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Analysis of Jane Eyre from the Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract: In this paper, the author conducts a comprehensive exploration of Jane Eyre from the postcolonial perspective. Certain characters are viewed as postcolonial archetypes for analysis: Jane Eyre as a marginalized figure due to her orphan status and mistreatment; Bertha Mason as a colonial woman with dual oppression because of her Creole identity; Mr. Rochester reflecting the era's power dynamics and racial hierarchies; St. John Rivers embodying the colonizer with his missionary zeal and authoritarian behavior. The research also explores key postcolonial themes underlying the text: racial hierarchies and othering, exposing how these lead to dehumanization; imperial influence on social structures, critiquing how it shaped 19th-century British society; and cultural hegemony and identity formation, showing how it pervades Victorian society and affects Jane Eyre's journey towards self-identity. This analysis helps understand literature's reflection of its social and historical context, especially regarding imperial influence and cultural hegemony.

Keywords: Charlotte Brontë; Jane Eyre; Postcolonial Theory.

1. Introduction

Jane Eyre, a novel by Charlotte Brontë, narrates the life of an orphaned girl named Jane Eyre, who, after enduring numerous adversities, grows into a strong and independent woman. The novel can be divided into five parts, each focusing on a separate stage of Jane's life: her miserable childhood at Gateshead Hall under the guardianship of Mrs. Reed; her harsh school life at Lowood boarding school; her peaceful life as a governess at Thornfield Hall; her time in shelter with the Rivers's family and her eventual reunion with Mr. Rochester. Given that the narrative revolves around a young woman's struggle for independence, it is unsurprising that feminist interpretations of Jane Eyre have garnered significant scholarly attention. It should be noted that Jane's journey towards self-discovery is also deeply intertwined with the novel's colonial undertones, particularly evident in Mr. Rochester's first marriage and St. John Rivers's missionary ambitions. However, exploration of Jane Eyre from a postcolonial perspective is not extensive.

Postcolonial theory, which critiques colonialism and its lasting impacts, examines how social, racial and cultural hierarchies justify imperial dominance. Brontë's work, written during this era, subtly reflects these imperial ideologies, especially in its depiction of race and class dynamics and how these issues are tied to colonial thought. By analyzing the novel's characters and their interactions within the context of British imperialism, this study aims to show how colonialism not only shaped social structures but also influenced individual identities, particularly for marginalized groups. This research thus offers a more nuanced understanding of *Jane Eyre*, providing new insights into its engagement with colonialism and its effects on gender and race relations.

2. Postcolonial Theory

2.1. Othering

"Othering", a central tenet in postcolonial theory, denotes the ideological process by which a dominant group portrays a marginalized group or culture as fundamentally distinct and inferior—characterizing it as heterogeneous, barbaric, inscrutable or in need of subjugation. This notion of "Otherness" is pivotal to the discursive formation of Orientalism, wherein the West defines its identity through opposition to an Orient constructed as static, irrational and enigmatic, in contrast to the West self-perception as rational, progressive and self-determined (Edward Said, 1978).

Typically orchestrated by colonizers, the act of "Othering" employs cultural, linguistic, religious, legal and various other mechanisms to depict the colonized as an "Other", thereby legitimizing the colonizers' hegemony. This process transcends mere acknowledgment of difference; it involves constructing an image of the "Other" that can be assimilated or dominated by colonial power while preserving the distinction that upholds such dominance. The construction of the "Other" is not simply an inverse of the Self but an intricate, ambivalent process of cultural engagement, negotiation, and imitation (Homi K. Bhabha, 1994).

2.2. Power Dynamics

Power dynamics in colonial and postcolonial societies involve complex, multifaceted interactions between colonizers and the colonized. This power isn't a one-way flow but is deeply embedded across social, political and cultural dimensions. Colonizers assert control through manipulating resources, social institutions, cultural discourse and education systems. Their dominance is evident not only in material exploitation but also in cultural and psychological manipulation, where colonizer values and lifestyles are idealized as the standard of civilization, compelling the colonized to conform.

In the postcolonial context, racialized power structures manifest through the labeling and differentiation of the colonized based on racial characteristics and cultural distinctions. Colonizers highlight oppositions such as civilization versus barbarism to justify unequal resource distribution, political participation and cultural expression. Racialized language and propaganda cultivate white supremacy, marginalizing the colonized groups further.

Gendered power relations in colonial societies intersect with racial and class oppressions, disproportionately affecting

women from colonized territories. They face dual oppression—from men within their own society and from racial and cultural biases of the colonizers. Colonized women are often depicted as heterogeneous, barbaric and oppressed, with the rhetoric of liberating them used to reinforce control (Fanon,1952). Colonial women thus endure gender oppression from both colonizers and their local male-dominated societies.

Class is another critical factor in postcolonial power dynamics. The colonized experience not only racial and gender inequality but also severe economic class oppression. Colonizers entrench class structures by depriving local societies of wealth and resources while maintaining control over education, employment and resource distribution (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1988). Most native inhabitants in colonial societies belong to the lower classes, with only a select few able to ascend within the colonizer's system. Colonizers reinforce this class oppression through land ownership, resource exploitation, and taxation systems.

3. Characters as Postcolonial Archetypes

3.1. Jane Eyre

Jane Eyre's portrayal as a marginalized figure within British society underscores her precarious and fringe status. This marginalization begins with her upbringing as an orphan, followed by her miserable childhood in the care of her aunt, Mrs. Reed and cousins who treat her poorly. The Reed family's treatment of her highlights the class prejudices of the time, where being an orphan and poor subjects one to mistreatment and neglect. It comes as no surprise that Jane is eventually abandoned by her aunt at the age of ten. In their final meeting, Mrs. Reed candidly expresses her social discrimination regarding Jane's future: "Quite right, sir. I may then depend upon this child being received as a pupil at Lowood, and there being trained in conformity to her position and prospects?"(Charlotte Brontë, p.53)

Despite her intelligence and aspirations, Jane faces limited opportunities due to societal expectations of women. Her role as a governess further cements her low social standing. The social discrimination faced by governesses is clearly depicted in the following excerpts:

Miss Ingram: "No, you men never do consider economy and common sense. You should hear mama on the chapter of governesses: Mary and I have had, I should think, a dozen at least in our day; half of them detestable and the rest ridiculous, and all incubi — were they not, mama?"

Mama: "My dearest, don't mention governesses; the word makes me nervous. I have suffered a martyrdom from their incompetency and caprice. I thank Heaven I have now done with them!"(Charlotte Brontë, p.296-297)

3.2. Bertha Mason

Bertha Mason serves as a critical example of how colonial women experience dual oppression. As a Creole woman, Bertha's identity places her in a uniquely vulnerable position. While she technically holds the title of Rochester's wife, she is stripped of all agency, locked away in the attic, and described in ways that dehumanize her. Rochester's depiction of Bertha aligns with colonialist narratives that frame native and Creole women as barbaric and in need of control: "What a pigmy intellect she had, and what giant propensities!"(Charlotte Brontë, p.320), emphasizing her supposed lack of reason and excess of primitive passion. Such descriptions reinforce the colonial ideology that non-European women were inherently wild and unfit for autonomy.

Bertha's confinement represents the broader colonial practice of controlling and silencing native women. Just as colonized lands and their inhabitants were subjected to European domination under the pretext of civilization, Bertha is literally imprisoned under Rochester's authority. Jane describes seeing her for the first time: "In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell"(Charlotte Brontë, p.342). The uncertainty of her humanity reflects the way colonial women were often reduced to mere figures of monstrosity. Furthermore, when Bertha is finally revealed, Rochester exclaims: "That is my wife, such as she is now. Look at her!" (Charlotte Brontë, p. 343). His public exposure of her as a spectacle echoes the colonial tradition of exhibiting the "exotic Other" as both a curiosity and a justification for control.

3.3. Mr. Rochester

Mr. Rochester's characterization in *Jane Eyre* can be interpreted through the lens of colonization, offering profound insights into the power dynamics, racial hierarchies, and cultural superiority that defined the era.

Firstly, Mr. Rochester is depicted as a wealthy and powerful landowner, aligning with the archetype of the colonizer who exerts control over both people and territory. Despite his frequent absences, he remains the absolute master of Thornfield Hall, mirroring how colonial powers asserted dominance over distant lands. His authoritative demeanor further underscores his role as a figure embodying power and control. The economic dynamics between Rochester and the inhabitants of his estate, including Jane Eyre as his employee, reflect exploitative relationships characteristic of colonial systems.

Secondly, Rochester's first marriage to Bertha Mason, a woman of mixed race often interpreted as having Caribbean or West Indian ancestry, brings to light the racial hierarchies of the time. Bertha represents the colonized Other, someone marginalized and confined due to her racial identity and perceived madness. Her confinement in the attic parallels the silencing and erasure of indigenous and colonized populations, highlighting Rochester's participation in oppressive imperialist structures.

Thirdly, Rochester embodies the cultural superiority complex frequently ascribed to European colonizers. His education, refined manners, and social status position him as superior to those around him, especially Jane. This sense of superiority justifies his actions and decisions, much like the rationale used by colonizers to justify their rule over other nations and peoples. The following exchange exemplifies this: Mr. Rochester: "And now what did you learn at Lowood? Can you play?"

Jane Eyre: "A little."

Mr. Rochester: "Of course: that is the established answer. Go into the library—I mean, if you please. (Excuse my tone of command; I am used to saying, 'Do this,' and it is done: I cannot alter my customary habits for one new inmate.) Go, then, into the library; take a candle with you; leave the door open; sit down to the piano, and play a tune."

I departed, obeying his directions.

Mr.Rochester: “Enough!” he called out a few minutes later. “You play A LITTLE, I see; like any other English schoolgirl; perhaps rather better than some, but not well.”

This interaction highlights his perceiving himself as inherently superior and entitled to command, reinforcing the power imbalances inherent in colonial relationships.

3.4. St. John Rivers

St. John Rivers’s character in *Jane Eyre* embodies several aspects of the colonizer archetype. His missionary fervor, authoritarian demeanor, economic exploitation tendencies, and emotional detachment all contribute to this image.

St. John Rivers embodies the missionary zeal that was a hallmark of European colonialism. His unwavering commitment to spreading Christianity to non-Christian regions, particularly India, mirrors the civilizing mission often espoused by colonial powers. He sees it as his duty to enlighten and save the “heathen” populace, echoing the sentiment that white Europeans had a moral responsibility to spread their culture and beliefs to the less fortunate. He frames his mission as a noble cause, stating: “Reason, and not feeling, is my guide… Duty directs me; and duty is the God I obey” (Charlotte Brontë, p. 402).

St. John’s authoritarian style reflects the hierarchical structures often imposed on colonized societies. He expects obedience and discipline from the people around, creating an environment where his word is law. This mirrors the way colonial administrators exerted control over indigenous populations, maintaining order through strict regulations and punishments. This is fully revealed in his persuasion of Jane to India: “God and nature intended you for a missionary’s wife. It is not personal, but mental endowments they have given you: you are formed for labour, not for love. A missionary’s wife you must — shall be. You shall be mine: I claim you — (Charlotte Brontë, p.686)

In his relationship with Jane, St. John attempts to assert a similar dominance. When he proposes marriage, it is not based on romantic love or mutual respect but rather on the practical consideration of her assisting him in his missionary work. This kind of marriage is not only exploitative in the same way as industrial colonizers but also reflects a certain emotional detachment that can be linked to the colonizer mentality. St. John’s attitude is clearly displayed in the following words:

“Simplify your complicated interests, feelings, thoughts, wishes, aims; merge all considerations in one purpose: that of fulfilling with effect—with power— the mission of your great Master. To do so, you must have a coadjutor: not a brother —that is a loose tie—but a husband. I, too, do not want a sister: a sister might any day be taken from me. I want a wife: the sole helpmate I can influence efficiently in life, and retain absolutely till death.”(Charlotte Brontë, p.692)

4. Postcolonial Themes in Jane Eyre

4.1. Racial Hierarchies and Othering

Jane Eyre masterfully unveils the intricate web of racial hierarchies, social status, and the process of othering. The narrative sheds light on how economic motivations, colonial exploitation, and societal pressures can lead to the dehumanization and marginalization of certain individuals or groups. In one poignant excerpt, Mr.Rochester recalls the plot of his first marriage:

“Yet as little could he endure that a son of his should be a poor man. I must be provided for by a wealthy marriage. He sought me a partner betimes. Mr. Mason, a West India planter and merchant, was his old acquaintance. He was certain his possessions were real and vast: he made inquiries. Mr. Mason, he found, had a son and daughter; and he learned from him that he could and would give the latter a fortune of thirty thousand pounds: that sufficed. When I left college, I was sent out to Jamaica, to espouse a bride already courted for me. ... Her family wished to secure me because I was of a good race; and so did she. ... Her relatives encouraged me; competitors piqued me; she allured me: a marriage was achieved almost before I knew where I was. Oh, I have no respect for myself when I think of that act! — an agony of inward contempt masters me. I never loved, I never esteemed, I did not even know her. I was not sure of the existence of one virtue in her nature: I had marked neither modesty, nor benevolence, nor candour, nor refinement in her mind or manners — and, I married her:- gross, grovelling, mole-eyed blockhead that I was! (Charlotte Brontë, p.518)

The mention of Mr. Mason being a “West India planter and merchant” alludes to the historical context of European colonization and the exploitation of enslaved peoples in the Caribbean. The wealth he possesses is likely derived from such exploitative practices, which underscores the racial hierarchies and the dehumanization of enslaved individuals who were instrumental in accumulating this wealth. It also reveals the protagonist’s internalized racism and elitism. He marries out of social obligation rather than genuine affection or respect, indicating how societal pressures can lead to the dehumanization of others. His lack of respect for his wife and his subsequent regret highlight the consequences of marrying someone solely for their perceived social or economic value. The use of terms like “gross, grovelling, mole-eyed blockhead” to describe himself reflects the self-loathing and disdain he feels towards his own choices, which were heavily influenced by societal expectations.

The excerpt continues with an all-around attack of the Mason family members:

“My bride’s mother I had never seen: I understood she was dead. The honeymoon over, I learned my mistake; she was only mad, and shut up in a lunatic asylum. There was a younger brother, too — a complete dumb idiot. The elder one, whom you have seen (and whom I cannot hate, whilst I abhor all his kindred, because he has some grains of affection in his feeble mind, shown in the continued interest he takes in his wretched sister, and also in a dog-like attachment he once bore me), will probably be in the same state one day. ... her character ripened and developed with frightful rapidity; her vices sprang up fast and rank: they were so strong, only cruelty could check them, and I would not use cruelty. What a pigmy intellect she had, and what giant propensities! How fearful were the curses those propensities entailed on me! Bertha Mason, the true daughter of an infamous mother, dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste. (Charlotte Brontë, p.520)

The references to Bertha Mason’s family members—her mother in a lunatic asylum and her brother being a “dumb idiot:—serve to further “other” them, marking them as inherently defective or undesirable. This portrayal perpetuates negative stereotypes about mental illness and disability, framing them as burdens or sources of shame rather than as conditions that require understanding and compassion. Mr. Rochester describes Bertha Mason in highly negative

terms, focusing on her vices and the suffering she brought to the him. This description serves to distance him from her, reinforcing the idea that she is fundamentally different and unworthy. The language used to describe her character such as 'pigmy intellect' and 'giant propensities' further entrenches the divide between them, illustrating the process of othering through dehumanizing language.

4.2. Imperial Influence on Social Structures

Jane Eyre offers a nuanced examination of how imperial influences molded social structures and individual lives in 19th-century Britain. Through its exploration of class, race, and religion, the novel provides a critique of the widespread impact of the British Empire on its characters and their interactions.

Thornfield Hall symbolizes more than just wealth and power; it represents the colonial foundation upon which such estates were built. Mr. Rochester's fortune is traceable to the plantations in the West Indies, where enslaved labor was prevalent, underscoring the economic prosperity of the British Empire rooted in exploitation. Characters like Mr. Rochester embody the traits of imperial masculinity—dominance, control, and superiority. His authoritative demeanor and his exertion of control over his household staff and Jane herself reflect the paternalistic and domineering attitudes associated with British imperialism.

Bertha Mason, Rochester's Creole wife from Jamaica, embodies the 'otherness' often linked with colonial subjects. Her madness and confinement can be seen as symbolic of the dehumanization and marginalization of colonized peoples. Her presence in the attic of Thornfield parallels the hidden yet pervasive impact of colonial histories on the British psyche. The portrayal of Bertha taps into the racist stereotypes of the time, depicting her as savage and untameable, which reflects the broader racial prejudices that justified imperial domination and the civilizing mission narrative.

Characters like St. John Rivers represent the missionary zeal intrinsic to British imperial expansion. St. John's commitment to spread his religious convictions abroad echoes the Victorian era's imperial ambitions to Christianize and "civilize" other parts of the world.

4.3. Cultural Hegemony and Identity Formation

In *Jane Eyre*, cultural hegemony is intricately woven into the fabric of Victorian society, influencing various aspects of the characters' lives and the societal norms they navigate.

Victorian gender norms are rigorously enforced throughout the narrative. Women are expected to conform to restrictive roles, primarily as wives and mothers, with limited opportunities for education or professional life. The institution of marriage is particularly scrutinized, with women often lacking autonomy in their marital choices. This patriarchal framework reflects the broader cultural hegemony that seeks to maintain male dominance and control over female agency. The portrayal of Bertha Mason, Rochester's Creole wife from Jamaica, taps into the racial prejudices of the time. Her depiction as mad and untameable reinforces colonialist stereotypes of the "savage" other. Bertha's confinement in the attic parallels the silencing and marginalization of colonized voices, reflecting the broader racial hegemony that dehumanizes and exoticizes non-European subjects. Religion plays a significant role in shaping the moral landscape of the novel. The character of Brocklehurst at Lowood School embodies the hypocrisy and rigidity of religious dogma, using it as a tool for social control. This religiosity is intertwined with imperialist notions of civilization and moral superiority, justifying the subjugation of "less civilized" populations both at home and abroad.

Amidst this backdrop of cultural hegemony, Jane Eyre's journey towards self-identity is both a struggle against and a negotiation with these dominant forces.

Jane's refusal to conform to the submissive role expected of her as a woman and her lower-class status marks her out as an individualist. Her insistence on being treated with dignity, despite her circumstances, challenges the class-based and gender-based hierarchies that seek to define her identity. Jane's educational and professional aspirations reflect her desire for intellectual and personal freedom. By teaching at Lowood School and later at Thornfield, she asserts her independence and rejects the traditional path of marriage as the sole means of social advancement. This pursuit of autonomy is central to her identity formation. Jane's relationships, particularly with Mr. Rochester, are governed by her principles of honesty and equality. Her decision to leave Rochester when she discovers his secret marriage, despite her deep love for him, underscores her commitment to her own moral compass. This emotional resilience and ethical steadfastness are crucial components of her identity. Her eventual return to Rochester, now free to marry, symbolizes not only a personal union but also a rejection of the exploitative systems that once defined her. This act of self-realization completes her identity formation, aligning her personal values with her actions.

In conclusion, Jane Eyre offers a profound exploration of how cultural hegemony shapes individual identities within a specific historical context. Jane's journey from a marginalized orphan to a self-assured individual is a testament to the human capacity for resistance and self-determination amidst overwhelming social pressures.

5. Conclusion

This research provides a detailed analysis of *Jane Eyre* through the lens of postcolonialism, offering fresh insights into its portrayal of colonialism and its impact on gender and race relations. The following characters are examined as postcolonial archetypes: Jane Eyre is portrayed as a marginalized figure due to her orphan status and the mistreatment she faces, highlighting her precarious position in British society; Bertha Mason represents colonial women who suffer from dual oppression due to her Creole identity, placing her in a uniquely vulnerable position; Mr. Rochester's character is interpreted through the lens of colonization, reflecting the power dynamics, racial hierarchies, and cultural superiority of the era; St. John Rivers embodies the colonizer archetype through his missionary zeal, authoritarian behavior, exploitation tendencies, and emotional detachment. By examining the characters as postcolonial archetypes, it reveals the hidden impacts of colonialism on gender and race relations within the novel, shedding light on the marginalized voices and oppression in the story.

The research also explores key postcolonial themes in the novel. Firstly, racial hierarchies and othering. The narrative exposes the complex racial hierarchies and social status that led to the dehumanization and marginalization of certain individuals or groups. Secondly, imperial influence on social structures. The novel critiques how imperial influences shaped social structures and individual lives in 19th-century

Britain, examining class, race, and religion. Thirdly, cultural hegemony and identity formation. Cultural hegemony is shown to pervade Victorian society, affecting the characters' lives and societal norms. Jane Eyre's journey towards self-identity is depicted as both a struggle against and a negotiation with these dominant forces. The exploration of postcolonial themes in *Jane Eyre* helps to understand how literature reflects and engages with the social and historical contexts of its time, especially regarding imperial influence and cultural hegemony.

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