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Jane Eyre, a Critique of Imperialism?

Relatrice
Prof. Alessandra Petrina

Laureanda
Aurora Angione
n° matr.1194504 / LTLLM

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FOREWORD

Jane Eyre is one of the most celebrated female *Bildungsromans* in English literature. Immediately after its first publication in 1847, Charlotte Brontë's masterpiece became a huge success, and it still continues to be so to this day. Written in the first person, the story revolves around the development and growth of its central female character, Jane. Her quest for identity, personal freedom and equality, her assertion of not only physical but also emotional and intellectual hunger, and her defiance of authority lie at the heart of the novel.

Although the novel does not explicitly engage with nineteenth century British imperialism, it was written during a time when the British Empire was at its zenith. Therefore, contemporary readers of *Jane Eyre* might wonder to which extent Charlotte Brontë's novel was influenced and permeated by imperialist ideology. This thesis aims to investigate the connection between *Jane Eyre* and British imperialism and attempts to clarify the novel's outlook on the British imperial mission. However, this work does not claim to provide a clear-cut answer to the question it poses, that is whether *Jane Eyre* could be considered a critique of imperialism. But it certainly endeavours to highlight the ambiguities and the contradictions that emerge from a nineteenth century text that celebrates the empowerment of a white, middle-class Englishwoman, yet relegates her figuratively black, wealthy, West Indian counterpart in an attic.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter focuses on the interconnection between the novel and nineteenth century British imperial ventures in the West Indies and in the East Indies. This chapter also aims to demonstrate how colonial wealth, acquired through the slave trade, was far from irrelevant to the development of nineteenth century England and how its influence is pivotal the development of the plot and of the main characters in *Jane Eyre*.

The second chapter investigates the complex figurative strategy employed by the novel and the novel's figurative treatment of other cultures and races. This chapter intends to explain how *Jane Eyre's* central figurative strategy could be understood as a critique of British imperialism. At the same time, however, the chapter shows how *Jane Eyre's* figurative strategy exposes the novel's fierce imperialistic and Anglocentric viewpoint. In the second chapter, an entire section is dedicated to the analysis of the problematic figurative representation of Bertha Mason and its relation to nineteenth century British abolitionist discourse.

The last chapter analyses the figures of Bertha Mason and Rochester from the perspective of *Jane Eyre's* post-colonial rewriting, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This chapter investigates Rhys's insight into the workings of British imperialism and its connection with patriarchy. In fact, this chapter underlines that *Wide Sargasso Sea* rejects *Jane Eyre's* binary racial distinctions, exposes Englishness as fiction, and reveals that racial identity is grounded more on money and social class than on blood.

CHAPTER 1 - The West Indian Background of *Jane Eyre*

1.1 - Slavery and Colonial Wealth

Although *Jane Eyre* does not contain any specific time indication, Susan Meyer argues that Charlotte Brontë may have meant for the main events¹ of the novel to occur in the 1820s and 1830s. If we assume that Jane ends her autobiography in 1846, thus when Charlotte Brontë began authoring her novel, and we bear in mind that *Jane Eyre* has been married to Edward Rochester for ten years, as Jane herself reveals at the end of the novel, then their marriage takes place no later than 1836. The year before their marriage, Rochester tells Jane that he has kept his wife, Bertha Mason, locked in his third storey-room for ten years. Since Bertha and Rochester lived together in Jamaica for four years before returning to England, then, at the latest, they would have been married in 1821.²

Sue Thomas adds an important contribution to the definition of *Jane Eyre*'s internal chronology. On the fifth of November, St. John Rivers visits Jane and brings her a book, a copy of Walter Scott's poem, *Marmion*. *Marmion* was first published in 1808, but since Jane does not describe the book as a new poem, but rather as a "new publication- a poem",³ Brontë may have alluded to a new edition of the poem, which was issued between the end of October and the beginning of November 1833.⁴ In addition to this element, other circumstances in the novel seem to support Thomas' dating, or at least to deny the

¹ I identify as the main events of the novel the following episodes: Jane's confinement in the red room at Gateshead, Jane's arrival at Thornfield Hall and her first encounter with Edward Rochester, Jane's acquaintance with Rochester's aristocratic guests, in particular with Blanche Ingram, Jane and Rochester's betrothal and failed marriage, Jane's encounter with Bertha Mason, St. John River's marriage proposal and Jane's subsequent refusal, Jane's discovery of her inheritance and kinship with the Rivers, Jane's reunion with Rochester in Ferndean.

² Meyer, Susan, *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996, p. 70.

³ Brontë, Charlotte, *Jane Eyre*, edited by Stevie Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2006, Davis, p. 427. This is the edition I use throughout.

⁴ Thomas, Sue, *Imperialism, Reform and the Making of Englishness in Jane Eyre*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 10.

possibility that St. John gives Jane a copy of *Marmion* in 1808. The day Jane arrives at Thornfield, roughly a year before the exchange involving Scott's poem, she has a conversation with Adèle Varéns, Rochester's ward, who has lived in Thornfield for six months. The girl tells Jane that Sophie, her nurse, "came with me over the sea in a great ship with a chimney that smoked" (Brontë, 120). Since "the first steam ship to cross the English Channel sailed in 1816" (Brontë, 556), Adèle could certainly not have reached England on a steam ship before that date. Four weeks prior to Jane and Rochester's attempted marriage, Jane employs an expression, "a blue-piled thunderloft" (Brontë, 302), which she "once saw styled" (Brontë, 302), in order to describe her future husband's brooding mood. Charlotte Brontë was fascinated by this expression, which she read in Thomas Aird's "The Demoniac" (Brontë, 574), in *Blackwood Edinburgh Magazine*, XXVIII, p. 803, which was issued in 1830 (Brontë, 574). According to this dating, Jane could have read this expression only at some point after the year 1830, presumably while she was at Lowood School. So, if we assume that St. John gives Jane the new edition of *Marmion* on the fifth of November 1833, then the broken engagement between Jane and Rochester must be placed in the year 1833, too. This means that Jane arrives at Thornfield Hall in 1832, that she and Rochester reunite in 1834, while Rochester and Bertha married in 1819.⁵

By placing the main events of the novel in this timeframe, Meyer and Thomas single out the existence of a connection between the novel and British colonial relations to the West Indies⁶ in the nineteenth century. In the novel, the only explicit link to the West

⁵ Thomas, p. 11.

⁶ There is a distinction between the terms 'West Indies' and 'Caribbean'. The former is more restrictive than the latter, as it refers only to the Greater and Lesser Antilles. In addition, there is disagreement as to whether the Bahamas and the Dutch islands west of Trinidad should be considered part of the West Indies. The Caribbean region instead consists of the arcuate archipelago of islands that stretches from the Yucatán and Florida peninsulas southeast to Venezuela. It is composed of a group of larger islands in the north, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Hispaniola, called Greater Antilles, and of smaller islands to the south and east, the Lesser Antilles. The term 'Caribbean' derives from the population, the Caribs, who inhabited the Lesser Antilles when the first Europeans arrived. The Greater Antilles were instead populated by the Arawaks. Richardson, Bonham C., *The Caribbean in the Wider World, 1492-1992: A Regional Geography*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 1992, p. 6.

Indies is represented by the character of Bertha Mason, Rochester's mad Jamaican wife, whose existence is hidden from the world, since she is imprisoned in Rochester's attic. Meyer and Thomas read the figure of Bertha in different ways. I propose to dedicate a section to Bertha in chapter 2. Meyer identifies Bertha with the Maroons, the rebel slaves, whereas Thomas argues that Bertha represents the Creole ruling class in the British West Indies and its moral corruption. Even though Meyer and Thomas' interpretations of Bertha diverge, they both relate Bertha's captivity and death in the novel to a specific historical moment in British West Indian history, which has to be placed before emancipation, occurring in 1838, but after or, in the case of Thomas' analyses, in the same year as the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies. In order to understand to which extent England's colonial relations to the British West Indies could have influenced the writing of *Jane Eyre*, I deem it necessary to give a brief account of the role slavery played in the British West Indies and how it affected Britain.

Slavery was not introduced in the West Indies by the English; it began with the arrival of Christopher Columbus and his men.⁷ Columbus soon realized that the real richness of the West Indies consisted in their native population. Thus, on his way back from his third voyage he took with him 600 Indians. The slave trade in the Caribbean began as an outward, not an inward cargo. However, the monarchs of Spain, on behalf of whom Columbus had claimed possession of the New World, ordained that the Indians who would submit to the Spanish sovereignty were to be treated as free men and employed for wages. Slavery was instead to await those who chose resistance. However, it soon became evident that the Indians, whose number was drastically decreasing, were not enough to satisfy the demand for labour. For this reason, the Spanish government

⁷ Williams, Eric, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, New York: Random House, 1984, p. 18.

resorted to white labour. But as the demand for labour increased, the Spanish Crown concluded that the most practical solution was to import black slaves.⁸

In the sixteenth century, Spain's chief rivals, England and France, joined later by Holland, attempted to weaken Spain's power with piracy, buccaneering, contraband trade and by establishing colonies of their own in the New World.⁹ The motives at the heart of the colonization of the West Indian territories included also the need for tropical commodities and the prospect of enlarging the market for English products.¹⁰ The British, French and Dutch colonies, profiting from the experience of the Spaniards, invested their energy and resources in the production of sugar. The substitution of sugar for tobacco marked the beginning of a new order.¹¹ Eric Williams argues that "sugar occupied the place in the 18th century economy that steel occupied in the 19th century and oil in the 20th".¹² Owing to the spread of tea and coffee, which were no longer a luxury, sugar became a necessary commodity in Europe.¹³ And the West Indies were its most important producer.¹⁴ If sugar was essential to Europe, black slavery was essential to the sugar plantations. As a matter of fact, the acquisition of black slaves went hand in hand with the development of the sugar industry in the Caribbean.¹⁵ Slavery thrived where sugar was the main crop and this was especially the case of the British West Indies.¹⁶ The British and the French immediately realized that the natives were not enough to satisfy their need for labour, so instead of being enslaved, the Indians were decimated or expelled.¹⁷ Like the Spaniards before them, the British and the French turned first to white

⁸ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, pp. 32-41.

⁹ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, pp. 75-8.

¹⁰ Sires, Ronald V., "Government in the British West Indies: An Historical Outline", *Social and Economic Studies*, 6 (1957), pp. 109-32, p. 109.

¹¹ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, p. 114.

¹² Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, p. 121.

¹³ Williams Eric, *Capitalism & Slavery*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994. p. 73.

¹⁴ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, p. 121.

¹⁵ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, p. 136.

¹⁶ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, p. 109.

¹⁷ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, pp. 95-6.

labour. Eventually, white labour proved to be inadequate and expensive to serve the needs of the planters. Black slaves, on the other hand, satisfied all requirements. They were cheap and available in abundance.¹⁸

Black slaves were imported *en masse* into the Caribbean through the slave trade. The slave trade was part of a broader system known as triangular trade, which consisted of three sides and involved three continents, Europe, Africa, and America. The slave ships left England loaded with goods to be exchanged for slaves on the coast of West Africa. This constituted the first side of the triangle. The second side of the triangle was the Middle Passage, also known as the slave trade. It consisted in the journey of the newly purchased slaves from Africa to the West Indies, where they were traded on the plantations in exchange for a cargo of colonial products. The shipment of tropical commodities back to England constituted the last segment of the trade. As commerce intensified, slave ships were supported, but never supplanted, by a direct trade between England and the West Indies for the shipment of colonial products.¹⁹ On the one hand, the British West Indies, through the slave trade, provided a market for British manufactures and foodstuffs, which were essential not only to purchase, but also to feed, clothe and maintain the slaves.²⁰ On the other hand, thanks to the exploitation of the slaves, they supplied sugar and other tropical products to England. In this way, the expenditure of bullion on foreign tropical commodities was unnecessary.²¹ By encouraging metropolitan exports, the triangular trade fostered the development of metropolitan industry and agriculture.²² Entire industries, for instance the woollen and the cotton industries, heavily depended on the triangular trade.²³ The effects of the wealth

¹⁸ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, p. 109.

¹⁹ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, pp. 139-141.

²⁰ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, pp. 107-8.

²¹ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, p. 141.

²² Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, p. 141.

²³ Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery*, p. 67.

brought by the slave trade to England ought not to be underestimated. As Williams points out:

By 1750 there was hardly a trading or manufacturing town in England which was not in some way connected with the triangular or direct colonial trade. The profits obtained provided one of the main steams of that accumulation of capital in England which financed the Industrial Revolution.²⁴

Entire cities owed their flourishing to the stimulus that came from the African and West Indian markets. For instance, the building of slave ships lies at the heart of Liverpool's extraordinary development in the 18th century. The manufacture of cotton goods, which were exported to the colonies and to Africa, played the same role in eighteenth century Manchester's development.²⁵

Colonial wealth permeates Charlotte Brontë's novel as well. As a matter of fact, both Rochester and Jane's wealth has a colonial origin. After Jane discovers the existence of Bertha, Rochester's rightful wife, Jane learns from Rochester himself the story of his marriage. Rochester's father did not want to divide his estate, but he was determined not to leave his youngest son destitute either (Brontë, 351). Thus, he sought a suitable match for him. He decided to marry off his son to the daughter of Mr Mason, "a West India planter and merchant, who was his old acquaintance. He was certain his possessions were real and vast: he made inquiries" (Brontë, 351). Mr Mason would leave his daughter "a fortune of thirty thousand pounds" (Brontë, 351). Thus, Rochester's wealth, acquired through Bertha's dowry, has a clear colonial origin, because, since Mr Mason was a Jamaican planter and merchant, Bertha's dowry was probably the product of slave labour. Rochester and Bertha lived together in Jamaica for four years before returning to England. As a wealthy white man living in Jamaica before emancipation Rochester would have surely had slaves to attend upon him. The plot of the novel works toward a more equal redistribution of power and wealth, therefore, what renders Jane and Rochester's marriage possible is not only Bertha's elimination from the novel, but also Jane's inheritance.

²⁴ Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery*, p. 52.

²⁵ Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery*, p. 74.

However, Jane's fortune bears troubling associations with imperialism as well, since it comes from her uncle in Madeira, who is an agent for a Jamaican wine manufacturer, Bertha's brother. The location of Madeira, on the West African coast, could indirectly suggest, through Mason's itinerary, the triangular route of the British slave traders, and could consequently imply that John Eyre's wealth is linked to the slave trade. Moreover, as Sue Thomas underlines, Madeira, a Portuguese colony, had a slave labour economy.²⁶ Colonial traces stain even the scene of Jane's acceptance of her inheritance. St. John is able to ascertain that Jane is indeed the heiress of his uncle's fortune because she has written her real name on a piece of paper, which he produces out of a "morocco pocket-book" (Brontë, 437), in "Indian ink" (Brontë, 440). Both the leather of the wallet and the pigment are colonial commodities. Thus, colonialism is implicated both in Jane's finances and in the act of writing itself, since the words Jane traces in Indian ink, "Jane Eyre" (Brontë, 440) are both her name and the title of the novel.²⁷

Thus, by determining a possible chronology for the main events of the novel and by placing it within the context of nineteenth century British colonial history, it can be possible to establish that the role played by colonial wealth in *Jane Eyre*, though not always made explicit by the text, is central both to the development of the plot and of the main characters.

1.2 – From the West Indies to the East Indies

Towards the end the novel establishes a link with another territory of the British Empire, India. The character of St John Rivers, the clergyman who, alongside with his sisters Diana and Mary, saves Jane from certain death, embodies this connection. St John

²⁶ Thomas, p. 64.

²⁷ Meyer, pp. 91-4.

aspires to work as a missionary in India and asks Jane to accompany him as his wife in order to “be a conductress of Indian schools, and a helper amongst Indian women” (Brontë, 465).

Missionary activity in the East India Company territory was illegal until 1813. Prior to that date, the few Baptist missionaries working in India relied on the tolerance of East India Company officials. The authorization of missionary work was advocated by a public campaign, which depicted India as a land of darkness and superstition in need of the British enlightened intervention. Only with the 1813 India Charter Act missionary work in those territories was authorised and an Anglican diocese based at Calcutta was founded. Initially, however, new missionaries who were willing to travel to India were not many. As a matter of fact, in 1833 the committee charged with making recommendations underlined that the number of clergymen present in India was too scarce. Jane herself tells John that missionaries are “few in number, and difficult to discover” (Brontë, 463). Since before 1813 missionary work in the East Indies was outlawed and missionary endeavour was prompted in 1833, on the occasion of the renewal of the India Charter Act, it is possible to hypothesize that St John asks Jane to accompany him in the year 1833.²⁸

In 1833, as Britain was intensifying its missionary activities in the East Indies, slavery was being abolished in the British West Indian colonies through the passing of the Emancipation Act. Despite the abolition of slavery, plantocracy still persisted. In order to prevent former black slaves from deserting the plantations, the emancipation legislation imposed a period of so-called ‘apprenticeship’. The apprenticeship system was meant to last until 1840 but was abolished earlier, in 1838.²⁹ The abolition of slavery in the British West Indian colonies was a result of their decreasing economic importance to England. Since the end of the eighteenth century, production in the British West Indies

²⁸ Thomas, pp. 60-2.

²⁹ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, p. 297.

was either static or declining. Thus, the sugar produced in the Caribbean was not enough to satisfy the requests of the British sugar refiners, who advocated relief from the West Indian monopoly.³⁰ Therefore, the British Government turned to the East Indies and encouraged the production of the free Indian sugar. The first shipment reached England in 1791.³¹

By the time Charlotte Brontë was authoring *Jane Eyre*, it was evident that British colonial interests had shifted from the West Indies to the East Indies, a twist mirrored by the plot of the novel. Whether, as argued by Susan Meyer, Brontë wanted to express her uneasiness about the recent East Indians colonial ventures, cannot be stated with certainty.³² However, it can be noticed that St John, the man who, driven by his own ambition, rejects the prospect of a wealthy marriage in England and travels to the East Indies to participate in the British colonial project in India, is punished for his decision and dies far from England. Similarly, Rochester's manor, where Rochester has brought a West Indian woman and her dowry, is burnt to the ground and Rochester himself, the master of Thornfield, is almost irreversibly maimed. Significantly, after Thornfield is burnt and Rochester and Jane are finally reunited, they form a family in Ferndean, a remote pre-imperial setting, which has been a possession of Rochester's family for generations, where Jane begins to write her own autobiography.³³

Yet, a contradiction remains, since Charlotte Brontë does not succeed in erasing the colonial other, represented by Jane's newly acquired wealth, which Jane brings to Ferndean. This is even more evident when we consider that the racial other in the novel

³⁰ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, p. 281-5.

³¹ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, p. 243.

³² Meyer, p. 94.

³³ Tracy, Thomas, "'Reader, I Buried Him': Apocalypse and Empire in 'Jane Eyre'", *Critical Survey*, 16 (2004), pp. 59-77, p. 73.

is not only expressed through the presence of colonial wealth and through the allusions to the nineteenth century English colonial ventures, but also through the use of a complex figurative strategy that I intend to explore in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2 – Berta Mason, the Other Woman in *Jane Eyre*

2.1- The Use of Race in *Jane Eyre*

Throughout the novel, Jane is identified with a generic slave and linked to non-white races. References to slavery or to non-white races occur especially whenever Jane finds herself in situations of crisis, which often anticipate her departure from a place where she feels oppressed.

At the very beginning of the novel, Jane revolts against John Reed, Mrs Reed's cherished son and Jane's cousin; she accuses him of being a "slave-driver" (Brontë, 13) and compares him to a Roman emperor. Sue Thomas argues that, although this allusion to slavery does not directly hint at Britain's recent past of slaveholding, an early Victorian reader would have certainly associated Roman slavery to West Indian slavery. In the early nineteenth century an analogy between Roman slavery and slavery in the West Indies circulated both in missionary discourse and in public debates.¹ Moreover, since British West Indian planters accused non-Conformist missionaries of fomenting slave rebellions, missionary societies would recommend their missionaries in the British West Indies that:

they were to address the spiritual and not the civil or temporal condition of the enslaved. Their precedent was to be the apostles of Jesus who proselytised among enslaved people in the Roman empire and did not advocate slave rebellion.²

Slavery is mentioned a second time, when Jane attempts to free herself from the grasp of the servants who are dragging her to the red-room, the room where her uncle Reed died.

Jane narrator describes her feelings as follows:

¹ Thomas, p.11

² Thomas, p.15

The fact is, I was a trifle beside myself; or rather *out* of myself, as the French would say: I was conscious that a moment's mutiny had already rendered me liable to strange penalties, and, like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved, in my desperation, to go all lengths. (Brontë, 15)

Jane compares herself to a slave during another punishment, this time suffered at the hands of Mr Brocklehurst, the hypocritical master of Lowood School, when he humiliates her by forcing her to stand on a stool and inviting the other pupils to marginalise her (Brontë, 80).

But references to slavery occur during Jane's adulthood, too. The difference is that this time the slave metaphor encompasses sexual and economic dependence. Rochester, whom Jane is about to marry, is resolved that she must relinquish her "governessing slavery" (Brontë, 311), which means relying on his finances. Furthermore, he makes her uncomfortable by showering her with luxurious gifts. Jane describes him in those terms: "his smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems" (Brontë, 310). It is at this point that Jane writes to her uncle in Madeira, in the hope of freeing herself from Rochester's financial slavery. Her decision sets off that chain of events that will reveal the existence of Bertha Mason and force Jane to leave Thornfield.

Gender oppression is also suggested by allusions to oriental cultural practises. The imagery of women exploited as sexual slaves in Turkish harems is evoked by Rochester when, with the intention of praising Jane, he claims that he "would not exchange this one little English girl for the Grand Turk's whole seraglio, gazelle-eyes, houri forms, and all!" (Brontë, 310). Images of wives forced to die in India after the death of their husbands are instead conjured up by the tradition of the "suttee" (Brontë, 314), which is alluded to in a song played by Rochester.³

³ Meyer, pp. 81-2.

Jane is frequently associated to non-white races, such as Indians, Turks, or native Americans.⁴ For instance, at the beginning of the novel, Jane is pictured isolated from the rest of the Reed family as she reads a book in the window-seat of the breakfast-room at Gateshead “crossed-legged, like a Turk” (Brontë, 10). At Thornfield Hall, as Rochester tries to convince her to become his mistress, she summons her inner strength and draws a comparison between the way she feels and the way “the Indian, perhaps, feels when he slips over the rapid in his canoe” (Brontë, 349).

Jane Eyre's central racial metaphor serves the purpose of expressing the disempowerment and marginality not only of Jane as an individual but also of the gender and the social class, the lower middle class, which Jane represents.⁵ The racial other is thus employed not to underline, as in many texts of the period was common, the inferiority of both women and non-white people to white men, but rather their shared oppression.⁶ However, the figurative strategy employed by the novel shifts the focus away from those races, because it does not address the historical reasons that would explain why non-white people might suggest the idea of oppression to a nineteenth century British reader. The focus is instead placed on Jane.⁷ As H. Adlai Murdoch explains:

Brontë assimilates Jane's subordinate social status to one of oppression and human bondage, but at the cost of appropriating the colonial signifier and attempting to disconnect it from its cultural signified.⁸

As Meyers remarks “the novel's own appropriation of non-white races for figurative ends bears a disturbing resemblance to that [English] history”.⁹

However, allusions to other races involve British subjects too, particularly as far as other women are concerned, especially Blanche Ingram, Bertha Mason, and Aunt Reed. Jane is first introduced to Blanche Ingram through Mrs Fairfax's description. She

⁴ Meyer, p. 64.

⁵ Meyer, pp. 73-4.

⁶ Meyer, p. 66.

⁷ Meyer, p. 66.

⁸ Murdoch, H. Adlai. “Ghosts in the Mirror: Colonialism and Creole Indeterminacy in Brontë and Sand”, *College Literature*, 1 (2002), pp. 1–31, p. 8.

⁹ Meyer, p. 66.

learns that her supposed rival for Rochester's attention has "olive complexion, dark and clear; noble features, eyes rather like Mr Rochester's, large and black, and as brilliant as her jewels" (Brontë, 185). Her hair is "raven-black" (Brontë, 185) and, Mrs Fairfax stresses, Blanche has "the glossiest curls I ever saw" (Brontë, 185). Afterwards, Jane draws the portrait of an imaginary Blanche Ingram with a cautionary intent. She tells herself: "remember the raven ringlets, the oriental eyes" (Brontë, 187) and a few lines later, "recall the august yet harmonious lineaments, the Grecian neck and bust; let the round and dazzling arm be visible, and the delicate hand; omit neither diamond ring nor gold bracelet" (Brontë, 187). When Rochester returns to Thornfield with his distinguished guests, Jane has finally the chance to verify the accuracy of Mrs Fairfax's description of Blanche. She immediately recognises her, because, alongside with her mother and her sister, she is the most distinguished (Brontë, 199). "They were all three of the loftiest stature of woman" (Brontë, 199), notices Jane. She then begins to describe Lady Ingram, Blanche's mother as having "her hair (by candle-light at least) still black" (Brontë, 200).

A few lines later Jane adds:

Most people would have termed her a splendid woman of her age: and she was no doubt, physically speaking; but then there was an expression of almost insupportable haughtiness in her bearing and countenance. She had Roman features and a double chin, disappearing into a throat like a pillar: these features appeared to me not only inflated and darkened, but even furrowed with pride; and her chin was sustained by the same principle, in a position of almost preternatural erectness. She had, likewise, a fierce and hard eye: it reminded me of Mrs Reed's; she mouthed her words in speaking; her voice was deep, its inflection very pompous, very dogmatical – very intolerable, in short. A crimson velvet robe, and a shawl turban of some gold-wrought Indian fabric, invested her (I suppose she thought) with a truly imperial dignity. (Brontë, 200)

Then Jane carefully surveys her daughter, Blanche. She ascertains that "the dark and raven ringlets were all there" (Brontë, 200) and adds: "Her face was like her mother's; a youthful unfurrowed likeness: the same low brow, the same high features, the same pride" (Brontë, 200). Jane concludes her observations by stating that "Miss Ingram was dark as a Spaniard" (Brontë, 201) and by sentencing that "if Rochester liked the majestic, she was the very type of majesty" (Brontë, 201). Thus, Blanche and her mother seem more akin to non-white women than to English women, since they are both tall, dark and with inflated features. Blanche even displays a "low brow" (Brontë, 200), considered a mark

of racial inferiority according to the nineteenth century science of race differences.¹⁰ Their alterity is also stressed by the fact that Jane associates their traits to foreign peoples, the Romans and the Spaniards. In addition, they dress in oriental fashion and appear haughty as far as both their features and their demeanour are concerned.

Traits of non-white races are associated to other representatives of the British ruling-class. Aunt Reed, who rules like a tyrant over Gateshead, favouring her own children over Jane, is described in the following terms:

She had a somewhat large face, the under jaw being much developed and very solid; her brow was low, her chin large and prominent, mouth and nose sufficiently regular; under her light eyebrows glimmered an eye devoid of ruth. (Brontë, 43)

When she sees Mrs Reed again, on her deathbed, Jane notices again her “raised, imperious, despotic eyebrow” (Brontë, 265). Just as Blanche resembles her mother, John Reed’s physical appearance recalls his mother’s. As Mrs Reed herself notices: “John does not at all resemble his father, and I am glad of it: John is like me and like my brothers—he is quite a Gibson” (Brontë, 265). John Reed is portrayed by young Jane in those terms: “large and stout for his age, with a dingy and unwholesome skin; thick lineaments in a spacious visage, heavy limbs and large extremities” (Brontë, 12).

So, Blanche and her mother, Mrs Reed and her son, display racialized undertones that mark their otherness. Moreover, Brontë couples those foreign physical traits with undesirable moral qualities that mark their pride, arrogance, imperiousness. This combination could strike us as contradictory, because the association to non-white races is employed to mark not the oppressed, but the oppressor.¹¹ However, as the novel stresses through the Eastern allusions to the harems of Istanbul and to the practice of the suttee, oppression is something that belongs to non-white races.¹² The novel appropriates characteristics conventionally attributed to dark races and assigns them to the British

¹⁰ Meyer, p. 79.

¹¹ Meyer, pp. 78- 81.

¹² Meyer, pp. 80-1.

ruling class in order to point out how the contacts with other cultures and races have marred the British ruling class.¹³ In other words, “the British aristocracy has been sullied, darkened, and made imperious and oppressive by the workings of empire”.¹⁴ Rochester belongs to the same social class as Blanche, but there is a substantial difference between the two. If Blanche is fixed in her class and uses her social status to oppress others, Rochester instead is similar to Jane.¹⁵ As Patricia McKee argues, both Jane and Rochester champion “a now alienated dimension of Englishness, which reappears among certain socially marginal characters”.¹⁶

Another important consideration can be drawn from Brontë’s figurative treatment of Blanche Ingram. Blanche can be related to another racially ambiguous character of the novel, Bertha Mason. In fact, Rochester describes Bertha as “a woman in the style of Blanche Ingram” (Brontë, 352). He is not wrong; the two women are very similar, not merely due to their outward appearance, but also because of the way the novel portrays them in relation to Jane. As Patricia McKee maintains, “characters who are identified by Jane as dark or impure, especially Bertha Mason Rochester and Blanche Ingram, fail to distinguish themselves spiritually”.¹⁷ Blanche and Bertha are characterised by their materiality and lack of spiritual insight. Blanche is grand, stately, she commands attention, whereas Bertha with her wild, animal-like behaviour forces herself on people. Jane, instead, has a small, white body and is a “plain, Quackerish governess” (Brontë, 299). So, she normally goes unnoticed.¹⁸ If Blanche and Bertha, due to their towering, majestic bodies, force attention onto them, people can choose whether to be subjected to

¹³ Meyer, pp. 78-80.

¹⁴ Meyer, p. 79.

¹⁵ McKee, Patricia, “Racial Strategies in Jane Eyre”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 37 (2009), pp. 67–83, p. 76.

¹⁶ McKee, p. 70.

¹⁷ McKee, p. 70.

¹⁸ McKee, p. 70.

Jane's influence or not.¹⁹ In Jane's case "cultural considerations compel people to admire her".²⁰ As McKee points out:

Spirit expands in this novel in exercises of freedom, of discipline, and of influence, since the inner spirit is strengthened by assertions of free will and discipline and since Jane's influence projects her spiritual strength into others.²¹

Owing to Jane's influence, Rochester cultivates spiritual salvation. If Jane embodies spiritual cultivation, Bertha represents the material corruption that has contaminated and misled the white man, Rochester.²² Thus, Bertha and Blanche serve the purpose of highlighting the white English woman's goodness and her own civilized image.²³

Similarly, cultures that are alien to Jane are appropriated by her to highlight her superiority on a scale of civilisation. Turkish harems are isolated from their cultural context, so Jane can use them as imaginary sites that can be improved thanks to her English moral superiority.²⁴ Traits of other ruling classes, belonging to the Romans and the Spaniards, are removed from their cultural and historical context, so that Jane can "understand the Ingrams as primitive imperialists".²⁵ Non-white races are commodified, so that Jane can convey the idea of oppression in England.

In conclusion, on the one hand, *Jane Eyre's* complex figurative strategy could be understood as a critique of British imperialism, as contacts with other cultures have brought corruption to England. Therefore, *Jane Eyre's* condemnation of imperialism seems to be beneficial more to the interests of the British than to those of the people suffering under the yoke of the British Empire. On the other hand, however, the novel's treatment of other cultures could be regarded as imperialist. The text's figurative structure appropriates cultural practices and features of other peoples, generalising them and

¹⁹ McKee, p. 72.

²⁰ McKee, p. 72.

²¹ McKee, p. 72.

²² McKee, p. 71.

²³ McKee, p. 80.

²⁴ McKee, p. 80.

²⁵ McKee, p. 76.

displacing them from their original context, in order to champion the superiority of the English subject, represented by Jane, which emerges as white and middle-class.

2.2- The Racial Indeterminacy of Bertha Mason

Bertha Mason Rochester is the only character who bears a direct and explicit connection with the British West Indies. Her function in the story is pivotal, since she is necessary to Jane's narrative of development and growth. Bertha represents the figure of the other in relation to which Jane has to define herself.²⁶ However, in order to affirm her identity and be recognized as something distinct from the other, Jane must be first identical to the other.²⁷ At first, Bertha and Jane seem to mirror each other. Before Rochester's arrival at Thornfield, Jane's sole relief is to walk along the corridor of the third storey of Thornfield Hall, where, unbeknownst to her, Bertha is locked up. Bertha is an alien just as Jane as a child was an outcast. And just as Jane acted out her rebellion at Gateshead during her tenth year of life, Bertha breaks free from her captivity in her tenth year of imprisonment.²⁸ Bertha is more than just the impediment to Rochester and Jane's wedding; she is a projection of Jane's own dark potentials.²⁹

Rochester's revulsion towards Bertha seems to be elicited not by her madness, but by her sexual licentiousness. Rochester describes her as "a wife at once intemperate and unchaste" (Brontë, 353). She is a woman of "giant propensities" and a "pigmy intellect" (Brontë, 353). When Bertha's existence is finally revealed, Jane has to decide whether to live with Rochester out of wedlock or to abandon him. She has to decide whether to surrender to her passion, which has characterized her as a child, but she has eventually

²⁶ Azim, Firdous, *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 176.

²⁷ Azim, pp. 178-9.

²⁸ Grudin, Peter, "Jane and the Other Mrs. Rochester: Excess and Restraint in 'Jane Eyre'", *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 10 (1977), pp. 145-57, p. 152.

²⁹ Grudin, p.145.

learnt to sublimate, or to follow moral propriety.³⁰ Bertha represents, in an exaggerated form, what lies latent within Jane, but also what she has to shun in order to accomplish her own journey.

The first time Jane sees Bertha, mistaking her for a ghost, she describes her to Rochester in those terms: “It seemed, sir, a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back” (Brontë, 326). When Rochester replies that “ghosts are usually pale” (Brontë, 327), Jane insists: “This, sir, was purple: the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed: the black eyebrows widely raised over the bloodshot eyes” (Brontë, 327). When Jane finally meets her, those are the words she employs to depict her:

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. (Brontë, 338)

Then, Jane is able to ascertain that the “clothed hyena” has indeed a “purple face” and “bloated features” (Brontë, 338). The beast-like West Indian wife of Rochester is thus described in dehumanising terms and linked to the non-white races. Susan Meyer identifies Bertha as black, not only on account of her physical description, but also because her mother “the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard!” (Brontë, 337). The word Creole does not shed light on Bertha’s racial ambiguity, since the term was used in the nineteenth century to refer to both black people and white people born in the West Indies. However, madness and drunkenness were common stereotypes associated to black people.³¹ Moreover, Bertha is imprisoned in the attic of Thornfield Hall, which recalls a cell, and uses fire to carry out her revenge, just as a Jamaican rebel slave would do. As Meyer points out “slaves used fire both to destroy property and to signal to each other that an uprising was taking place”.³²

³⁰ Grundin, pp. 152-5.

³¹ Meyer, p. 68.

³² Meyer, p. 69.

However, Meyer fails to consider that in the West Indies black people were not the only ones to be represented in dehumanising terms. According to Sue Thomas, Bertha's non-white features do not associate her to the oppressed West Indian rebel slaves, but to their oppressors, since they are a representation of the white Creoles' moral depravity.³³ As a matter of fact, Thomas maintains that "in the racial formation of the British empire whiteness was not a homogenous category"³⁴ and that there were also "hierarchies within whiteness".³⁵

Already in the seventeenth century the English considered the West Indies a territory "outside the moral boundaries of European society and culture".³⁶ In the nineteenth century this perception did not improve, especially as the evangelical abolitionists started to deplore British West Indian slave owners' cruelty and depravity. It was believed that Jamaican planters had been rendered brutal by slavery. Furthermore, they were especially notorious for "their open, culturally tolerated practice (among both married and unmarried men) of keeping slave concubines."³⁷ Creole white women were not exempt from criticism. As Sue Thomas points out:

Several instances of appalling cruelties perpetrated by or on the orders of slave-owning women received wide publicity in Britain in the late 1820s and early 1830s, and commentary on their actions placed the women outside evangelical gender norms of femininity.³⁸

Rochester's lamentation that "no servant would bear the continue outbreaks of her [Bertha's] violent and unreasonable temper" (Brontë, 353) could echo discourses surrounding the abuses slave-servants had to suffer at the hands of their British West Indian mistresses.³⁹ Furthermore, it was maintained that exercising their authority over

³³ Thomas, p. 43.

³⁴ Thomas, p.53.

³⁵ Thomas, p.53.

³⁶ Rogers, Philip, "'My Word is Error': 'Jane Eyre' and Colonial Exculpation", *Dickens Studies Annual*, 34 (2004), pp. 329–50, p. 331.

³⁷ Rogers, p. 334.

³⁸ Thomas, p. 41.

³⁹ Rogers, p. 339.

slaves deprived women of their femininity.⁴⁰ Bertha is clearly masculinized when Jane describes her as:

a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest—more than once she almost throttled him [Rochester], athletic as he was. (Brontë, 338-9)

Propensity to violence was not the only flaw Creole white women possessed. Nineteenth century accounts of Creole society uniformly condemned “the state of West Indian culture and the intellectual deficiency of Creole women”.⁴¹ Again, descriptions of Creole women might echo in Rochester’s disgust at Bertha’s “cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger” and at her “coarse and trite, perverse and imbecile” (Brontë, 353) conversations.

Rochester presents himself as a victim of circumstances. He tells Jane that he was deceived by his father and his brother, who “knew all this; but they thought only of the thirty thousand pounds and joined in the plot against me”, and by the Mason’s family, who “wished to secure me because I was of a good race” (Bronte, 352). Rochester explains to Jane how Bertha lured him into marrying him:

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. There is no folly so besotted that the idiotic rivalries of society, the prurience, the rashness, the blindness of youth, will not hurry a man to its commission. Her relatives encouraged me; competitors piqued me; she allured me: a marriage was achieved almost before I knew where I was. (Brontë, 352)

Rochester, a genteel English man belonging to a respectable and ancient family, is thus contaminated by his proximity to his West Indian wife and by the insalubrious Caribbean air. According to the Victorian atmospheric theory, the air carried material effects. For instance, a person could become infected by a disease if they inhaled the air breathed by a sick person.⁴² Rochester might suggest that he is being contaminated by Bertha when he tells Jane: “I yet saw her and heard her daily: something of her breath (faugh!) mixed with the air I breathed” (Brontë, 354). To the Caribbean air, that Rochester

⁴⁰ Rogers, p. 331.

⁴¹ Rogers, p. 337.

⁴² McKee, p. 80.

compares to “sulphur-steams” (Brontë, 354) is associated a sickening effect, too. Rochester is thus contaminated by Bertha’s moral insanity, but also by the same West Indian insalubrious air that Bertha breathes. According to nineteenth century ethnographic discourse, physical and intellectual adaptation to the tropical climate had contributed to the white Creole’s moral degeneracy.⁴³

One night, on the brink of desperation, “a wind fresh from Europe” (Brontë, 355) gives Rochester respite and urges him to return to England. Rochester’s return to England is depicted in salvific terms, since it is the first step towards his encounter with Jane, the “antipodes of the Creole”.⁴⁴ Fleeing Jamaica implies Rochester’s recognition of its moral corruption, thus proves his essential goodness. Similarly, Jane proves the virtue and gentility that Bertha lacks by refusing Rochester’s offer to be his mistress.⁴⁵ According to Philip Rogers, Rochester is not punished for marrying Bertha, since his first marriage is portrayed by the novel as a juvenile error dictated by his naivety. He is punished because he attempted to efface his ties with Jamaica, which had become not only an economical but also a mural burden.⁴⁶

In conclusion, on the one hand the figure of Bertha could serve the same figurative purpose as Blanche Ingram, since she is a foil for Jane. This means that Bertha is presented as white, although described in racialized terms, in order to mark not only her inferiority, but also her alterity in relation to Jane. On the other hand, her identity as a white Creole possessing dark features and behaving like a demented person, might also serve as a cautionary tale for any British subject willing to partake of British colonial ventures. Bertha could be regarded as the emblem of the extent to which the brutalities of slavery, upon which colonial exploitation was grounded, coupled with the effects of the

⁴³ Thomas, p. 51.

⁴⁴ Rogers, p. 336.

⁴⁵ Rogers, p. 342.

⁴⁶ Rogers, p. 333.

tropical climate, could spoil a white person. After all, her racial ambiguity, embedded in her colonial origin, signals that Bertha is both a perpetrator and a victim of British colonial injustices, as both African slaves and white Creole slave owners are the products of the same system.

Chapter 3 – *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a Post-colonial Rewriting of *Jane Eyre*

3.1- Antoinette, a Question of Identity

It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all.¹

Jean Rhys was born in 1890 at Roseau, Dominica, one of the Caribbean islands belonging to the Lesser Antilles. She was the daughter of a Welsh doctor and a white Creole, the granddaughter of a Scottish-born planter and a West Indian woman. At the age of seventeen she moved to England (Rhys, pp. 255-7). Although she never adjusted to England and to the English culture, and she never perceived herself to be English, she never returned to the Caribbean, except for a short trip in 1936 (Rhys, ix). The figure of Bertha Mason, Rochester's first mad Creole wife, haunted Rhys for many years, so she decided to write her story, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Rhys, 6). Although the novel is based on Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* stands on its own.² Rhys worked on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which was first published in 1966, for twenty-one years (Rhys, ix).

In Rhys's rewriting of *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason becomes Antoinette Cosway. Antoinette is Bertha's real name in *Jane Eyre*, but her surname comes from Antoinette's white Creole father, Mr Cosway, rather than by her English stepfather, Mr Mason.³ As the name Rhys chooses for her points out, Antoinette "inhabits a zone of 'inbetween'",⁴ because her identity can neither be considered fully British nor fully Caribbean.⁵ She is not accepted by the other Jamaican white Creoles, she is marked as something alien by

¹ Rhys, Jean, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, edited by Judith L. Raiskin, London: W.W. Norton, 1998, p. 61. This is the edition I use throughout.

² Kamel, Rose, "'Before I Was Set Free': The Creole Wife in 'Jane Eyre' and 'Wide Sargasso Sea'", *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 25 (1995), pp. 1-22, p. 1.

³ Adjarian, M. M, "Between and beyond Boundaries in 'Wide Sargasso Sea'", *College Literature* 22 (1995), pp. 202-9, p. 203.

⁴ Adjarian, p. 203.

⁵ Adjarian, p. 203.

her English husband, so she cannot be considered English, and she is certainly not welcomed by the white Creoles' counterpart, the black Creoles. As Anderson points out, Antoinette "belongs or is accepted in neither the black nor the white world but has inheritances from both".⁶

Rhys shifts dates to write about post-emancipation time, that is when *Jane Eyre's* Bertha could have never spent her childhood. The Emancipation Act, which was approved in 1833 by the British Parliament and outlawed slavery in Britain and all its colonies, took effect a year later. In order to prevent former black slaves to desert the plantations, the emancipation legislation imposed a period of so-called 'apprenticeship'. The apprenticeship system was meant to last until 1840 but was abolished earlier, in 1838.⁷ After the so-called apprenticeship system, the planters were supposed to receive a compensation for their expropriation of property, i.e., their slaves. Part One of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, narrated in the first person by Antoinette, begins with the suicide of her neighbour, Mr Luttrell, who grows "tired of waiting" (Rhys, 9) for the compensation promised by the English (Rhys, 9). Antoinette is still a child when her family, which owns Coulibri Estate, near Spanish Town, in Jamaica, suffers the consequences of the emancipation. At the beginning of the novel Antoinette states: "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did" (Rhys, 9). "They" (Rhys, 9) indicates the group of white Jamaicans, to which Antoinette belongs by birth right. However, the fact that she addresses them as something other than her reveals that Antoinette and her family are ostracized by those "ranks" (Rhys, 9).⁸ The reason of their ostracism consists in her mother's physical appearance and provenance. As Christophine, Antoinette's black nurse, tells her, her mother is "pretty like pretty self" (Rhys, 9) and, worse, she comes from Martinique. In 1839 Martinique, one of the West Indian islands belonging to group of the

⁶ Anderson, Paula Grace, "Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Seas: The Other Side/"Both Sides Now"*", *Caribbean Quarterly*, 28 (1982), pp. 57–65, p. 60.

⁷ Williams, *From Columbus to Castro, The History of the Caribbean*, p. 297.

⁸ Neck-Yoder, Hilda van, "Colonial Desires, Silence, and Metonymy: 'All Things Considered' in *Wide Sargasso Sea*", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 40 (1998), pp. 184–208, p. 187.

Lesser Antilles, was a French colony, whereas Jamaica was a British colony since 1670. And, as Daniel Cosway, Antoinette's coloured half-brother, later explains in a letter addressed to Rochester, "French and English like cat and dogs in those islands since long time" (Rhys, 57).

However, the fact that the other white Jamaican ladies stress the physical difference of Annette, Antoinette's mother, could also be a sign of Annette's possible racial impurity. Antoinette resembles her mother. As Daniel Cosway writes in his letter to Rochester "she is beautiful like her mother was beautiful" (Rhys, 58). Throughout the novel, Antoinette's whiteness is indeed at times questioned. For instance, when young Antoinette is sent to a convent, after the burning of the Coulibri Estate, she begs Miss H el ene, another white Creole girl living in the convent, to "tell me how you do your hair, because when I grow up I want mine to look like yours" (Rhys, 32). But after the girl patiently explains her how to do her hair, Antoinette retorts: "Yes, but H el ene, mine does not look like yours, whatever I do" (Rhys, 32). At this point, H el ene's "eyelashes flickered, she turned away, too polite to say the obvious thing" (Rhys,32).⁹ In Part Two, mainly narrated by Rochester, Rochester voices his suspicions that his wife is not white. He describes her with the markers of racial otherness. He notices that her eyes "are too large" (Rhys, 39), that they are "long, sad, dark alien eyes" (Rhys, 39). He also compares her to Am elie, their "half-caste" (Rhys, 38) servant.¹⁰

Another trait of Antoinette, that marks her as other, her sensuality, is inherited from her mother. Annette, abandoned by her former slaves, her estate in a state of disarray, decides to "market her last remaining asset",¹¹ that is her exotic sensuality. At least, that is how her wealthy English husband, Mr Mason, sees her: "Didn't you fly at me like a little wild cat when I said nigger" (Rhys, 19). The use of the verb 'to fly at'

⁹ Neck-Yoder, pp. 187-191.

¹⁰ Neck-Yoder, pp. 187-8.

¹¹ Anderson, p.60.

suggests the idea of a sudden, violent, animal-like attack. Annette's animal-like behaviour is further stressed by the comparison between her and a "little wild cat" (Rhys, 19), which also underlines the fact that Mr Mason does not consider her 'attack' threatening. Mr Mason thinks that Annette's behaviour is out of line, but at same time he seems indulgent towards her, because he sees her reaction as a tropical extravagance. Mr Mason is probably attracted to the idea of exotic femininity that Annette conveys, which is diametrically opposed to the demure and submissive femininity Englishwomen were supposed to display. Antoinette's sensuality, which initially attracts, then repels Rochester, is the core of their marriage, too.¹²

As already analysed above, white Creole women were seen by Englishmen as primitive "i.e., lazy, prone to emotional instability, given to sexual excess".¹³ Thus, they were represented in the same stereotypical way black women were depicted. Nevertheless, as Jean Rhys explains in one of her letters, they were married by Englishmen for their dowries (Rhys, 144). By the 1830s, the British public opinion regarded slavery as immoral. As a consequence, the moral and sexual degeneration connected to the system of slavery was attributed to the white Creoles, the perpetrators of the hateful institution. Therefore, they were "excluded from the community of respectable English men and women".¹⁴ In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Mr Cosway, Antoinette's biological father, a white Creole, is not only a slaveholder, but also a promiscuous rake and a drunkard. In fact, he has at least two mixed-race illegitimate children, and, as Antoinette overhears someone saying at her mother's wedding, "the estate was going downhill for years before that [emancipation]" (Rhys, 17), due to Cosway's drinking problems.¹⁵ Thus, Antoinette and her mother, just like *Jane Eyre's* Bertha, are victims of those stereotypical

¹² Anderson, p.61.

¹³ Kamel, p. 3.

¹⁴ Ciolkowski, Laura E., "Navigating the Wide Sargasso Sea: Colonial History, English Fiction, and British Empire", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 43 (1997), pp.339–59, p. 341.

¹⁵ Ciolkowski, pp. 341-2.

representations, of which Rhys, being a white Creole herself, must have certainly been aware.

However, sexual licentiousness in *Wide Sargasso Sea* exposes also the connection between patriarchy and imperialism, which *Jane Eyre* overlooks. As Hilda van Neck-Yoder argues, the sexual subordination of women was one of the pillars of colonial power:

Because the legal status of “white” was conferred via the mother, wealth and prestige of the “white people” depended on the ability of colonialist men to control the sexual behaviour of their women, i.e. to keep colonized men from having sexual access to those women, while the colonialists demanded access to their women.¹⁶

So, if the “construction and maintenance of racial categories- the basis of colonial power relations- depended on the ability of powerful men to exert sexual control over women”,¹⁷

then Antoinette threatens Rochester’s power and prestige, two elements that he, being a white English man in the Caribbean, takes for granted.¹⁸ Not only does Antoinette express her sexuality in a way that is judged excessive by Rochester, but she has had, and, as we learn in Part Three, continues to have throughout her marriage with Rochester, an affair with her coloured cousin Sandi Cosway. If, as Ciolkowski argues, “the proper Englishwoman ostensibly restricts all sexual activity to the domain of the patriarchal family and thereby regulates the genetic makeup of the English imperial race”,¹⁹ then Antoinette defies England’s imperialistic project.

But if Antoinette cannot be assimilated to a white English woman, as both her narration in Part One and Rochester’s account of her in Part Two suggest, she cannot be assimilated to a black Creole either. At the beginning of the novel, Antoinette’s only friend is Tia, a black girl. As Adjarian argues, young Antoinette, neglected by her mother and excluded from the white Creoles’ community, expresses an unconscious desire to identify with Tia, that is with black Creoles. When the two girls swim together, Antoinette wears Tia’s clothes.²⁰ When Coulibri is burnt to the ground by a group of ex-slaves,

¹⁶ Neck-Yoder, p. 192.

¹⁷ Neck-Yoder, p. 192.

¹⁸ Neck-Yoder, p. 195.

¹⁹ Ciolkowski, p. 343.

²⁰ Adjarian, p. 205.

Antoinette naively runs towards Tia, wishing that she would “live like Tia” (Rhys, 27) and “be like her”(Rhys, 27). In both cases Tia hampers this identification and stresses their insurmountable racial differences, which are deeply rooted in the historical and socio-political context of post-emancipation Jamaica.²¹ In the first episode, Tia reminds Antoinette that she is a “white nigger” (Rhys, 14), because her family has no money, and this makes Antoinette and her family even more undesirable than black people. In the second episode, Tia throws stones at her, thus severing their bond.

However, if on the one hand in Part One Antoinette expresses an unconscious desire to merge with Tia, on the other she internalizes and reproduces the language of the white colonizer. She frequently employs racist labels such as “nigger” (Rhys, 14) to refer to black people, even Tia, and replicates “racialized and dismissive comments about black costumes”.²² For instance, she voices her disgust at the scent of a black girl’s hair oil: “Her hair had been plaited and I could smell the sickening oil she had daubed on it” (Rhys, 29). When a group of former slaves burns Coulibri, she is unable to tell the difference between the individual black bodies. Instead, Antoinette notices that they “all looked the same, it was the same face repeated over and over, eyes gleaming, mouth half open to shout” (Rhys, 25).²³ And, as Judith Raiskin points out (Rhys, 248), she tries to conform to the English standard represented by her “favourite picture, ‘The Miller’s Daughter’, a lovely English girl with brown curls and blue eyes and a dress slipping off her shoulders” (Rhys, 21).

In Part Two, Antoinette displays the same contradictorily fragmented identity. She tries to “live up to her husband’s pre-established views”,²⁴ because that would mark her as white and English. Thus, she never admits that she has had an intimate relationship with a coloured man, even though Rochester tells her that he has seen Daniel Cosway,

²¹ Mardorossian, Carine M, “Shutting up the Subaltern: Silences, Stereotypes, and Double-Entendre in Jean Rhys’s ‘Wide Sargasso Sea’”, *Callaloo* 22 (1999), pp.1071–90, p. 1083.

²² Mardorossian, p. 1076.

²³ Ciolkowski, p. 352.

²⁴ Mardorossian, p. 1076.

who knows about her affair with Sandi Cosway. Instead, she purposefully diverts the subject to her supposed madness.²⁵ But her efforts to conform to an Englishwoman are prevented by the prejudices of the same man who could legitimize her whiteness. For instance, when Rochester returns to Grambois, Antoinette's estate in Dominica, from his encounter with Daniel Cosway, he sees Antoinette "wearing the white dress I had admired" (Rhys, 76), which is slipping "untidily over one shoulder" (Rhys, 76). Rochester does not see that Antoinette is trying to emulate the picture of the Miller's Daughter, and instead associates her attire with wantonness.²⁶

At the same time, however, we see how older Antoinette "has adapted many of her black counterparts' practices and believes".²⁷ She applies scent on her hair, speaks patois with Christophine, and decides to resort to the practice of obeah²⁸, in order to win back Rochester's love.²⁹ But also in Part Two, Antoinette's racial other, represented by the black Creoles, dismisses any commonalities with Antoinette. Amélie, the black servant to whom Antoinette is compared by Rochester, for instance, resorts to stereotypical labels such as "white cockroach" (Rhys, 60) to refer to Antoinette, thus underlining her otherness. Even Christophine calls her "béké" (Rhys, 68), a term used to refer to white people, and asks her not to meddle with obeah.³⁰ Antoinette's silence about the white Creoles' implication in the enslavement of black people further complicates her identification with the black Creoles.³¹ In Part One, Antoinette has conveniently blocked out the memory of Coulibri when it was flourishing, that is when Coulibri was attended by slaves. Instead, in Part Two, when Rochester asks her if the reason why a certain village they visit is called "Massacre" (Rhys, 38) is because slaves were slaughtered there,

²⁵ Neck-Yoder, p. 196.

²⁶ Mardorossian, p. 1076.

²⁷ Mardorossian, p. 1076.

²⁸ Rose Kamel defines obeah as "a ritual of West African origin in which priests (many of whom were women) used folk magic to empower themselves while destabilising and in many instances poisoning their masters". Kamel, p. 3.

²⁹ Mardorossian, p. 1076.

³⁰ Mardorossian, p. 1084.

³¹ Mardorossian, p. 1082.

she replies, shocked, that something else happened a long time ago but “none remembers it” (Rhys, 68). Her obliteration of the role white people had in the enslavement of black people is perhaps most evident when she explains to Rochester that “white cockroach is what they called us who were here before *their own people* in Africa sold them to the slave traders” (Rhys, 61; italics mine).³² African slavery was a popular justification employed by white people for the enslavement of black people in the New World (Rhys, 61).

By depicting Antoinette as other to everyone, Rhys’s novel questions the dichotomous racial division between the British and the generic racial other portrayed in *Jane Eyre*.³³ As Ciolkowski points out, through Antoinette, “a colonial who is trapped within the logic of a nation-state that enforces her British status while insisting that she can never be English, Rhys exposes national identity itself as an imperial fiction that is always subject to confusion”.³⁴ Thus, *Wide Sargasso Sea* challenges the notion of race based on blood, which the British imperial fiction underwrites. Instead, what the novel exposes is a connection between race and money, race and social class. As Mardorossian maintains, “race is a historically and discursively constituted identity whose meaning varies according to one’s economic status”.³⁵ Antoinette’s family is legally white but due to the effects of the emancipation, economically and socially black, therefore shunned by both black and white people. Sandi and Daniel Cosway are both the product of racial mixing. However, the former is accepted among white people because of his money and is described as being “like a white man, but more beautiful than any white man” (Rhys, 75). But he is not white enough for Antoinette to marry him. On the contrary, the latter,

³² Mardorossian, p. 1084.

³³ Münzner, Christina, *The Postcolonial Rewriting of Colonial Stories: Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea*, Norderstedt: GRIN Verlag, 2011, p. 11.

³⁴ Ciolkowski, p. 350.

³⁵ Mardorossian, p. 1073.

poor because old Cosway did not favour him as he favoured his other coloured half-brother, Alexander, is described as a “yellow rat” (Rhys, 76).³⁶

Only in Part Three, Antoinette, locked in Rochester’s attic in England, is able to assert her identity as Caribbean. After her fight with her brother, Richard Mason, she asks her jailor, Grace Poole, to see her red dress. Antoinette reminisces that Rochester thought that the red dress made her look “intemperate and unchaste” (Rhys, 110). As Hilda van Neck-Yoder argues, the red dress recalls metonymically the Caribbean:³⁷

The scent that came from the dress was very faint at first, then it grew stronger. The smell of vetivert and frangipanni, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain. (Rhys, 109)

But the dress also symbolizes her relationship with Sandi. Antoinette now reveals that she never stopped seeing him:

Sandi often came to see me when that man was away and when I went out driving I would meet him. I could go out driving then. The servants knew, but none of them told. (Rhys, 110)

Thus, it is only at the end of the novel that not only do we learn that Antoinette actively chose to see Sandi while she was married, but that she could have also escaped with him. Instead, Antoinette remains with Rochester and is shipped to England as a madwoman. As Neck-Yoder points out, the red dress in Part Three is an “index to her Caribbean subjectivity- her active resistance and her paradoxical collaboration in her psychological and physical imprisonment”.³⁸

The red dress ignites Antoinette’s rebellion, which brings her to set Thornfield on fire and to commit, at least apparently, suicide. Anderson reads Antoinette’s suicide as an “act of self-assertion and will, of self-liberation”.³⁹ She analyses the burning of Thornfield in opposition to the burning of Coulibri Estate. In the latter, the fire is an agent of destruction, because it marks Antoinette’s abrupt break with her past and with her only childhood friend, Tia. In the former, instead, the fire is an agent of purgation, and is thus associated by Antoinette with Christophine, her black mother-like figure, and with Tia,

³⁶ Mardorossian, p. 1085.

³⁷ Neck-Yoder, p. 200.

³⁸ Neck-Yoder, p. 201.

³⁹ Anderson, p. 59.

her black childhood friend, who, in Antoinette's dream, calls her by her real name, which is thus juxtaposed with 'Bertha', the name Rochester has given to her.⁴⁰

3.2-Both Sides in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Unlike what happens in *Jane Eyre*, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* there is no celebration of a "unified and autonomous (feminine) subject".⁴¹ Through the double narrative structure of the novel, Rhys provides access to both Antoinette's and Rochester's perspectives, since Rochester narrates most of Part Two. I propose to analyse Rochester's side of the story in this section of the chapter. If in *Jane Eyre* Rochester's account of his marriage is self-exculpatory, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as Michael Thorpe argues, we can at least accept "Rochester's claim for our pity".⁴² Exiled from what is familiar, he must rely on Antoinette to adapt to a different place and culture, which he cannot comprehend. Indeed, Rochester cannot see Caribbean culture except through his Anglocentric standpoint.⁴³ For instance, when Rochester is drugged by Christophine, on behalf of Antoinette, the fear and paranoia that the drug produces in him derives from the stereotypical notions of obeah that he has read in an English text, *The Glittering Coronet of Isles*.⁴⁴

Rochester is an abolitionist. He despises the hypocrisy of the marble tablets of the church where he married Antoinette, which commemorated "the virtues of the last generation of planters. All benevolent. All slave-owners. All resting in peace" (Rhys, 45). He also tells Antoinette that slavery "was a question of justice" (Rhys, 88). Mr Mason

⁴⁰ Anderson, p. 60.

⁴¹ Mardorossian, p. 1072.

⁴² Thorpe, Michael, "The Other Side: "Wide Sargasso Sea" and "Jane Eyre"", *ARIEL, A Review of International English Literature*, 8 (1977), pp.99-110, p. 107.

⁴³ Münzner, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Mardorossian, p. 1080.

appears to be an abolitionist as well, as Antoinette reveals when she explains that he “did not approve of Aunt Cora, an ex-slave owner who escaped misery, a flier in the face of Providence” (Rhys, 18). The text does not clarify whether Rochester and Mason actually support the abolition of slavery, or if they simply accept and profit from the new *status quo*. However, their position on slavery seems to be influenced more by their antipathy towards the former white Creole slave-owners than by a genuine understanding and rejection of the slave system. Christophine, once a slave in Martinique, describes the English entrepreneurs, represented by Mr Mason in the novel, who invested their capitals in the ruined West Indian properties after emancipation, as follows:

These new ones have Letter of the Law. Same thing. They got magistrate. They got fine. They got jail house and chain gang. They got tread machine to mash up people’s feet. New ones worse than old ones – more cunning, that’s all. (Rhys, 15)

Furthermore, both Mason’s and Rochester’s extensive use of stereotypes shows that the abolition of slavery has not eradicated the racism on which colonial control hinges.⁴⁵ Mr Mason calls black people “nigger” (Rhys, 19), considers them as harmless as children, thus not capable of destroying Coulibri (Rhys, 21), has made Antoinette “shy about my [her] coloured relatives” (Rhys, 30) and sees his Creole wife as an exotic commodity. Rochester applies to Christophine the same prejudices that Annette, the daughter of slave-owners, associates to the servants who left the estate in ruin. He tells Antoinette that Christophine “looks so lazy” (Rhys, 51) and dislikes her because of her “African-centred earthiness”.⁴⁶

The novel shows that Rochester is more akin to a slave-owner than he would imagine. After knowing about the relationship between Antoinette and Sandi, Rochester retaliates against Antoinette, replicating the sexual vices of the same slave-owners, whom he despises.⁴⁷ He spends the night with his coloured servant, Amélie, and in the morning

⁴⁵ Mardorossian, p. 1084.

⁴⁶ Kamel, p. 9.

⁴⁷ Ciolkowski, p. 349.

he notices how “her skin was darker, her lips thicker than I thought” (Rhys, 84). Then he sends her away and Antoinette tells him:

You abused the planters and made up stories about them, but you do the same thing. You send the girl away quicker, and with no money or less money, and that’s all the difference. (Rhys, 88)
Not only does Rochester exploit Amélie’s body, but he also colonizes Antoinette’s body.

He renames her Bertha, thus erasing her subjectivity and her past as a slave-owner would do and transports her to England as a lunatic.⁴⁸

As Neck-Yoder argues, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rochester uses Antoinette’s supposed madness, a pretext conveniently supplied by Daniel Cosway, to reassert control over her. In this way, he does not have to reveal that Antoinette has made him “a laughing stock, a cuckold, a loser in a competition with a ‘coloured’ man”.⁴⁹ Rochester realizes that he has been tricked by his own people, namely Richard Mason, to marry a woman whose sexual behaviour sets her out of the domain of proper English womanhood.⁵⁰ Rochester’s intentions are correctly understood by Christophine: “You want her money but you don’t want her. It is in your mind to pretend she is mad” (Rhys, 96). She thinks that the same thing happened to Antoinette’s mother:

They drive her to it [madness]. When she lose her son she lose herself for a while and they shut her away. They tell her she is mad, they act like she is mad. (Rhys, 94)
At the end of Part Two, when Rochester voices his obsession for Antoinette before

leaving Grambois, we might as well question *his* sanity.⁵¹

She’ll not laugh in the sun again. She’ll not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking-glass. So pleased, so satisfied.
Vain, silly creature. Made for loving? Yes, but she’ll have no lover, for I don’t want her and she’ll see no other. (Rhys, 99)

Antoinette shows a paradoxical complicity with Rochester’s plan, because her submission to her husband and the obliteration of her affair with Sandi signify safety within the ranks of the white people.⁵² However, Antoinette’s collaboration with the same patriarchal logic that relegates her to Thornfield’s attic, is also attributable to the fact that

⁴⁸ Kamel, p. 8.

⁴⁹ Neck-Yoder, p. 194.

⁵⁰ Neck-Yoder, p. 195.

⁵¹ Anderson, p. 63.

⁵² Neck-Yoder, p. 197.

she has been schooled, like other Creole girls, only to succeed in the marriage market. She is therefore denied the agency that Jane is able to cultivate at Lowood School.⁵³

What Rochester ultimately fails to understand, the secret of Grambois, which he wishes to unfold, is the “oblique and elliptical narrative of a Creole woman”,⁵⁴ the opaqueness of a culture that cannot be translated into the binary paradigm of the Englishness and the Otherness.

⁵³ Kamel, p. 7.

⁵⁴ Kamel, p. 9.

RIASSUNTO

Jane Eyre, il capolavoro di Charlotte Brontë, pubblicato nel 1847, non contiene indicazioni temporali specifiche. Tuttavia, è possibile ricostruire una cronologia degli eventi principali, secondo la quale essi si svolgerebbero negli anni venti e trenta del diciannovesimo secolo. Ipotizzando, infatti, che Jane finisca al più tardi di scrivere la propria autobiografia nel 1846, ovvero quando Brontë inizia a scrivere *Jane Eyre*, allora il matrimonio tra lei e Rochester, che ha luogo dieci anni prima, come Jane stessa rivela alla fine del romanzo, non può essersi celebrato dopo il 1836. L'anno prima che i due si sposino, Rochester rivela a Jane di aver tenuto rinchiusa sua moglie, Bertha Mason, nell'attico di Thornfield Hall, per ben dieci anni. Siccome Bertha e Rochester hanno vissuto in Jamaica per quattro anni prima di tornare in Inghilterra, allora il loro matrimonio deve essere avvenuto non dopo il 1821. Ipotizzando, inoltre, che la copia di *Marmion*, celebre poema di Walter Scott, che St John porta a Jane il 5 novembre, non sia la sua prima pubblicazione, bensì l'edizione pubblicata tra la fine di ottobre e l'inizio di novembre del 1833, allora è possibile collocare la fuga di Jane da Thornfield nel 1833, la morte di Bertha Mason nel medesimo anno e il matrimonio tra Jane e Rochester nel 1834.

La definizione di un lasso temporale entro cui collocare gli episodi principali del romanzo è fondamentale al fine di individuare una connessione tra il romanzo e le relazioni coloniali tra Inghilterra e Indie Occidentali. L'Inghilterra stabilì le sue prime colonie nei Caraibi nel sedicesimo secolo. Facendo tesoro dell'esperienza degli spagnoli, che si erano insediati nelle Indie Occidentali a partire dall'arrivo di Cristoforo Colombo nel 1492, gli inglesi investirono nella produzione di zucchero. I nativi dei Caraibi, già troppo pochi per venire impiegati nella coltivazione della canna da zucchero, vennero anche decimati. Gli inglesi li sostituirono con schiavi neri, importati in massa dalle coste dell'Africa Occidentale: è la cosiddetta tratta degli schiavi. La tratta degli schiavi faceva

parte di un sistema più ampio, il commercio triangolare, che coinvolgeva tre continenti, l'Europa, l'America e l'Africa, ed era estremamente redditizio per l'Inghilterra. Questo sistema, infatti, permise di sviluppare la produzione industriale e agricola inglese. Grazie alla diffusione del tè e del caffè, che cessarono di essere prodotti di lusso a partire dal diciottesimo secolo, lo zucchero divenne un bene necessario per gli europei, e le Indie Occidentali, grazie all'impiego degli schiavi, ne erano diventate il principale produttore.

La ricchezza proveniente dalle Indie Occidentali ha un ruolo tutt'altro che irrilevante nel romanzo di Charlotte Brontë. Infatti, sia la ricchezza di Rochester che quella di Jane hanno un'origine coloniale. Il padre di Rochester, per assicurare al figlio minore un cospicuo patrimonio, lo fa sposare con la figlia di un piantatore e mercante giamaicano, Mr Mason. Nella dote di Bertha Mason è dunque implicato il lavoro degli schiavi. Ma anche la fortuna di Jane, che le permette di unirsi a Rochester, una volta raggiunto il piano dell'uguaglianza economica, si rivela connessa con lo sfruttamento degli schiavi. Infatti, Jane eredita una cospicua somma di denaro da uno zio, che ha fatto fortuna a Madeira, una colonia portoghese dall'economia simile a quella schiavista della Giamaica.

Verso la fine del romanzo, è presente un ulteriore collegamento con un altro territorio dell'Impero britannico, l'India. St John Rivers, il sacerdote che salva Jane da morte certa e che si rivelerà essere suo cugino, incarna questa connessione, poiché chiede a Jane di accompagnarlo, in qualità di sua moglie, in missione in India. La fine di *Jane Eyre*, contraddistinta dalla morte di Bertha Mason, giunta in Inghilterra dalle Indie Occidentali, e dalla prospettiva della partenza di Jane al fianco di St John alla volta delle Indie Orientali, rispecchia la posizione dell'Inghilterra nei confronti di entrambe le colonie. Dalla fine del diciottesimo secolo, l'interesse dell'Inghilterra si era progressivamente spostato dalle Indie Occidentali all'India, e questo era ormai evidente nell'anno in cui Brontë inizia a scrivere *Jane Eyre*.

Tuttavia, la presenza dell'“altro razziale” (in inglese, *racial other*) non è espressa nel romanzo solo attraverso il ruolo della ricchezza importata dalle colonie e le allusioni ai risvolti della politica coloniale inglese del diciannovesimo secolo. In tutto il romanzo è infatti presente una complessa strategia figurativa che paragona Jane ad un generico schiavo oppure la collega alle cosiddette “razze non bianche” (in inglese, *non-white races*). Questa strategia figurativa, da un lato, assolve la funzione di evidenziare la marginalità e la mancanza di potere non solo di Jane come individuo, ma anche del genere, femminile, e della classe sociale, quella della piccola borghesia, che Jane rappresenta, dall'altro distoglie l'attenzione dalle ragioni storiche per le quali le cosiddette “razze non-bianche” sono utilizzate, nel romanzo, come termine di paragone per sottolineare la condizione di inferiorità di Jane. Dunque, la “metafora razziale” (in inglese *racial metaphor*) è impiegata al solo beneficio di Jane e di ciò che lei rappresenta.

Paradossalmente, però, le caratteristiche fisiche convenzionalmente attribuite all'“altro razziale” sono impiegate anche per descrivere altri personaggi del romanzo, in particolare Blanche Ingram e sua madre, Mrs Ingram, Mrs Reed, la zia di Jane, e, infine, suo figlio, John Reed, che rappresentano l'alta borghesia. Inoltre, a questi personaggi vengono associate anche caratteristiche morali, che Jane giudica negative, come l'orgoglio, l'arroganza, l'imperiosità. L'associazione tra caratteristiche fisiche impiegate per descrivere le “razze non bianche” ed esponenti dell'aristocrazia inglese potrebbe sembrare contraddittoria, poiché, invece dell'oppresso, esse caratterizzano l'oppressore. Invece, *Jane Eyre*, attraverso le allusioni agli harem di Istanbul e alla pratica del *suttee*, segnala che l'oppressione è propria delle “razze non bianche” e che entrare in contatto con queste culture, attraverso i meccanismi dell'impero, ha corrotto le classi abbienti inglesi. Un altro aspetto importante riguarda il fatto che Blanche Ingram e Bertha Mason, la quale presenta caratteristiche fisiche molto simili a Blanche, siano definite dalla loro materialità e dalla loro corporeità. Questo le pone in netto contrasto con Jane, che è caratterizzata da un aspetto fisico insignificante, ma da una notevole levatura spirituale e

culturale. Dunque, Blanche e Bertha assolvono anche la funzione di evidenziare il grado di civilizzazione e la bontà della “donna bianca inglese” (in inglese, *white Englishwoman*).

Questa tesi approfondisce la figura di Bertha Mason, caratterizzata da una marcata ambiguità razziale. Bertha è infatti rappresentata con le caratteristiche fisiche tipiche delle “razze non bianche”, ma è, allo stesso tempo, una “creola bianca” (in inglese, *white Creole*), ovvero un’abitante delle Indie Occidentali di discendenza europea. Bertha non parla mai nel romanzo, ma, dal racconto che Rochester fornisce della loro breve convivenza in Giamaica, emerge come Bertha posseda gli eccessi e i vizi che gli abolizionisti inglesi associavano ai “creoli bianchi”. Si riteneva che la loro degenerazione morale fosse dovuta sia agli effetti della brutalità della schiavitù, che a quelli dell’ambiente tropicale delle Indie Occidentali. Gli effetti negativi dell’aria dei tropici e della vicinanza di Bertha hanno un’influenza negativa anche su Rochester, che potrà redimersi solo in Inghilterra, dove troverà Jane, l’antitesi della “creola bianca”.

Quindi, se da un lato la strategia figurativa impiegata dal romanzo può essere interpretata come una critica all’imperialismo, poiché i contatti con le altre culture hanno danneggiato l’Inghilterra, dall’altro l’appropriazione, da parte di Jane, di pratiche culturali e caratteristiche che riguardano altri popoli, completamente decontestualizzati e utilizzati per far risaltare il suo grado di civilizzazione, può essere considerata imperialista.

L’ultimo capitolo di questa tesi esplora la figura di Bertha Mason dal punto di vista di *Wide Sargasso Sea*, la celebre riscrittura di *Jane Eyre*, pubblicata da Jean Rhys nel 1966. *Wide Sargasso Sea* riscrive la storia di Bertha Mason, nel romanzo rinominata Antoinette Cosway. Il romanzo è ambientato in Giamaica, nel periodo successivo all’emancipazione degli schiavi, ed è diviso in tre parti. La prima, narrata in prima persona da Antoinette, racconta la sua infanzia; la seconda, narrata prevalentemente da Rochester e in parte da Antoinette, riguarda la loro luna di miele nell’isola di Dominica; infine, nella

terza e ultima parte del romanzo, Antoinette, portata in Inghilterra da Rochester, riprende la narrazione permettendo a *Wide Sargasso Sea* di collegarsi esplicitamente a *Jane Eyre*.

Nel romanzo Antoinette emerge esplicitamente come “altro” rispetto alla cultura inglese, rispetto a quella dei “creoli bianchi”, gruppo al quale, essendo la figlia di un ex-schiavista giamaicano, appartiene, e a quella dei “creoli neri” (in inglese, *black Creoles*), ovvero i discendenti degli ex schiavi africani. Nella prima parte del romanzo, Antoinette è esclusa dalla comunità dei “creoli bianchi” a causa della madre, emarginata dalle altre “donne bianche giamaicane”, per il fatto che proviene da una colonia francese e per la sua bellezza, o comunque per il suo aspetto fisico, che potrebbe denunciare una possibile impurità razziale. Antoinette e la sua famiglia però risentono anche degli effetti economici e sociali dell’emancipazione, che ha ridotto molti ex schiavisti in povertà. Questo li rende socialmente meno desiderabili persino dei “creoli neri”. Perciò il forte desiderio di identificazione provato da Antoinette nei confronti di Tia, sua unica compagna di giochi e figlia di ex schiavi, è contrastato proprio dalla consapevolezza di quest’ultima della loro differenza razziale, plasmata dal contesto sociopolitico. Antoinette però coltiva anche un desiderio di identificazione inconscio con una bambina inglese ritratta in un’immagine (*The Miller’s Daughter*) che conserva nella sua camera. Questo tentativo di identificazione con il modello della donna inglese svanisce nel momento in cui, nella seconda parte del romanzo, Rochester la descrive con le caratteristiche tipiche dell’“altro razziale”. D’altra parte, Antoinette dimostra di aver interiorizzato alcuni dei costumi tipici dei “creoli neri”, ad esempio quando pensa di ricorrere ad un rituale magico originario dell’Africa Occidentale, *obeah*, per riconquistare l’amore di Rochester. La sua assimilazione ai “creoli neri” è però impedita sia dal rifiuto di questi ultimi di essere associati a lei, che dalla negazione, da parte di Antoinette, del riconoscimento del ruolo dei “creoli bianchi” nella schiavitù.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys scardina il concetto di razza, basato sul sangue, proprio dell’imperialismo inglese, e svela come il concetto di razza sia invece

strettamente intrecciato col concetto di classe sociale. Rhys denuncia però anche il connubio tra imperialismo e patriarcato, in quanto è proprio sul controllo del corpo delle donne, fondamentale al fine di mantenere la purezza genetica della “razza dominante”, che si regge il potere coloniale inglese. Rochester, infatti, si inventa che Antoinette sia pazza e la porta in Inghilterra proprio per ristabilire il controllo sul suo corpo, dopo aver scoperto che Antoinette ha avuto, e forse continua ad avere, una relazione con un altro uomo, per giunta di colore.

Ciò che inoltre viene messo in discussione nel romanzo, è la dicotomia tra “inglesità” (in inglese, *Englishness*) e alterità, che caratterizza *Jane Eyre*. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, infatti, Rochester interpreta sia Antoinette che la cultura caraibica, unicamente attraverso la propria prospettiva anglo-centrica, per cui entrambe devono essere necessariamente ridotte o entro i termini dell’“inglesità” o di quelli del generico, inquietante, “altro razziale”.

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