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GIVING VOICE TO A VICTORIAN MUTED CHARACTER: JEAN RHYS'S *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between the center and the periphery has always been a significant issue in the world of literature. The aim of postcolonial writing in identifying this relationship has provided a great number of works by various writers. Jean Rhys is among the writers to fulfill one of the functions of literary writing which is to give voice to the silenced. Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* illustrates the voice of the muted Victorian character; Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. The dominant patriarchal discourse that victimizes the female character is represented in Bronte's novel. However, Rhys subverts this discourse through revealing the effects of slavery, social position of women and their struggle against the patriarchal system. The image of passive 'mad woman in the attic' is transformed into a woman who talks about the inequalities and the unseen behind the surface. Therefore, in this study Rhys's novel is analyzed to reflect how the text displays the binary relation between the colonizers and the colonized.

Keywords: Post-Colonial Writing, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Jane Eyre*, Colonizers and The Colonized as Binaries.

VİKTORYA DÖNEMİ EDEBİYATI'NDAKİ KARAKTERLERE SES VERMEK: JEAN RHYS'İN *WIDE SARGOSSA SEA* ROMANI

ÖZET

Edebiyat dünyasında merkez ve merkezin dışında kalan arasındaki ilişki her zaman önemli bir konu olmuştur. Bu ilişkiyi yansıtmayı hedefleyen sömürge sonrası yazın, çeşitli yazarların ürettiği bir çok eserin ortaya çıkmasını sağlamıştır.

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Jean Rhys da susturulmuş olanlara ses vermek amacıyla yazan yazarlar arasında yer almaktadır. Rhys'ın *Wide Sargasso Sea* adlı eseri susturulmuş bir *Vicktorya* dönemi karakterinin sesi olma özelliği taşır, ki by karakter Bronte'nin *Jane Eyre*'dir. Bronte'nin romanında kadın karakteri kurbanlaştıran baskın ataerkil söylem yansıtılmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, Rhys romanında bu söylemi köleliğin, kadınların sosyal pozisyonlarının ve onların bununla mücadelelerinin etkilerini yansıtarak ters yüz eder. Pasif olan 'çatıdaki aklını yitirmiş kadın' imajı eşitsizliklerle ve görünenin altında saklanan şeylerle ilgili konuşan bir kadın imajına dönüşmüştür. Dolayısıyla, bu çalışmada Rhys'ın romanı sömürgeci ve sömürülen arasındaki ikili karşıtlık ilişkisini nasıl yansıttığı incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sömürge Sonrası Yazın, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Jane Eyre*, İkili Karşıtlık Olarak Sömürgeci ve Sömürülen.

Introduction

Wide Sargasso Sea, written to demonstrate the 'other side' of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, is a great work by Jean Rhys which has an ultimate aim in illuminating and questioning the concepts of colonization, imperialism, patriarchy and slavery. Rhys's *Bertha* (*Antoinette*) is given a voice unlike Bronte's character who is the muted Creole. Moreover, Rhys aims at overthrowing the assumptions imposed by the Victorian text. The writer emphasizes this belief of her by making *Antoinette* utter these words; "[t]here is always the other side, always" (81). Rhys applies the principles and techniques of post-colonial writing in this novel in order to deal with these issues. The definition of post-colonial literature suggested by Mishra and Hodge mirrors Rhys's way of writing this novel. As the critics state, post-colonial literature "foregrounds a politics of opposition and struggle, and problematizes the key relationship between the centre and periphery" (276).

In addition to this, the "barriers around 'English literature' that protected the primacy of the canon and the self-evidence of its standards" are destabilized by means of post-colonial writing (Mishra and Hodge 276). Therefore, Rhys's intention in writing the novel becomes obvious which is to challenge to the canon and with the application of these principles Rhys's novel is taken as a re-writing and subversion of the dominant European discourse.

Spivak declares that it is not possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without keeping in mind that imperialism, "understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English" (1). Taking this belief as a starting point; Rhys fulfils a rebellious approach to the colonial way of European discourse.

Geentry also underlines this kind of post-colonial writing by reporting that “there is a common practice in literature emerging from the shadow of colonialism to ‘write back’ against a white literary canon. In the case of *Wide Sargasso Sea* there is also writing back against a master narrative that is both racial and patriarchal” (qtd. in Geentry 2). Thus, the novel, as a re-telling of a *Jane Eyre* from a different point of view, is “an extension of the deconstructive project of exploring the silences and omissions within a text” (Geentry 2). By giving a voice to the silenced Bertha of *Jane Eyre*, Rhys seeks to avoid the suppression of the patriarchal domination in her work.

I.

In the novel *Jane Eyre*, as a Creole, explores the problematic relationship between the white colonizers and the black colonized in the West Indies. Since the actions take place after the Emancipation Act, the atmosphere is not only problematic because of the struggle between the two poles (colonizers and colonized) but also chaotic because of the class struggle reinforced by the inappropriate application of the emancipation act. Frickey remarks this as follows:

The work recreates the turbulent years following emancipation, the heated passions born from newly acquired freedom, and the nightmarish landscape infused with magic in which the pair are suddenly cast as lovers. It is about the struggle involved in the reconciliation of opposites when the opposites are two young people, curious about each other, and under the spell of the tropics (8).

As postcolonial theory of criticism suggests, the postcolonial writer creates a new discourse by means of confronting the hierarchical binaries such as center-margin, master-slave, self-other, civilized-savage (Ball 3). Rhys discloses these binary oppositions in the novel by deconstructing the patriarchal literary text. The relationship between Annette and Mr. Mason, between Antoinette and Edward illustrate this kind of approach. Mr. Mason and Edward hold the position of the center, master, self and the civilized whereas Annette and Antoinette are exposed to fulfill their existence within the restrictions of the margin, slave (of their husbands’ will), other and the savage. Thus, as Gregg states, “the text underscores the crucially different formation of the Englishman and the West Indian woman” (qtd. in Frickey 158).

Annette as a passive character cannot act according to her own will. She is considered just as a sexual object for her husband. He is attracted by her but this feeling of attraction is not accompanied with love.

She is a voiceless character who is victimized by the patriarchal attitude of her husband. Their relationship seems to be the result of the power which is in the monopoly of Mr. Mason. As suggested by Jenkins patriarchy suggests a notion that “women are always what men are not” (164). Thus, their marriage represents the binary opposition of the powerful and the powerless. Annette’s position as a wife is pre-determined by his husband’s colonizing approach. Since Mason is the colonizer, Annette cannot escape from being a colonized under her husband’s domination as a result of Mason’s patriarchy.

II.

As for Antoinette she cannot manage to fully realize her own identity as a woman in her marriage unless she manages Edward’s house at the end of the novel. Her marriage is like her mother’s in the sense that it does not involve a love relationship in it. Just like Mr. Mason, Edward sees the marriage as a means not an end. Moreover, Edward imposes his wife a multiple identity by means of re-naming her with various names. This also signifies the oppressive domination of the patriarchal system over the colonized. Edward, as a new colonizer, tries to compose an illusion that he has the right to create his wife an identity according to his own will. When Antoinette asks his aim in calling her as Bertha, he replies, “because it is a name I am particularly fond of. I think you as Bertha” (Rhys 86). This answer of him implies his consideration that it is his understanding of her which is important rather than what Antoinette thinks herself as a separate self. As Jenkins states, “Bertha/Antoinette is triply other: she is mad, female and mulatto colonial subject” (164). Therefore, in doing this, he not only reinforces Antoinette’s displacement as a white Creole but also he exposes her into a chaotic world of multiple identities. This enslavement of Antoinette results in her madness and zombie-like existence. As Aizenberg emphasizes, “[b]elonging completely neither to the white world, her birthright, nor to the black world, close to her through her friend Tia and her beloved nurse Cristophine, Antoinette suffers further zombification” and the critic adds, “[t]o gain control over her - as masters gained control over slaves - Rochester ‘zombifies’ Antoinette” (5). Moreover, one of the imposing approaches of the colonial system is the economic domination. Edward’s aim in getting married to Antoinette is having the wealth of her since according the English law it is the husband’s right to get everything that his wife has. Therefore, Edward as a part of this system plays his role as a colonizer by confiscating Antoinette heir. Both Annette and Antoinette are the victims of the colonial and patriarchal considerations of their husbands.

Although they seem to be the ones who are sharing a life with their husbands, indeed, they are just the means within their partners' own lives. In other words they are the ones what their husband's are not as mentioned in the novel.

III.

Besides these oppositional relations and the struggling features of the marriages, Rhys also provides the reader with the voice of the unheard by means of Antoinette and Christophine. The novel begins with the burning of Antoinette's home by the ex-slaves, the ensuing madness of her mother, and the death of her child-brother. It ends with Antoinette's imprisonment in Rochester's tower in England on which she sets fire. As James points, "Fire is the ambivalent symbol of both destruction and passion...the mature Antoinette rebels against the life-denying imprisonment of the English Rochester, and asserts her human need for colour, for passion, for love" (qtd. in Frickey 126). In addition to this, Gregg adds another dimension to the symbolism of fire and the aim of it in the novel and claims that fire "as an instrument of liberation is what frees her from the distorted mirror image of Bertha, the madwoman in the attic. When she cauterizes by fire the imposed identity, she thereby creates her own" (qtd. in Frickey 164). Therefore, Rhys uses fire symbolically in order to reflect her aim in writing the novel which is to destroy the domination of the colonizer's discourse. The aim of the 'fire' is deconstructed in her novel. Although in Bronte's novel the fire is the result of the helplessness of the victimized, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* it implies the burning of the colonial values resulting in the beginning of a new atmosphere in which the colonized makes her voice heard and unmasks the colonizer in the end.

In addition to this, Rhys portrays Christophine as a crucial character in the novel. She can be considered as the one and the only character who does not suffer from the oppressive colonial power. She is a determined character and she represents the 'free will'. She explicitly tells this to Edward in stating that Coulibri "is the free country and I am a free woman" (Rhys 104). It is her own choice to stay at the house of Antoinette's and go on her duty as a nurse. Although the aim of the colonial power is to make the local people feel as Other, it fails in this aim towards Christophine. As Spivak declares, "she is the first interpreter and named speaking subject in the text", since in the novel's opening paragraph she explicitly reflects her own idea about why Annette is not being loved by the Jamaican ladies. Spivak adds "[i]t is Christophine who judges that black ritual practices are culture-specific and cannot be used by whites as cheap remedies for social evils, such as Rochester's lack of love for Antoinette"(6).

As it is emphasized by the critic, Christophine is the voice of the colonized and she fulfils this position at the most rebellious way.

She not only proves that she can create her own identity far from the effects of colonial system but she also stands against the patriarchal domination. This quality of her can be observed when she severely and courageously criticizes Edward for his unfair and wicked attitude towards Antoinette. Without paying attention to the imposed hierarchical status, she expresses her ideas openly which makes Edward afraid. She attacks Edward as;

She is Creole girl, and she have the sun in her. Tell the truth now. She don't come to your house in this place England they tell me about, she don't come to your beautiful house to beg you to marry her. No, it's you come all the long way to her house—it's you beg her to marry. And she love you and she give you all she have. Now you say you don't love her and you break her up. What you do with her money, eh? (130).

Then Edward comments silently to himself as “her voice was still quiet but with a hiss in it when she ‘money’” (Rhys 130). As Spivak suggests, Christophine’s criticism is powerful enough for him to be afraid since he expresses that he feels “dazed, tired, alert and wary” (6). Thus, Rhys emphasizes and dwells on the colonized as a reaction to the dominant European discourse in depicting such a character as Christophine. Moreover, this relationship between Edward and Christophine represents the interest of the post-colonial text in the oppositional relation between the imperial and the colonized formed by the imperial.

Conclusion

As a result, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an intertextual and deconstructive novel revealing the conflicts between the colonizers and the colonized. Rhys’s way of representing this subversiveness is of great importance since her way of writing is that of authentic and rebellious at the same time. She reflects a kind of world in which everything is in a problematic and unsettled situation. Antoinette’s multiple identity and her struggle over her husband, who represents a patriarchal domination, are Rhys’s main interest in deconstructing Brontë’s *Bertha*. Aizenberg points to this issue as, “Crucially, *Wide Sargasso Sea* it is a white Creole woman who represents the figure of the colonized double. In other words, Rhys’s novel exhibits the displacement that turns white women into hybrid zombies that makes in-betweenness” (5). However, Rhys also deals with the cry of the colonized by means of Christophine and Antoinette in the end of the novel.

Thus, she clearly displays her aim in destructing the patriarchal and imperial power imposed on the colonized in the novel. The silenced blacks and the hybrid white Creoles, who are forced to lost their ethnic identities and social existences in the colonial world, are presented vividly in her novel. By means of this presentation, Rhys underlines her denial of the monocentric approach of the domineering colonialists. Moreover, through providing a post-colonial discourse for her characters the novelist tries to reveal what is hidden in that of the colonial.

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