

## “Rhetoric and Racial Politics in Reading *Jane Eyre*”

Heasook Tae

The powerful image of the mad woman with streaming long black hair on the burning roof was still lingering in my mind when I read *Jane Eyre* for the second time in 1985. Yet, I was so taken by the romantic surface of Jane's and Rochester's love story that I did not notice the significance of Bertha as a Creole woman and forgot her in a moment. During the third reading in 1988, I was surprised to notice Bertha's presence in the text. Her total silence paradoxically seems to speak some meaningful message to me. What awakes me from my ignorance is not only my contact with poststructuralist and feminist theories but also my personal experience of institutional oppression and marginalization.

Foucault, as a poststructuralist theorist, has discovered the margin, the silence, and the accidents which are systematically and institutionally excluded from Western metaphysics and history. For him, the notion of truth or sanity is produced by the power structure of domination in order to oppress the unthinkable or the irrational; there is no absolute or objective truth and all “truth” is but a will to power.<sup>1)</sup>

This recovering the margin as a place with its own truth partly influenced feminist theory's focus on women's experience and on women's writing that has been excluded from the canon. The critical awareness that women have been marginalized and oppressed by patriarchal discourse and social institutions is essential if we are to resurrect the muted and silenced women's tradition.

However, this perspective is in danger of succumbing to universalism or essentialism upon which mainstream American feminist critics base their criticism. Trying to define the distinctively female qualities of women's texts in a male-dominated literary tradition, they tend to overlook particular social realities. If mentioned, social conditions are given so little attention that they can not substantially influence the reader's response.

For example, the authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic* see the heart of *Jane Eyre* as Jane's rebellious feminism and her progress toward mature freedom against “difficulties Every woman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome.”<sup>2)</sup> This universalistic premise is related with their attitude of reading the work in purely psychological terms. Their difference from other traditional approaches is to see Jane's confrontation with Bertha not with Rochester as the most important encounter in the novel.

They find out many parallels between Jane and Bertha, which focus on the psychological barriers Jane faces in achieving her freedom and how she overcomes them. For

instance, Bertha's fiendish madness is mentioned because it illuminates Jane's "hunger, rebellion, and rage" against Victorian patriarchal society. Bertha is thus finally "Jane's truest and darkest double: ...the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress..." (p. 360).

For them, Jane's psychological situation is the most important and central. Such material reality as her class is only incidentally mentioned. Jane's psyche is always at the center while Bertha doesn't exist even as a human subject having her own personality, feelings, and the socio-historical reality of a Creole woman from colonized Jamaica. They don't bring the psychological or moral truth of one individual's inner psyche into a dialectic between symbolic and imaginative language and a particular socio-political world. To do this is the purpose of this paper.

Gayatri Spivak's discussion of *Jane Eyre*, in her essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," gave me many insights into how to bring language and social reality into play. She pointedly recognizes the ideology of the creative imagination such as a feminist individual as Jane commands and the ideology of the imperialistic soul-making inscribed in St. John's allegorical language of Christian psychobiography.<sup>3)</sup>

She does not, however, explore the meaning of Jane's returning to another Victorian imperialist, Rochester, after Jane resists the ideology of soul-making. Together with exploring the nature of Jane's language and writing in relation to her class and audience, my emphasis is on Rochester's exotic story of patriarchal oppression and on Bertha's silence and resistance rather than on St. John's allegorical language, whose meaning is quite obvious.

Jane and Bertha as nineteenth-century women are very different in spite of some parallels in their psychology. First, the adult Jane as a Victorian middle-class woman speaks the English language fluently, which is a form of power. Nineteenth-century literature has an intimate relationship with its audience and still believes in the power of language to influence readers. Through this power, Jane attempts to legitimate herself and to persuade Victorian readers of the morality and legitimacy of her happy married life. Jane's whole story is thus a kind of rhetoric of persuasion.

To achieve this purpose, Jane uses organically united imagery and symbolism. For example, the room and window-seat images are used throughout the novel. In the opening chapter, Jane slips in a small room where she has as her companion a book "stored with pictures."<sup>4)</sup> Through the various images of desolation and isolation it provides, Jane consoles her lonely and oppressed situation. When she establishes her life as a governess at Thornfield Hall, she goes to the window-seat of the third story "to open my [Jane's] inward ear to a tale that was never ended—a tale my imagination created, and narrated continuously" (p. 141). Jane's whole story looks like a realization of this tale when she writes her autobiography, enclosed in her room at Ferndean. This use of symbolic imagery thus gives Jane's life an aesthetic unity and beauty, by which many readers are trapped.

Jane also gives her everyday life the heightened moral significance and pattern through her use of biblical imagery. For her, Thornfield looks like Eden rather than a Victorian country house of a landed gentry and Rochester looks like the majestic "iron-garthed" chestnut tree rather than a Victorian patriarch. The night before their wedding it is struck by lightning which foreshadows God's judgment to prodigal Rochester. When Jane finally returns to him, he looks like "that sightless Samson" (p. 456).

Jane's purpose of commanding symbolic and biblical imagery is connected to her idea of poetry or literature in general. According to her celebration speech on poetry (p. 396), only genuine literature is powerful and safe enough to confront the meanness and sordidness of commercial Victorian bourgeois. For Jane, our mediocre and tedious life can be redeemed and divine by genuine poetic values. Jane belongs to petit bourgeois who have idealistic values and intellectual and spiritual pride even though their economic and social status is obscure and poor. She attains her education through religious institutions. Her attachments to books and paintings and her image-making habit are shaped by ideological formation of Victorian institutional education.

Jane's idealistic and spiritual values are, however, deconstructed by her story itself. Through her celebration of poetry, tension and anxiety and doubt of the heightened poetic value are felt and her tone is bitter, when she says "safe in heaven... the hell of your own meanness." Jane's bitterness about unfair treatment of a governess is revealed when she mentions that such intelligent and graceful women as Diana and Mary have to earn their living as governesses by serving a stupid but wealthy family. When Jane receives her inheritance, Jane furnishes her cousins' house comfortably and luxuriously, which reveals her repressed desire for convenient material life. Jane also knows well that there is no equal spirit-to-spirit relationship without economic independence.

These fissures also appear between her famous speech for women's action beyond tranquil domesticity (ch. 10) and her choice of maimed and blinded Rochester in the final chapter. Despite a heightened rhetoric designed to persuade the reader of her happy married life of "perfect concord," her life at Ferndean looks diminished and regressive and confined.<sup>5)</sup> Ferndean is so isolated and closed that there is no possibility to influence and be connected to community life. Jane encloses herself isolated from the busy world full of life while Rochester seems a plaything in Jane's finger. Her home cannot be "a dynamic center of activity, physical and spiritual, economic and moral, whose influence spreads out in ever-widening circles,"<sup>6)</sup> which can be said an ideal of the new matriarchy.

Furthermore, Brontë contrasts Jane's happiness with St. John's approaching death. This problematic ending disrupts and subverts Jane's proclaimed happiness even more drastically because St. John's inflexible spiritual pride and heroism shatter Jane's self-complacent and self-satisfied earthly paradise. It further perplexes and makes readers see through the romantic and mystified surface of Jane's love story, enabling readers to question the truth of her writing and to question Jane's romantic sensibility and creative imagination as

realized in her subtle uses of language.<sup>7)</sup>

Unlike Jane, Bertha is totally muted even though she is of an English-speaking race and of a higher and wealthier class than Jane's. She is called "that unfortunate lady" by Jane, which shows Jane's consciousness of their difference in social class. Yet Bertha's class did not matter to Rochester at all when he found out that Bertha had a Creole mother. When we see Bertha through Jane's eyes, Bertha is already fiendish and savage. She can no longer command the English language because of her madness and depravity. She can only laugh "the same low, slow ha! ha!" and make her eccentric murmurs. Deprived of her language, of human communication and contact, she looks like animal and goblin.

Only Rochester contacted the fine and beautiful Bertha before degradation. Only through his discourse (ch. 26 and ch. 27), we can hear about Bertha. Rochester's discourse is conveying an extravagant and exciting story of a remote and alien figure and country. Playing a role of inexperienced romantic hero in the travel story, he uses his rhetoric for more practical urgent goals. It is used to persuade Jane into marriage by rationalizing his hatred for and disgust with Bertha, his departure from Jamaica, and his confinement of Bertha. As Rochester clearly says, he is of a good Anglo-saxon and feels superior to the Creole woman. For him, she is constitutionally and naturally an inferior and base woman.

Because Jane and the Victorian audience have no direct contact with the Creole woman from the remote foreign country, they would be unconcerned with the truth-value of her representation and taken by Rochester's rhetoric. Bertha herself cannot explain the reason for her eccentric behavior and appearance and is not given the opportunity. She is always positioned not as a human subject worth trying to understand but as an object, an Other, constitutionally and naturally evil and savage. Rochester is not interested in understanding the different and alien other and would not spend his energy in understanding Bertha at all. He thus can persist in enjoying a position of moral superiority even though his past behavior exploited Bertha sexually and economically.<sup>8)</sup> For him, his past action is not a crime but an error.

Of course, he is also a victim of an "avaricious, grasping" father. Victorian patriarchy is managed partly by the diminishing landed gentry like his father. He doesn't want to decline in social status to the extent that he arranges his son's marriage of convenience and victimizes him. However, Rochester rarely questions or condemns the validity and legitimacy of either his own or his Victorian society's formation. He is always blaming the victim.<sup>9)</sup> He can't see himself and is almost solipsistic and narcissistic. Through his totally one-sided and self-righteous rhetoric, he reveals his illusions about himself and his society. He makes himself look like a Byronic hero in his exotic story.

Can you imagine that a fine and majestic woman could be changed into the low and unredeemable Bertha in a moment? She might be in the pathological society which

Victorian Imperialism produced in exploiting the Third world countries and destroying the native cultural and economic systems. As a matter of fact, Bertha's father is a West India planter and merchant; Bertha's wealth is a part of Victorian imperialistic exploitation. When she becomes mad and confined, however, her wealth is alienated from her and appropriated by Rochester.

As regards Jane, the fact that she is of a lower class than his does not matter to Rochester because she is of his race and is not savage, vile and evil like Bertha. His rhetoric is that of a Victorian male imperialist who reaps benefits from the imperial exploitation rather than a Byronic and romantic hero. His imperialistic discourse is racist.

Persuaded by Rochester's rhetoric, Jane easily forgives his crime and feels more pity and sympathy for his misery and suffering than Bertha's. For Jane, Bertha's madness is only a question of fortune not of socio-historical determination. As a woman, Jane does not consider Bertha's oppressed situation deeply even though she flees from the false cramped existence of Victorian patriarchal exploitation at first.

Bertha's miserable survival of fifteen years confinement means a kind of resistance to Victorian patriarchy and the burning of Thornfield Hall is the only possible way for her to challenge it. During that time, Jane becomes independent and wealthy from her inheritance, which means she belongs to the class exploiting colonial society. Her final return and marriage to Rochester thus are not a challenge to the status quo but an acquiescence in the existing exploitative and racist social system even though Jane's insight into the false ground of St. John's heroic mission for bettering "an inferior race" in India is precious.

Curiously enough, Gilbert and Gubar pointedly recognize the difference between Bertha and Jane while they emphasize the psychological similarity. Bertha always does what Jane wants to do secretly and cannot do, though only as an agent serving even in her death to free Jane from her hostility and fear and resentment at Victorian patriarchal society. She is always doing something, not merely dreaming a supernatural and romantic dream and wishing some secret longings.

Despite their powerful command of the English language, both Jane's and Rochester's rhetoric fail to persuade the reader who is not trapped by their illusions. This failure seems due to the repressed and silenced and sacrificed existence of Bertha. Although they try to forget and ignore Bertha, she remains the repressed element and enables us to see the limitation and contradiction within Jane's rebellious feminism. Bertha suggests the existence of a world that Jane and Rochester try to repress. She is "a bizarre representative of existence of an underworld"<sup>10</sup> of colonial people whom not only Jane and Rochester but also Western scholarship tries to ignore and wants to forget.

This forgetting is not merely a personal problem of choosing one's own interpretative framework but institutionally processed by Western scholarship although it tries to change the orientation, As Barbara Christian insists, it has still concentrated on the center itself

and has not been slightest interested in knowing the periphery it ignores and controls.<sup>11)</sup>

The image of the mad woman with streaming long black hair on the burning roof is not an empty negative in her very destructiveness. Bertha provides some indications and figurations of values radically opposed to those of the dominant Victorian patriarchal culture and society. She does not, in the first place, attack Jane the night before the wedding although she attacks her brother furiously. Unlike Jane's aunt, she seems to have a residual deep human care for a fragile female. Richard Mason's persistent caring for his mad sister is contrasted with the egoistic brother-sister relationship of Victorians such as Reeds and Rochesters. Mason's challenge to the powerful Victorian patriarch Rochester at the crucial moment is valuable. Their practices and values thus seem to provide a critique to the cramped Victorian life and society. That's why I try to understand the literary meaning of the liberating image of the mad woman on the burning roof.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Michael Foucault, "Nietzsche, Generalogy, History," from *Language, counter-memory, practice* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp.139-164.
2. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 339.
3. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," "Race," *Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Grates, Jr. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp.262-280.
4. Charlotet Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Penguin Books, 1966), p. 39.
5. Several recent critics note this point. For example, See Lee R. Edwards, *Psyche as Hero* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), pp.87-88 and Annette Tromly, *The Cover of the Mask* (University of Victoria, 1982), pp.57-61.
6. Jane P. Tomkins, "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p.100.
7. Emphasizing the form of fictional autobiography and the distance between Brontë and Jane, Tromly is excellently pointing out what Jane's writing means. Because she does not connect them with Jane's material reality, however, she sees the problem of Jane's rhetoric as indeterminacy between clarity and complexity of life, which are quite neutral terms.
8. Abdul R. Jan Mohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature", "Race," *Writing and Difference*, pp.80-85.
9. Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent," "Race," *Writing and Difference*, p.217.
10. Brook Thomas, *Cross-examination of law and literature* (Cambridge University Press,

1987), p.180, Prof. Thomas's Contemporary Theory course helped me get a clear mapping of various critical theories and write this paper.

11. Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique*, No.6(Spring 1987), p.56.