therefore, textual description of the big room, which includes Bertha's

² *Turquerie* was an orientalist fashion in Western Europe from the seventeenth to the late-nineteenth century that imitated aspects of Ottoman art, culture and costume. Turkish coffee, hamams, rugs, kilims, caftans, turbans, colorful fabrics, including muslin, as well as Oriental designs, such as damask patterns and arabesque ornamentation, became fashionable, especially in France and Britain.

secret room on the third floor, is shown as if it sprung forth from an orientalist painting, as a picturesque, "tapestried room, with its great bed and its pictorial cabinet" (250). The outer room leading into the dark and fearful "den of the monster Bertha" must have been her bedroom before she was forced out and pushed into the small, dark, cave-like room inside. The exquisite decoration of the large, outer room can be understood to be a recreation of the environment she used to live in before she was brought to England from the West Indies.

In addition to providing information on orientalist and colonial fashion in the Victorian era, Bertha's room in the attic as a setting becomes a metaphor for colonization and the usurpation of indigenous lands at the hands of European imperialism. The East, symbolized by the outer room in the attic, is Bertha's native land with riches and beauty, and therefore her forced banishment to the inner, cave-like space is a reflection of colonized people's displacement from and dispossession of their land. In this dark, barren space, with a "low, black door, opened by Mr. Rochester's master-key, [that] admitted us to a room without a window there burnt a fire, guarded by a high and a strong fender, and a lamp suspended from the ceiling by a chain" (250), Bertha, as the colonized other, is forced into a position in which, like colonized people in a larger sense, lives a life of deprivation, stripped of possession and the right to freedom.

In this reading, Mr. Rochester, as the white, European, male master, represents British colonialists who freely wield the power to possess and access the land with his the master key that opens a door into the world of the other. Brontë's view of the colonized other becomes more troubling when Bertha is introduced to the reader as "an animal":

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, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, 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 (250).

Here it is important to also note that Jane's choice as the narrator of the neuter subject pronoun *it* to refer to Bertha, which reinforces demeaning colonialist prejudices concerning colonized people, also referred to as "savages" in the dominant public discourse. In this scene where Mr. Rochester and Jane venture into Bertha's "den", a raving and growling Bertha is retained forcefully and subdued by Mr. Rochester, reminiscent of their violent subjugation of colonized people: "At last he mastered her arms ... and pinioned them behind her; with more rope ... he bound her to a chair" (250). Tragically, an imprisoned human being's bestial monstrosity added to the amusement of the Victorian readership fond of Gothic suspense.

In all, the important colonialist implications of Bertha as a character in the novel would go unnoticed without a postcolonial reading. Locked away in England in a room at Thornfield Manor, which was bought most probably with her wealth, Bertha exists as a symbol of subjugated, colonized people along with their lost land and wealth. In this analogy, Mr. Rochester's marriage to Bertha, who is of a mixed racial origin on her maternal side, can be read as a metaphor for appropriation, or seizing, of indigenous people's lands. As a note, the hyper-masculine idea of the white European man's penetration into the feminized native landscape comes to mind, as well. Bertha's voicelessness in the novel also adds to the problematic colonial discourse that reinforces the supposed inferiority of

colonized peoples. By putting the people from Britain's colonies in a state of backwardness, rendering them bestial beings and lastly stripping them of any normalcy, e.g., attributing hereditary madness, colonialists validated their presence in a foreign land to their fellow countrymen. Therefore, as Watson aptly points out, "Brontë still manages to present Bertha's struggle as only a subordinate part of the novel" (Watson, 2001, p. 463).

In Bertha's characterization, we see the epitome of the silenced, colonized other. Bertha does not even possess an identity throughout the entire novel and is mostly portrayed as less-than human, a bestial creature. Jane as narrator prefers to call Bertha without using a name while other characters in the novel refer to her as a lunatic, vampire, demon, monster, and a mad and savage hag. Bertha is nameless and we hardly hear her voice except for her "violent shrieks" and murmurs accompanied by occasional demoniac laughter. Reading it in line with Spivak's theory then, she belongs to the silenced multitude and is accordingly portrayed through the other characters in the novel. Her voice is ultimately rendered in an occasional show of violence materialized in the following ways: an attempt to burn and kill Mr. Rochester, her tearing the bridal veil off Jane and her final triumph in burning Thornfield down and maiming Mr. Rochester before killing herself (1993, p. 66-111).

Also, the manipulative power Mr. Rochester has in his relationship with Bertha's brother, Mr. Mason, suggests a master-slave relationship between the two, and metaphorically between two societies at large—the colonizer and the colonized. Their relative position to each other, as we can infer from the power relationship between Mr. Rochester and Mr. Mason, is self-revelatory, as the colonized society with its people is subordinated to the colonizer. As Mr. Rochester says, the colonized as embodied in Mr. Mason show a "dog like attachment" to their colonizers (Brontë, 2001, p. 261). Jane, realizing Mr. Mason's dependence on Mr. Rochester, says, "Mr. Mason seems a man easily led. Your influence, sir, is evidently potent with him" (184). Mr. Rochester replies to this with, "Ever since I have known Mason I have only had to say him 'Do that', and the thing has been done." (185).

Moreover, in the same passage, Mr. Rochester's attitude toward Jane and his remarks resemble the slave-master relationship between Mr. Rochester and Mr. Mason. Hence, femininity and colonization are interrelated once more. It is implied that the colonized and women need to come under the domination of a white man. For example, while answering Jane in the same speech when he indicates Mr. Mason's subjectivity and docility, Mr. Rochester calls Jane a simpleton. Furthermore, Jane responds by accepting his position of master over her: "I like to serve you, sir, and to obey you in all that is right" (185). When we contrast the submissiveness from a woman to Bertha's rebellion, we once again see Bertha's othered status. Bertha is excluded from white, male discourse, defies Mr. Rochester and does not allow herself to be subordinated.

One should also take note of the novel's silence about the British experience with slavery and slave ownership. The novel does not allude to Britain's history with slavery and instead conceals the British colonizers' experience with slavery and displaces it first onto Roman slave holders and then onto Turks, which "represses the history of British imperialist domination and in particular, British enslavement of Africans" (Meyer, 1997, p. 112-3). Similarly, orientalist notions of the sultan's, or Grand Turk's seraglio and odalisques

resonate clearly in Jane's objections to becoming a member in Mr. Rochester's seraglio when she says, "don't consider me an equivalent for one" (Brontë, 2001, p. 229).

Brontë likewise suppresses British women's disagreeable position in society with her implicit reference to Eastern women and their supposed slavery in the harem whereas British women have a meaningful existence in the public sphere despite the denial of certain legal rights to married women, including maintenance of property, divorce and self-representation—known as coverture. This erroneous supposition in some sense only serves to maintain patriarchal hegemony in Britain with a misinformed comparison particularly to Muslim women. Clouded by the sensual stereotypes of the harem, little known was the fact that unlike women in many European countries until mid-twentieth century, married women in Islamic countries enjoyed the right to own property and maintain it without their husband's intervention as well as the right to ask for divorce, represent themselves at court and take custody of their children. Islamic teaching concerning women's rights have been overlooked in Europe not just because of orientalist assumptions about "the East" and Islam, but also because of the usurpation of these given rights by patriarchal mindsets and practices in those countries. Susan Meyer reiterates the same idea in an analogy between women and slaves in her observations that "Jane Eyre was written in an ideological context in which white women were frequently compared to people of non-white races, especially blacks, in order to emphasize the inferiority of both to white men" (1997, p. 108). We see that Brontë oscillates between "a conflict between sympathy for the oppressed and a hostile sense of racial supremacy" (1997, p. 121). Consequently, Bertha's presence in the novel is not to generate criticism of racial hierarchies and colonialism, but rather to serve as a reflection of the anxieties and protests concerning white women's subjugation, as "the novel's various allusions to people of nonwhite races are not free from racism. The use of slave as a figure focuses attention not so much on the oppression of blacks as on the domestic situation within England" (1997, p. 108).

Consequently, through Bertha, slavery and the subjugation of women are compared in this novel only because "with the increased abolitionism in the 1980s, the oppression of women was more explicitly compared with the West Indian system of slavery" (2001, p. 463). Watson makes a similar observation, that "eventually in literature, the Victorian white heroine would be depicted as a 'slave' of a patriarchal society. Women writers of the time chose to use slave analogies to demonstrate the horrors associated with the unequal treatment of women in British society" and not necessarily to draw attention to the plight of the colonized people (2001, p. 463).

CONCLUSION

There are different layers of othering in *Jane Eyre*: one that results from Jane's ambiguous position in terms of class and another generated by Bertha's presence as a colonial subject. In both situations, femininity initiates a gender-specific narrative in this othering process, thereby increasing the othering effect. Brontë creates a female character who sets out to challenge the Victorian era's classed society and its gender hierarchies—namely the othered status of governesses and women—only to reinforce the status quo. Her introduction of Bertha as the colonial and racial other, a madwoman threatening the British man as embodied in Mr. Rochester, and women as embodied in Jane, is poignant in terms of reflecting the dominant ideologies concerning race in England in the nineteenth century. This comparative reading of the two female characters in *Jane Eyre* helps us understand that

while Brontë, with a feminist viewpoint, fictively assuages the othered status of English women in her characterization of a Jane, who triumphs in resisting the rigid class boundaries and women's subordinate positions in terms of legal and financial matters, she does not grant a similar, fictively emancipating view to the colonial and racial other in Bertha. This is obviously a clear indication of the limitations of Brontë's feminist activism and inclusiveness as well as her participation in upholding in the dominant, imperialist discourse of her time.

The idea that nineteenth century British literature is laden with imperialistic undertones has been maintained by many leading postcolonial scholars and this analysis contributes to that argument. As we know, Spivak (1985) remarks that literature of nineteenth century Britain reproduced the very ideology of imperialism. Furthermore, she laments that feminist criticism has also engaged in reproducing the "axioms of imperialism" (1993). Likewise, *Jane Eyre* reproduces the imperialistic ideology of its time by failing to portray Bertha and colonized women at large as British women's equals. When Jane is portrayed as a woman who yearns for independence from suppressive male domination, Bertha is excluded from this feminine discourse even though her situation as a suppressed woman deserves equal attention. Therefore, Bertha's presence is used for nothing more than to create suspense as the embodiment of white men's imprisonment of white women.

As a result, we can say that as a plot device, Bertha's presence, characterization and her ultimate sacrifice only helps to create Gothic suspense and act as the foil in comparison to the ideal Victorian woman in Jane, which helps drive the narrative and resolve conflicts. In other words, Bertha's suicide and destruction of Thornfield conclude the narrative by granting Jane the independence and position she so desires as lady of the house—since Thornfield represents her enslavement by Mr. Rochester as his mistress. Spivak rightly maintains that Bertha should transform herself into "the fictive other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction." For Spivak, Bertha's self-extermination illustrates "the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer" (1985, p. 251).

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