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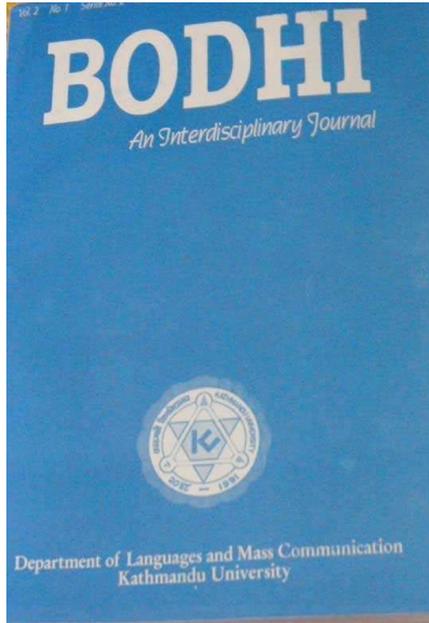
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## “Selfing” the Other: A Colonial Reading of *JE* and *WSS*

-Tika Lamsal

The subject-production of colonial metropolis gets manifest in most of the novels written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in England. As we look at their intricate textures having their roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century English identity when England was a colonial Empire, both of the novels *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (the latter written as a reinscription to the former in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) become veritable mines for us to see the normalization and consolidation of colonial power. The major female characters, Bertha and Antoinette respectively, in both of these novels are doubly victimized in the society they are pitted against: one as the victim of gendered identity and the other of colonial mentality. Thus, Bertha and Antoinette's is a subliminally fluid identity constructed by the colonial imagination engineered by English men.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha emerges as a complex character whose self depends on the patronage of her English husband. With a conspicuous divide between her identity as a Caribbean woman and an English 'lady', Bertha's is a crucial story that leads us deep into the colonial projection of a Third World woman whose self is "othered" in the image of an English girl. For example, when Jane talks about the predicament of Bertha as an essential misery incurred upon her due to Mr. Rochester's "hate" and "vindictive antipathy" towards her, Mr. Rochester reveals that "it is not because she is mad I hate her. If you were mad, do you think I should hate you?" (*Jane*, p. 282). His implication is that he cannot treat Jane as a mad woman because she is an English girl, and by the same token, he has imprisoned Bertha as a mad woman because the West Indian Bertha is not what English Jane is. As such, Bertha is what Spivak would call the "absolutely Other [that] cannot be selfed" (p. 258) because she cannot be contained within the framework of 'domestic angel in the house' that a husband would have a woman in Victorian England.

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Although a reinscription of *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* falls into the same trap of colonial gaze when Jean Rhys ends it with the self-immolation of Bertha (Antoinette) as Bronte does in *JE*, paving the way for Jane to stand as a Victorian “angel in the house” heroine of British fiction. Spivak (1985) observes such projection of Bertha as “an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer” (p. 251). The apparent difference between *JE* and *WSS* regarding their representation of Bertha is that while the former suggests that “Bertha’s function... is to render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal and thereby to weaken her entitlement under the spirit if not the letter of the Law,” the latter “keeps Bertha’s humanity, indeed her sanity as critic of imperialism, intact” (p. 249). Despite her othered self, Antoinette in *WSS* maintains her sanity and asserts her goal clearly as to what she has to do: “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (*Wide*, p. 190).

By the same token, Antoinette’s identity in her own land merely becomes the subliminal projection of colonial consciousness that widens the gap between the self and the Other. She is the subject-production of the colonized island, an exotic and wild atmosphere that represents the other side of the English Empire: “Not only wild but menacing,” (*Wide*, p. 69) as Antoinette’s English husband thinks it to be. Moreover, its beauty becomes too much for an English “lord” to make spectacular, “Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near” (*ibid*). He regards the colonized island as an uninhabitable and savage location and the people living here as what the English are not – savage and non-human. The English man’s belittling attitude towards the places and people of the colonized island manifests the colonizer’s systematic normalizing strategy to ‘civilize’ the savages in the Caribbean and consolidate power.

However, the colonial mission to civilize the native people hits rough waters when the masters can't overpower the colonized as per their interest and control. Bertha's (Antoinette's) assertive sexuality turns into a similar indomitable self which the English man, Antoinette's husband, cannot control. Challenged by the assertiveness of Antoinette's Caribbean identity, he goes to the extent of charging her of being mad. By doing so, he wants to undermine her native strength because his expectation of Antoinette is colored by his Englishness as to make of her a pure, domestic, obedient and pious lady, conforming to the image of an English 'lady'. The man wishes to impose the same image upon Antoinette: "Looking up smiling, she might have been any pretty English girl" (p. 71). He sees that Antoinette cannot make an English pious wife because as Christophine, Antoinette's Martinique housemaid, postulates, "'It's she (Antoinette) won't be satisfy. She is Creole girl, and she have the sun in her'" (p. 158). It is the same passionate 'sun' within Antoinette that the English man fears will burn him, and he starts seeing his wife as not belonging to his 'type'. The only way to underscore his manhood may be to look down upon the Caribbean Antoinette as the Other of an English housewife, hence his calling her "intemperate," "unchaste," and "infamous daughter of an infamous mother" (p.186), leading ultimately to the accusation of being mad. To an English man, a vivacious West Indian girl's madness lies in her strong sexuality, for "She will loosen her black hair, and laugh and coax and flatter (a mad girl. She'll not care who she's loving). She'll moan and cry and give herself as no sane woman would—or *could*. Or *could*. Then lie so still as this cloudy day. A lunatic who always knows the time" (p. 165). He is scared that she overpowers him sexually and takes recourse to his authority as an Englishman who, by his law, can use her and her properties as per his wish, leading to her imprisonment as a mad woman.

In this sense, "the 'unchastity' of Rhys's protagonist is the consequence rather than the cause of her husband's callousness and infidelity" (Hite, 1989, p. 37) because his own

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unfaithfulness undercuts the Victorian moral standards that are only the outward gloss fraught with hypocrisy. His double standard reveals in the novel when he sleeps with his wife's maid Amelie to the utmost shock of the former leaving an implicit message that he is unrestrained by any ethics because he is the citizen of "English Empire."

The circumstances that lead to Bertha's alleged madness in *JE* are also the byproducts of Mr. Rochester's colonial mindset to see the West-Indian landscapes, people, and lush wild atmosphere as the counterparts to his English identity that he wants to project upon his wife. We know from what he admits to Jane about Bertha that he wants to project his Victorian attributes of a domestic wife in Bertha so as to see her exhibit "modesty," "benevolence," "candour" and "refinement in her mind or manners" (*Jane*, p. 286). Mr. Rochester's frustration of Bertha intensifies when he finds her nature "wholly alien to mine, her tastes obnoxious to me, her cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger" (p. 287). It is only by "othering" his wife's self that he justifies his own imperialistic identity. In the words of Hite, "In Bronte's novel the story of her (Bertha's) origins colors Rochester's account of her madness and badness to the point where madness, badness and creole origins are all equal figures for an essential pollution that must be exorcized from the fictional landscape" (1989, p. 34). It is to exorcize the indomitable spirit of a Creole girl that Mr. Rochester creates circumstances in her life leading to her madness.

Moreover, Bronte's depiction of Bertha's brother Mr. Mason as looking "weak, wild and lost" (p. 200) also reveals the embodiment of colonial consciousness in the novel, belittling the image of a West Indian self as the Other of English Mr. Rochester who is resplendent with a 19<sup>th</sup> century English gentlemanly virtues having "broad and jetty eyebrows; his square forehead" and "broad chested and thin flanked" stature (pp. 113-14). Mr. Mason's identity is defined in terms of how

he is different from Mr. Rochester. That the latter epitomizes the spirit of the dominant Empire as a civilized man is understood as natural rather than constructed one so as to contain the belief that because the former looks rude and wild, he is the Other, not belonging to the place where there is the castle of an Englishman.

Similarly, the English man's hostility to the West-Indian landscapes also serves to see the territorialization of the Other. The man's identity in *WSS* is defined by his not belonging to the beautiful island which, to him, seems to be "quite unreal and like a dream" (*Wide*, p. 80). This is an exotic territory which only becomes a part of a colonizer's dream, not the reality. What he craves for in the lush island is his "English summer" (p. 164) so cool, calm and grey as opposed to the West-Indian rough and violent season. Likewise, Mr. Rochester disparages the natural beauty of the lush island by overshadowing it with the longing for European wind. His imperialistic mindset longs only for what is European, "the sweet wind from Europe" (*Jane*, p. 289) juxtaposed with "fiery West-Indian night" (p. 288). Moreover, Rochester's creation of a binary of heaven and hell between England and West Indies is clearly suggestive of exotic manifestation of the colonized island: "This life... is hell: this is the air—those are the sounds of the bottomless pit! ... . The sufferings of this mortal state will leave me with the heavy flesh that now cumpers my soul. Of the fanatic's burning eternity I have no fear: there is not a future state worse than this present one—let me break away, and go home to God!" (p. 288).

Despite her sense of belonging nowhere due to the colonial legacy of English Empire even in her native land, Antoinette's identity is deeply attached to the people and the places in Coulibri and Granbois. Hers is a disjunctive identity torn between "white nigger" and "white cockroach" that the native and the European people call them respectively. Such limbo status of the Creoles has its roots to the European imperialism which left them belonging nowhere. The people in the colonies

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are always pictured as the others, “The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, ‘because she pretty like pretty self’” (*Wide*, p. 17). Neither was Antoinette ever accepted in the circle of the native people who believed them to be the white descendents. Antoinette’s vision of identifying herself with Tia, the native girl, embodies a significant identity crisis that she undergoes throughout her life. She tries to befriend Tia but only to receive a badge of non-belongingness on her forehead when her friend hurls a stone at her. However, her constant desire to belong to the place reflects in her dreams, for her third and the last dream ends with her invocation of none other than Tia: “I called ‘Tia!’ and jumped and woke” (p. 190). Spivak rightly postulates Tia as “the other that could not be selfed because the fracture of imperialism... intervened” (1989, p.250).

Nevertheless, Antoinette always feels at home in the lush island and sees her own image in the place as she does in her looking glass. She has developed an inherent relationship with the place as she asserts, “I love it more than anywhere in the world. As if it were a person. More than a person” (*Wide*, p. 89). She knows that she cannot feel at home in England which is just “like a cold dark dream” (p. 80) which she sees as a cardboard box later, figuratively suggesting her imprisonment. The island for her becomes a mirror image of her imaginary stage when, despite her misrecognition of her own image, she cherishes a deep longing for the body of her desire, i.e. her birthplace. She, however, is denied her authority upon her own land and property on account of her marital relationship with an Englishman who enters as a father figure in her life snatching her away from her own self—transformation from imaginary stage to the symbolic one. The former is related with her own image as a Creole girl in the lush island, and the latter with the imperialistic encroachment “othering” her self and identity.

Christophine also serves as a foil to Antoinette because she is also the absolute other that cannot be selfed. Like Antoinette, she is a non-native to Jamaica, so she feels never at home there. She becomes nostalgic for Martinique where she thinks she

belongs. She invokes a strong woman in Antoinette and encourages her to act like a bold woman. She challenges the imperial threats of her English master and declares that she is a free woman beyond the grasp of tentacles of his English laws: ““No police here,’ she said. ‘No chain gang, no tread machine, no dark jail either. This is free country and I am free woman”” (p. 160). She represents the indomitable spirit of a colonized citizen always identified as the other by colonizers.

An Englishman’s colonial mentality reveals itself when he manifests his predilection for naming Antoinette as Bertha. Through naming, he attempts to negotiate the identity of his wife as the other, the one that he can possess as an object. The process of naming dismantles an individual’s identity, especially when it is looked in the colonial context: “In the context of imperialist naming, this (mode of representation) can only lead to ethnocentric disdain or cultural despair” (Bhaba, 1995, p. 55). Antoinette feels badly “othered” when her husband calls her Bertha and disposes of her othering nomenclature at once as she retorts back, “My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?” (*Wide*, p. 135). Nomenclature thus becomes another strategy for consolidating power in the colonized territories. Antoinette’s native identity is transformed to serve the colonial desire represented by her English husband.

In this way, we can find both of these novels fraught with colonial underpinnings of identity though they seem to be apparently dealing with love, romance and marital relationships. As an inscription to *JE*, *WSS*, despite its imperial undertone, serves as a conscious literary effort to dismantle the “othered” image of the protagonist and arouse awareness about the imperialistic undercurrents existing in *JE*. Taken together, they help us better understand the historical reflection of the colonial consciousness underlying *JE* as a 19<sup>th</sup> century novel despite its appeal to romantic love and family bond at the sacrifice of a domestic angel in the house.

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