

Comparing Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre in Foucault's Perspective to Interpret "The Madwoman in the Attic"

Yue Yang^{1,a,*}

¹College of Liberal Arts, Sichuan Normal University, Chengdu, 610066, China

a. 100994@yzpc.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: Charlotte Bronte portrayed a marginal character in Jane Eyre, Bertha Mason, the madwoman in the attic. Many readers thought she was insane, ugly, and silent at the same time. She emerges from the attic later to recount her forgotten background in Wide Sargasso Sea when Jane Rhys investigates her family history. Whether it is the postmodern writing style or the psychological exploration of the heroine in the novel, it has the artistic research value of various interpretations. The study of Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre mainly focuses on postcolonial discourse and identity discourse. It is rare to analyze Bertha from the perspective of Foucault's discourse power theory. This essay interprets Bertha and Antoinette's characterizations in terms of the interrelationships of discourse, power, and knowledge based on Foucault's theory of discursive power. It examines the lack of women's discourse and its reconstruction, broadens the viewpoints of Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre, and deepens our comprehension of The Madwoman in the Attic.

Keywords: Foucault, discursive power, Jane Eyre, Wide Sargasso Sea

1. Introduction

Jane Rhys is a well-known contemporary woman writer whose masterpiece, Wide Sargasso Sea, won the Royal Society Prize for Literature that year. The following year it won the W.H. Smith Literary Award. The majority of Wide Sargasso Sea is written from the perspective of Bertha, a crazy attic dweller and Rochester's former wife. Bertha describes her own awkward predicament as a white Creole lady in the colony and the tyranny she endured under a patriarchal culture. The work has the significance of an aesthetic study with multiple interpretations, whether it is the postmodern writing style or the psychological investigation of the heroine. Wide Sargasso Sea is a retelling of the text of Jane Eyre, which has attracted the attention and interpretation of many readers since its publication [1]. The reason why Wide Sargasso Sea has attracted much attention is largely because Rhys adapted the famous Jane Eyre in the mad woman Bertha. Jane Eyre created the role of Bertha, the mad woman in the attic. Under Jane Rhys's exploration, she walked out of the attic and told us about her forgotten past in Wide Sargasso Sea.

The postcolonial perspective, the feminist viewpoint, and the intertextual perspective are the three primary lenses through which the field of international studies is evaluated [2]. For instance, Silvia Cappelletto elaborated on the precarious position of Creoles and the discrimination they face. Carine Melkon discusses the role of patriarchy in the perpetuation of racism and other forms of oppression. Rajeev S. Patke draws parallels in the portrayal of two insane women. Most domestic studies on Wide

Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre focus on postcolonial discourse and identity discourse, or deconstruct the self-construction of the protagonist, explore the relationship between identity consciousness and narrative strategies in the works or explore the implicit postcolonial resistance discourse in the works. Domestic studies such as Zeng Li's "Deconstruction and Return in the Postcolonial Context: Interpreting 'Wide Sargasso Sea'" and Zhang Feng's "The Voice of the Subordinate: The Discourse of Postcolonial Resistance in 'Wide Sargasso Sea'" both interpret the madwoman Bertha from a postcolonial perspective. Sun Ni's "The Sea is Boundless, Where Does Man Return: An Examination of the Theme and Artistic Style of Joan Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea," and Zhang Deming's "Identity Consciousness and Narrative Strategy in The Sea is Boundless" analyze the narrative strategy and artistic style. The analysis of Bertha from the perspective of Foucault's discourse power theory is relatively rare.

2. Theoretical Framework

Foucault proposed the concept of "discourse as power". In his discourse, "discourse" and "knowledge" are both very important elements. On the one hand, he is of the opinion that the production, accumulation, and diffusion of discourse are inextricably linked to the establishment of power, its unification, and the carrying out of authority's responsibilities. Power gives rise to speech, and discourse, in turn, gives rise to power. On the other hand, in his opinion, in order for people to generate knowledge and achieve "truth" they must first spread the words that they have created for themselves. People's lives are permeated with power. It is an active form of expression and plays a significant part in the process of disseminating information. Control and influence can be exerted through words when power is present.

In addition, Foucault emphasized that discourse is a social structure that comes before being as an individual. In order for individuals to successfully develop their own identities, they need to be able to communicate their thoughts using a certain mode of discourse and have those thoughts understood by other people. Not only does discourse make use of language to convey meaning, but it also possesses a significant ability to construct. Discourse is an expression of practical activities that take place in real life. Our own lives, as well as our comprehension and perception of the world, and even our very subjectivity, are products of the discourse that we engage in.

This paper is divided into three main parts; the first part is to analyze the image of the madwoman Bertha and explain how she loses her discourse to become the Other in Jane Eyre. The second part is to analyze how Antoinette becomes an active participant in power and achieves self-reinvention in Wide Sargasso Sea. The third part then compares the two images and summarizes the interrelationship between discourse and power.

3. Madwoman Bertha Becomes the Other in Jane Eyre

In Jane Eyre, Bertha is seen as a foil to the heroine, Jane Eyre, and is even denied a voice and labelled as "mad". Bertha's father, a wealthy West Indies plantation owner and merchant, is willing to give his daughter £30,000 as a dowry. Before she gets married, Bertha is described in the book as being "famous for her beauty in Spain" as well as "tall, dark, and very solemn" She is both beautiful and talented, and as a result, she has a lot of admirers. Before she wed Rochester, Bertha was obviously a lovely and captivating woman. This is something that can be observed. In stark contrast to this is the fact that Bertha eventually went insane and became a terrible person as a result of being abused. He says nothing about this, except that he married Bertha "out of ignorance, immaturity, inexperience" and "the lust, recklessness and blindness of youth". "I found her a beauty, tall, tanned, and magnificent," and Rochester satisfied male vanity with such a rich and attractive wife. In spite of this, Rochester has locked Bertha up in a cramped, windowless room in the attic of Thornfield Manor

on the grounds that Bertha is insane and hails from a family of insane people. Bertha has been held there since the physicians decided that she was insane. The author wrote that the room was even "turned by her into a lair of wild beasts, a den of monsters." One can easily envision that if a person were to spend their entire life shut away in a room with no windows and no access to the outside world, they would eventually lose their sanity. Rochester's right to talk has led to a significant transformation of Bertha from a beautiful woman into a beast. A raving lunatic won't have anyone listening to a word she has to say. Rochester, who had become enormously wealthy as a result of his marriage, started treating his wife with disdain and contempt. "I never loved her, respected her, I did not even know her", "her fun disgusted me, and I found I could not spend an evening, or even an hour of the day, comfortably with her ". The deceitful behavior of Rochester has been brought to light. In his eyes, Bertha is nothing more than his own vassal, a piece of art that only appears to be appealing on the surface. This is all being done to cater to his own self-interest and narcissism, nothing more. In order to demonstrate that everything makes perfect sense, he is going to continue to mock Bertha. Rochester is often seen as the hub of power and successfully maintains its own authority.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is always in a state of aphasia and is labeled as "evil" and "mad" and has no chance to defend herself [3]. Nobody in her immediate vicinity paid attention to what she had to say or considered her defense leaving all her past to Rochester's word. In *Jane Eyre*, the author never once discusses Jane directly in any kind. Each of Bertha's four appearances is accompanied by either a demonic chuckle or a high-pitched scream. Bertha's first appearance within the work, although she is not really in front of the reader, has the effect of terrifying everyone with the "saddest, most incredible" laughter in the novel. We should probably steer clear of this woman since we have the impression that she is really frightening. After reading such a description, nearly no one will even attempt to comprehend why Bertha is in such a situation; instead, they will merely feel bored. Bertha remains voiceless, without a voice, forced into silence in the gloomy attic.

The long imprisonment has left Bertha without a voice, and in her place is Rochester, who has locked her up. He never stopped talking about how great he was while simultaneously putting Bertha down in order to emphasize his superiority. When Rochester's hypocritical lies are exposed, he recklessly shames Bertha for having the crudest, nastiest, most corrupt character. It was difficult for Rochester and her to have a cordial chat because no matter what topic he started, he would immediately hear from her a conversation that was crude and prosaic, hostile and impotent. This made it impossible for Rochester and her to have a conversation. Rochester suggested that the marriage was the culmination of her stimulating, seductive, and perplexing behavior toward him. He made the offensive and unjustifiable accusation that Bertha had revealed her true nature after the wedding. It makes no difference even if Bertha is completely insane. He intended to make use of this in order to categorize her and locate a justification for confining her. He blames it all on Bertha Mason, who is labeled a "crazy woman" and can't do anything about it. Some academics are of the opinion that the protagonist did not inherit his mental illness but rather cultivated it over time on his own [4]. However, in most cases, the other characters continue to refer to the protagonist as a mad woman. Bertha's male companions did not provide her the right to speak, and they dictated both her words and her acts regardless of what she said or did. In the presence of the men Rochester represented, she was stripped of her right to express herself, she lost her identity, and she was reduced to the role of a male subordinate. Bertha is a miserable person. It is impossible for other people to comprehend and acknowledge her in a society that is patriarchal. Even her identity was taken away from her. She was unable to speak to other people or communicate with the outside world since she was unable to speak. Therefore, as a result of the daily torment, she gradually forgot who she was and ultimately led herself to ruin.

4. Antoinette Reinvents Herself in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

The heroine of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a Caucasian Creole woman who suffers discrimination at the hands of both the locals and the whites in the area. Because she is a woman, she must also deal with the double amount of pressure that comes from her stepfather and her husband. She began to slowly awaken as a result of the power operation performed by the author, and she eventually became aware of the return of her own qualities [5]. Jane Rhys enriches Antoinette's image without completely subverting it. She didn't recreate the image of a perfect, independent woman. Rather, it retains the reader's original impression and integrates Antoinette's self.

The first thing that Antoinette is subjected to is colonial oppression. In the first part of the novel Antoinette recounts her adolescent experiences. After the abolition of slavery in the West Indies, Antoinette is plunged into identity confusion and disorientation. She is called a "white cockroach" by blacks and a "white-skinned nigger" by whites. She was unable to determine where she fit in or how she related to other people because of this. But for the first time she spoke out against the mainstream: "I've never looked at a strange black person in the eye. They hated us. They call us white cockroaches" [6]. She unwittingly utters fringe words and is troubled by reality, which is a reflection of the racial and colonial struggles that were prevalent during the time period.

During that period, she was unable to exercise her freedom because her stepfather was such an oppressive figure. Therefore, despite the fact that it was a prearranged marriage, she was still attempting to keep the marriage together. But for Rochester, their marriage was nothing more than a solution to a financial problem, and as a result, he never gave the idea of taking the relationship seriously a second thought [7]. In Rochester's eyes, "her pleading look irritated me. It was not I who bought her, but she who bought me." He intentionally calls her "Bertha" and denies Antoinette's identity. He gave her the fictitious name "Bertha" on purpose in order to conceal her true identity and cast doubt on the existence of Antoinette [8]. He deprives Antoinette of her ego, which symbolizes the absence of her voice.

In the second part of the novel, Rochester, as the enforcer of power, holds the discourse that represents power. He suppresses and dominates the colonized, Bertha, through the colonial discourse. Rochester looked down on Creoles, so his image of West Indian Creoles was full of all kinds of prejudice and derogation. However, Rhys uses Antoinette's narrative to "resist" truth and authority. Antoinette interrupts him to expose all of these lies and tell the truth of the matter. Antoinette moves from passively "listening" and being judged to actively speaking. Antoinette becomes a participant in the power. She is no longer willing to take Rochester's insults and evaluations at face value and instead chooses to fight back with facts. She started telling the truth about the events of the past and voicing her views. Antoinette's active narrative dismantles the authority of the male-dominated discourse represented by Rochester, which signifies her transformation from an unconscious other at the mercy of others to an active participant. This represents the slow construction of herself.

The third part of the novel is again narrated by Antoinette, whom Rochester changes her name to Bertha, hiding her in an attic in the Thornfield estate. At the time in Jamaica, the heroine still has an identity to speak of; she is white and black, colonizer and colonized. She is a complex mix. But she loses her identity completely when she comes to England. She lost her voice and lost her identity. Rochester takes control of her, and she becomes a prisoner. This means that he gets back the power that Antoinette had shared with him. But Foucault argues that "power is never located, it is never in the hands of some people, it is never appropriated like property or wealth, it operates." Despite the fact that Rochester was able to briefly dominate the right to speak in order to gain control over Bertha. However, words may put up a fight and have the ability to evoke power.

Antoinette wanted to struggle to regain power, but it was not easy to overthrow the traditional Western centers of power represented by Rochester. It will be difficult for her power alone to affect

a change in all of this. She is a woman who has been subjugated by colonial rule and patriarchy, yet she has not lost her determination to fight against those systems of oppression. Antoinette made the decision to end her life in order to free herself from Rochester's control, vent her rage, and satisfy her need for vengeance. Ultimately, Antoinette was able to fully awaken and locate herself in the world. She made the decision to destroy everything in order to free herself from the unending subjugation and control that she was subjected to. She held candles to light the castle, a symbol of colonial rule and patriarchy. During the blaze, Antoinette managed to liberate herself, much like a moth to a flame, and find her way back to herself within the fervent flame. Antoinette chose to end her misery by taking her own life; she was courageous, but at the same time, she was unlucky. Even though she was liberated, colonial power and patriarchy continued after her release. There are also a great number of female victims of torture who, thankfully, may have been able to escape such a life. But unfortunately for some people, they have no choice but to lose their minds. They are unable to communicate in any way, are incapable of debating with those in the outer world, and have long since abandoned themselves.

5. Summing up: Discourse and Power Interact

Rochester holds a discourse that represents power, and he uses colonial discourse to suppress and dominate the colonized. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester is full of various prejudices and intentional denigration of the Creole people. He intentionally calls Antoinette "Bertha" in order to deny and deprive her of her identity. In *Jane Eyre*, we can see that Bertha is left to Rochester's word, and she is deprived of the right to speak and defend herself, and eventually loses herself. Foucault has done research on prisons, and he points out that in the round prison there is a "central surveillance point" as the center of power implementation [9]. Every window in the cell looks out onto the point of surveillance, so any movement that is being watched is visible to the people who are keeping an eye on it. However, the people who are being watched cannot see the captives. Therefore, regardless of whether or not they are actually being monitored, they will have the impression that they are being monitored, and they will voluntarily comply with the rules. This central discourse of power monitors each individual by means of a "gaze". It envelops the individual's body and daily behavior. Bertha was locked up by Rochester so that he could amass more power. But Antoinette took the initiative to step to the platform and speak out, becoming an active participant in power, courageously defying truth and authority, and inverting the role of power and subject in the process. She completes the reconstruction of her self-image by identifying herself, courageously questioning the authority of truth, and exercising the resistance of discourse to power.

6. Conclusions

Through the interpretation of Bertha and Antoinette's fate, it is possible to discover that in a culture dominated by patriarchy, women hold no status and are subservient to men. They are deprived of the right to express who they are, they are unable to direct the course of their own lives, and they are unable to pursue happiness. By resetting the discourse power [10], Jane Rhys criticized Western centralism and hegemonism, helped women at the bottom to express their voices, criticized the oppression and control of the people by the colonial rulers, and expressed dissatisfaction with colonialism and resistance to social oppression. The author helps us unravel the mystery of the "madwomen in the attic" who were not born mad, or who were not mad. The "madwomen" were discriminated against and chained by the male society, and these "madwomen" were crying out silently with laughter and screams, which also reflected the helplessness of women and the loss of their voice at that time.

References

- [1] Huang Qinghui. (2019). A Foucaultian Interpretation of the Madwoman Image in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Journal of Minjiang University*, 40, 40-45.
- [2] Lei, G., & Xu, X. (2019). *The Dialogue of Madness and Civilization: a Study on the Reasons for Antoinette's Madness in Wide Sargasso Sea*.
- [3] Zhou Hui. (2019). The separation of spirit and meat: Bertha Mason and Fanyu crazy image comparison. *Popular literature*, 15, 33-34.
- [4] Jalali, J. (2019). *Feminization, construction and re-construction of madness: intertextuality between Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea* (Doctoral dissertation, Brac University).
- [5] Meng Yuan. (2014). *The Interpretation of Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea under Intertextual Perspective*. (Doctoral dissertation, Northeast Normal University).
- [6] Wang Rui. (2007). Voice from the colony -on the discourse in the boundless Algal Sea. *Science and technology information*, 26, 163.
- [7] He Xin. (2019). Read the tragic fate of crazy women in post-colonial feminism. *Young writer*, 27, 150.
- [8] Lei Lingju. (2019). Interpret the authority construction of the heroine in the boundless algae Sea from the feminist narrative science, 23, 116-117.
- [9] Shi Yu. (2019). *Rebelling against Power: A Study of Foucault's Theory of Discourse*. (Doctoral dissertation).
- [10] Wei Wei. (2020). The endless postcolonial narrative of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Literature education*, 12, 86-87.