

CHOLERA AND SUTTEE IN *JANE EYRE*: A RECONSIDERATION OF POSTCOLONIAL-FEMINIST READINGS

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Introduction

Since the advent of the postcolonial school of criticism, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* has proved especially amenable to this kind of reading. Bertha, the Creole wife of Rochester from the West Indies, is the most outstanding of the numerous colonial images in the novel. Understandably the perception of her character has undergone a radical transformation as a result of postcolonial reading; the psychoanalytic feminists' view of her as "Jane's truest and darkest double" (Gilbert and Gubar 360) has been criticised by Carl Plasa. He takes Gilbert and Gubar to task for denying Bertha's racial identity, relegating her to the "status [of] an autonomous subject" (Plasa 80) thus reducing her to heroine's secret self.

Bertha's death leaves the reader with the uncomfortable impression that she has been conveniently banished in order to bring about the happy union of Jane and Rochester. Is she really victimised due to her native background to accomplish British middle-class woman's marriage? Laura Donaldson suggests that "no" is the answer to this question. Taking her point of departure from feminism and post-colonialism, she reads Bertha's death as an expression of positive will, suggesting that her suicide is "an act of resistance not only to her status as a woman in patriarchal culture but also as a colonized object" (Donaldson 30). Her view is valid in terms of recent critical trends and is useful in probing into the deeper stratum of the novel. This essay tries to reconsider both interpretations, psychoanalytic feminism

and postcolonialism: Bertha is neither the heroine's shadow nor a victim of Anglo-Saxon supremacism. This paper will show how she functions as a colonial allusion to support the feminist principles present in this novel. With this aim in view, this discussion will focus on two colonial images; cholera and suttee. So far, Bertha has been too easily defined as a "racial other" simply because she is an Creole. Susan Meyer explains Bertha's "racial otherness" as follows:

I read Bertha's odd ambiguity of race—ambiguity which is marked within the text itself, rather than one which needs to be mapped onto it—as directly related to her function as a representative dangers which threaten the world of the novel. She is the heiress to West Indian fortune, the daughter of a father who is a West Indian planter and merchant, and the sister of the yellow-skinned yet socially white Mr. Mason. She is also a woman whom the younger son of an aristocratic British family would consider marrying, and so she is clearly imagined as white [. . .]. But when she actually emerges in the course of the action, the narrative associates her with blacks, particularly with the black Jamaican antislavery rebels, the Maroons. In the form in which she becomes visible in the novel, Bertha has *become* black as she constructed by narrative [. . .]. (Mayer 151)

This essay, following Meyer's argument as well as others, defines Bertha as "racial other." However she is not racially an "other" by nature, the rhetoric of the novel makes her so. The present discussion will focus not on her background but on the colonial imagery which is associated with her. Images of cholera and suttee can illuminate the profound implications of Bertha's racial otherness.

Chapter 1. Cholera as a Symbol of Power

1-1: Jane in the Red Room and Bertha in the Attic

Victorian society polarised the image of women as either angels or

monsters. While they idealised woman as a sacred “angel in the house,” they also saw other aspects in woman which turned them into monsters. That Brontë was clearly antagonistic to these conventional ideas is made explicit in *Shirley* where such polarization is expressly condemned. Shirley complains to her friend Caroline:

“If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed; but the cleverest, the acutest men are often under an illusion about woman: they do not read them in a true light: they misapprehend them, both for good and evil: their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman almost always a fiend.” (*Shirley* 360)

What is important is that she says “men” cannot see women as they really are. In patriarchal society, it is men who can see and women are always objects to be seen. Men are the subject and women are the “other.” For men, women have been something either superior or inferior to human, but never been fully or simply human. Thus, a woman “must examine, assimilate and transcend the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors have generated for her” (Gilbert and Gubar 17) and redefine herself in order to recover her subjectivity and autonomy. In this essay, the term “true femininity” is used to describe female subjectivity which is freed from patriarchal stereotypes¹ and how Jane and Bertha recover it from men shall be considered.

Their process of the recovering of “true femininity” shall now be clarified. Bertha has already been robbed of this quality when she first appears in the novel and is depicted as a “beast”: Jane sees Bertha “[snatches] and [growls] like some strange animal” (250). It is Rochester who has made her such a beast as Elaine Showalter argues: “[m]uch of Bertha’s dehumanization, Rochester’s account makes clear, is the result of her confinement not its cause” (Showalter 121–2). It should be noted also that Jane and the readers never learn about Bertha’s nature before she becomes mad. Rochester is the only source

of information on this, but his estimation of her is so twisted and malicious that it is unreliable. He calls her in his recollection a “harlot” (262), “a monster” (264), an “Indian Messalina” (265) and every other infamous title reserved for a woman who has deviated from the feminine ideal. Thus, Rochester, who is a man and a patriarch, robs Bertha of her true femininity and redefines her as a beast.

Similarly, Jane is also denied her true femininity. She experiences it in the red room. According to Showalter, the ten-year-old Jane is aware of “the ‘animal’ aspects of her being—her body, with its unfeminine needs and appetites, and her passions, especially rage” (Showalter 114). Consequently, Jane is confined in the red room and punished for her “unfemininity.” Her true feminine nature is denied through confinement and John, the young patriarch of the Reeds, calls her a “bad animal” (7) and “a mad cat” (22) in order to force upon her the image of a deviant woman as a beast, mad and evil.

A significant point to be noted here is that Jane identifies herself with the racial other.² She calls herself “a heterogeneous thing” (12) in the Reed family and “an interloper not of her [Mrs. Reed’s] race” (13). Brontë compares Jane to Bertha not only as a woman sharing the same oppression and rage but also as a racial other. Bertha seems not just a double of Jane, heroine’s dark secret self which should be ultimately banished.

1–2: Bertha and Cholera

This discussion has argued that Jane in the red room can be identified with Bertha. However, it must be noted that Rochester declares them to be completely dissimilar:

“That is *my wife*,” said he. “Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know—such are the endearments which are to solace my leisure hours! And *this* is what I wished to have” (laying his hand on my shoulder): “this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a

demon, I wanted her just as a change after that fierce ragout. Wood and Briggs, look at the difference! Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder—this face with that mask?this form with that bulk; [. . .].” (251)

Why does Jane, who once defined herself as “the other” in terms of both race and gender, become so different from Bertha? To answer this question, it will be very helpful to focus on a particular aspect of the historical backdrop to that time: the cholera epidemic.

The expansion of the European colonies has spread the Indian endemic disease cholera worldwide. It continued to be raging in Britain throughout the 19th century. It appears very likely that Charlotte Brontë was aware of cholera symptoms due to the fact that she had lost a number of her acquaintances to this disease and, furthermore, wrote about the cholera epidemic in Yorkshire in one of her letters.³

There is no explicit reference to cholera in *Jane Eyre*, but Bertha’s appearance coincides with those of cholera patients in symptomatic terms. Dr. Thomas Shapter wrote in his *The History of the Cholera in Exeter in 1832* that cholera patients have “the purple contracted lip; the sunken eye, sharp, wild, and terrified stare” and their “countenance [becomes] dusky,” “the skin [assumes] a shrunk, purplish, or leaden hue.” Also, they sometimes have “a general nervous agitation and uneasiness, attended by an excitement and irritability of mind, amounting at times to incoherency, supervened” (Shapter 210–1). These characteristics can be seen in the depiction of Bertha. Jane explains to Rochester how she looks.

“Fearful and ghastly to me—oh, sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discoloured 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!”

“Ghosts are usually pale, Jane.”

“This, sir, was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow

furrowed: the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes. Shall I tell you of what it reminded me?"

"You may."

"Of the foul German spectre—the Vampyre." (242)

A purple countenance, bloodshot eyes and evidence of mental disorder such as nervous agitation and wildness are typical symptoms of cholera. A relevant fact in this connection is that Victorians sometimes believed that cholera was a retribution for intemperance (Miichi 241). This commonly held view can be linked to Rochester's mention of Bertha's propensities: he says that she is "at once intemperate and unchaste" and "her excesses [have] prematurely developed the germs of insanity" (261). Also, Bertha's association with the Vampyre is very significant because many cultural-anthropologists say that this creature can be an allegorical figure of the plague. Legends of Vampyres originate from people's terror of infectious diseases such as the Black Death, cholera and rabies. Although Plasa states that Jane's reference to the German spectre Vampyre is "a Eurocentric association" (Plasa 91), there is arguably the context of the epidemic behind it.

It is perhaps not too much to say that the close association of Bertha with cholera suggests the true nature of her madness: she is rebelling not so much against patriarchy as against imperialism. For Europeans, cholera was felt to be far more terrible than other infectious diseases such as typhus or smallpox because epidemic was one that had come from the colonies. Susan Sontag analyses Europeans' fear of the disease:

At the end of *Crime and Punishment* Raskolnikov dreams of plague: [. . .]. Dostoevsky's model is undoubtedly cholera, called Asiatic cholera, long endemic in Bengal, which had rapidly become and remained through most of the nineteenth century a worldwide epidemic disease. Part of the centuries-old conception of Europe as a privileged cultural entity is that it is a place which

is colonized by lethal disease coming from elsewhere. Europe is assumed to be by rights free of disease. [. . .]. The tenacity of the connection of exotic origin with dreaded disease is one reason why cholera, of which there were four great outbreaks in Europe in nineteenth century, each with a lower death toll than the preceding one, has continued to be more memorable than smallpox, whose ravages increased as the century went on [. . .] but which could not be construed as, plague-like, a disease with a non-European origin. (Sontag 137–8)

British people considered cholera to be a form of retaliation emanating from the colonies. It was seen as a metaphor of the power of rebellion against unjust oppression. Brontë parallels the revolt of the slave in colonized countries against a suzerain with a female defiance of male domination. Bertha's rebellion, which is implied in her choleraic feature is directly linked to Jane in the red room, who defines herself as a "rebel slave" (9).

The process of Jane's deracialization is also shown through the metaphor of infection. It is not cholera but the typhus epidemic that she experiences at Lowood, but the situation of the school within "the cradle of fog and fog-bred pestilence" (64) and "[t]he unhealthy nature of the site; the quantity and quality of children's food; the brackish, fetid water used in its preparation" (70) may have evoked the colonial images in the minds of readers at that time. This is because, from the latter half of the 18th century, people believed that plague broke out from damp, fetidness, miasma and they often metaphorically paralleled such filthy conditions, which engender unhealthy air, with Eastern colonies. There were preconceived formula of "East = damp = disease" in the minds of Victorian people, so sanitarians insisted on the importance of marsh reclamation and waterworks improvement to stop the cholera epidemic. Simultaneously, "cleanliness" became a virtue for the British people. The notion of "cleanliness" was thought to distinguish the civilized from the savage. Therefore, the sanitary revolution can be connected to British imperialism, which tried to

exclude “Eastern filthiness” from “British cleanliness.”

Lowood undergoes an improvement as a result of the epidemic. That is, the school changes to a cultural/European locality as distinct from the savage East. At the same time, Jane as a “racial other” is also reformed into an English lady. Bessie, who visits Lowood to see Jane, says “[Y]ou are genteel enough; you look like a lady [. . .].” (78) when she learns that Jane has achieved proficiency in accomplishments such as music, painting and needlework. However, this comes at a price; Jane loses her impetuous power of revolt. She recovers it again when she meets Bertha in Thornfield.

Chapter 2. The Fire of Suttee

When Jane sees Bertha’s face, she loses consciousness; this is, she says, “the second time” in her life when she has become “insensible from terror” (242), the first being when she was locked up in the red room. After she confronts Bertha in the attic, she dreams of the red room.

That night I never thought to sleep; but a slumber fell on me as soon as I lay down in bed. I was transported in thought to the scenes of childhood: I dreamt I lay in the red-room at Gateshead; that the night was dark, and my mind impressed with strange fears. The light that long ago had struck me into syncope, recalled in this vision, seemed glidingly to mount the wall, and tremblingly to pause in the centre of the obscured ceiling. (272)

Jane’s re-experiencing of her confinement suggests that Bertha awakens Jane’s “racial otherness” which she first realised in the red room. Also, Jane comes to see the otherness in herself in the morning of her wedding day. When she sees her reflection in the mirror with her wedding costume, she thinks that the figure is “so unlike [her] usual self that seems almost the image of a stranger” (244). She cannot identify herself with her own figure in the mirror because she

feels discomfort at being involved in the patriarchal system through marriage. Marriage is a kind of “sanitalization”; the removal of rebellious racial otherness to become a “respectable” English lady. That is, marriage is one of the process of “deracialization” where woman is deprived of the power of revolt and is transformed into an angelic ideal. Jane hesitates to throw away the self as a rebel slave to become a meek English lady.

Now Jane, who is aware of her own racial otherness, no longer sees Bertha as a hateful object and sympathises with her. She says to Rochester, “[Y]ou are inexorable for that unfortunate lady: you speak of her with hate—with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel—she cannot help being mad” (257). She understands that Bertha’s dehumanization is not the cause but the result of her confinement: that is, she knows that Bertha is, like herself, a victim of the patriarchal structure. By identifying with Bertha, Jane regains her autonomy and self as a rebel slave. Then she revolts against Rochester; refuses to become his mistress and flies from Thornfield.

Thus, Bertha awakens Jane’s rebellious self as a “racial other” and helps her recover the power of autonomy. However, then, one can ask why the mad woman must die. The significance of Bertha’s death will become understandable if it is considered as part of the concerted female effort for retrieving true femininity from male control. This process is represented through the image of fire.

As a metaphoric creature, Bertha is strongly connected to fire: she sets fire on Rochester’s bed and burns down Thornfield Hall. The image of fire is especially important in considering her death because it is deeply involved with her racial otherness. Could it be a ritual immolation of the wife on the funeral pile of her husband’s body, an act of “suttee”?⁴ We should note that it can be interpreted as a form of protest against patriarchal imperialism.

Jane refers to this Indian custom as she says to Rochester “I should bide that time [to death], and not be hurried away in a suttee” (233). It is safe to say that Brontë had interest in and knowledge of suttee, and she may well have been concerned with it when she

depicted Bertha's death. Significantly, Brontë wrote an essay on suttee in French when she was studying in Belgium.⁵ In this essay, the narrator observes the ritual of suttee and describes its details in a lively way. Above all, the depiction of the widow is very striking because she is represented as a strong-willed woman. She "[advances] toward the pyre with a firm step" ("*Belgian Essay*" 4). Her face is pale but "still resolute" ("*Belgian Essay*" 4) and narrator sees in her gaze "an agonizing struggle between bodily weakness and spiritual power" ("*Belgian Essay*" 6). Although the widow is described as an "unhappy woman" ("*Belgian Essay*" 6), Brontë represents her mind is strong and powerful. This was an unusual view in the 19th century, as contemporary feminists had a common idea that suttee was a symbol of the weakness of Eastern women who had to subject themselves slavishly to a patriarchy. However, Brontë rewrites the meaning of suttee through her presentation of Bertha. Bertha's fire functions not to end her life but to destroy patriarchal power. She revenges herself on a patriarchy which has imposed a distorted feminine image on her by burning Rochester and his property, Thornfield Hall, the embodiment of his power as a patriarch. At the same time, she tries to invalidate the image of woman as a "beast" by erasing her own dehumanized figure.

Another reason why Bertha's death is an act of autonomous protest is the method of her suicide. She does not burn herself as is the case with suttee, but rather jumps from the rooftop of Thornfield Hall. Barbara Gates offers an analysis on a female suicide by jumping. She notes that jumping is to fly, although it is momentary, and that is an act of self-assertion (Gates 254). Bertha is "standing, waving her arms" and her long hair is "streaming against the flames" (365) before she jumps. Her arms and hair look like wings. They symbolise the will and the power to fly from patriarchal constraint. Moreover, her wings make an ironic contrast to the wings of the "angel in the house." Bertha kills herself by jumping to prove that she is an autonomous woman. Thus, by radically subverting the meaning of suttee as a symbol of woman's obedience, Brontë not only has rebelled against patriarchy but also has shown the autonomous power of a woman from

a different race who was thought to be silenced and weak.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed Bertha's function in *Jane Eyre*, focusing particularly on the colonial implications of this character. Firstly, we have pointed out the similarity between Bertha's features and the symptoms of cholera. This can be linked to a counter-colonial phobia deeply rooted in the psychology of Victorians. They feared cholera as an act of vengeance emerging from the colonies; in the colonial context, the disease can be a metaphor for rebellion. Bertha's choleric features signify her resistance to patriarchal control. Furthermore, Jane, when imprisoned in the red room, is a victim of patriarchal oppression and depicted as a "racial other" like Bertha. Although she is deracialized at Lowood and becomes a lady, Bertha awakens to aggressive self-assertion as if to compensate for this taming of the heroine in Thornfield.

Secondly, we have tried to put forward the case that Bertha's death can be seen as an act of autonomous suttee. Bertha is often associated with the image of fire so the reader can easily connect her suicide with suttee. Suttee was commonly thought as a symbol of the weakness of Eastern women, but Brontë overturns this idea. Bertha's fire destroys patriarchal power and rescinds the beast-like image imposed on any woman who deviates from the Victorian norm of femininity. Bertha's suttee is the act of protest against patriarchy.

Thus, Brontë skilfully represents woman's self-assertiveness in the image of racial other. She uses it in order to uncover the rebellious female self lurking under a mask of meek, gentleness which was thought to be appropriate for a British woman. Bertha, who awakens Jane's racial otherness, is not just a heroine's double.

Former studies tend to conclude that Bertha as a victim: both feminists and postcolonialists consider her as a poor scapegoat who is banished from the story. However, the images which have been analysed in this essay, cholera and suttee, revise the idea of Jane's

relation to Bertha and present a new possibility for a postcolonial-feminism reading of this novel.

NOTES

- ¹ In her *Alternative Femininity*, Samantha Holland calls patriarchal assumption of woman as “traditional femininity” and insists that woman should create “alternative” femininity by herself. This essay is basically agree with her but we use the word “true femininity” to emphasise that Jane and Bertha resists the “false” femininity which is made by the patriarchy.
- ² Carl Plasa also points the reference of Jane’s racial otherness; “the division between oppressor and oppressed, the Reeds and Jane are indeed mapped in terms of racial difference.”
- ³ Refer to Brontë’s letters of August 23, 1849 and June 4, 1850.
- ⁴ Suvendrini Perera analyses the image of suttee in *Jane Eyre* more intimately. Also Peter Childs and Laura Donaldson refers this matter.
- ⁵ See *The Belgian Essays: Charlotte and Emily Brontë*. ed. and trans. by Sue Lonoff. New Haven: Yale UP, 1996.

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