Imperialism in the novels of Aphra Behn, Jane Austen and Jean Rhys: A reading of *Oroonoko*, *Mansfield Park* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Imperialism in the novels of Aphra Behn, Jane Austen and Jean Rhys: A Reading of *Oroonoko*, *Mansfield Park* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract

World history today is largely shaped by the history of imperialism. The traces and effects of imperialism can not only be found in the works of dominant writers, but many African and Asian writers also refer to the presence of slavery and colonisation in European writings. Such English writings include *Oroonoko* (1688) by Aphra Behn, *Mansfield Park* (1814) by Jane Austen and *Jane Eyre* (1848) by Charlotte Brontë. *Oroonoko* gives us the earliest account of slavery and British imperialism in Surinam. *Mansfield Park* is a domestic novel that helps us to understand the contribution of slave labour to the European economy. On the other hand, there are some contemporary novels that respond to European accounts of imperial history. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a response to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. *Wide Sargasso Sea* portrays the imperial history from a Creole West Indian's point of view. These works show that different accounts of imperialism are still important both as a reference of history and as records of how imperialism that have shaped the world and individual lives.

Introduction

> "[B]ecause I know you will take pleasure in the great victory that Our Lord has given me in my voyage, I write this letter to inform you of how in twenty days I reached the Indies with the fleet supplied to me by the most illustrious King and Queen, our Sovereigns, and how there I discovered a great many islands inhabited by people without number.[1]

The above excerpt is from a letter by Christopher Columbus to the King and Queen of Spain. The letter informs them the discovery of a new land, America in 1492. Subsequently, this is to be called one of the earliest historical accounts of the imperial mission and its connection to voyage and discovery. Economist Adam Smith pronounced "the "discovery" of America a turning point in world history"[2]. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels comments on "the significance of Columbus's discovery, seeing the event as crucial for opening "up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie"".[3]

Besides the historical accounts, many works of literature bear the traces of imperialism. From the beginning of imperialism several writers have reflected on the new world in their works. For example, William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) is an example of a colonial text, where Caliban[4] is represented from a conqueror's perspective. His name reminds us the word of 'cannibal'. On the other hand, the name of the protagonist of the play, Prospero, refers to the word

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[1] Quoted in Peter C. Mancall's "The Age of Discovery". *Reviews in American History*. 26.1.The Challenge of American History (March,1998.), p 26
[2] Ibid, p 26
[3] Ibid, p 26
[4] Caliban is the native of the island, where the protagonist of the play Prospero has been trapped.

'prosper'. Another example can be seen in the some poems of John Donne (1572-1631). For example, in his poem "The Sun Rising", he uses the image of spices and mine of both "Indies". The images of treasures of both Indies in the poem show that the wealth of both East and West Indies are available to the imagination of the European writers. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) contains perhaps the most direct reference to imperialism. The protagonist of the novel Crusoe establishes a colony on a deserted island along with a master-slave relationship with Friday. The first word Crusoe teaches Friday is "master". This is showing an imperial relationship between a European and a native of a new 'other' land. Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) also criticises British Imperialism in his essay "The Modest Proposal". He criticises both Europeans for exploiting Irish and Irish to let themselves be exploited by them. It can be said that the references of imperialism have influenced English writers from the beginning of imperialism.

Contemporary history cannot be written without its colonial references. The history has many significances. For example, Toni Morrison in her book *Playing in the Dark* (1992) points out that American literature and American history cannot be written without referring to its Afro-American presence. She says,

> There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white views, genius, and power, those views, genius,

> and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States. This agreement is made about a population that preceded every American writer of renown and was, I have come to believe, one of the most furtively radical impinging forces on the country's literature. The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination.[1]

Almost every American literary work has a black slave in the background. She points out that slavery is a part of American history from the moment of its discovery to the Europeans. Similarly, William C. Spengemann claims that Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) should be considered the first American novel. He argues that *Oroonoko* is omitted from American literature because the novel is set before the "Declaration of Independence."[2] Joanna Lipking argues in a Preface[3] to *Oroonoko* that unlike the play of Shakespeare and Defoe's novel, *Oroonoko* provides us with an authentic account of early British imperialist presence in Surinam in South America. She says that details of the setting resemble actual places in Surinam.

Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) while being a domestic novel is not free from the traces of imperialism. Critic Edward W. Said has pointed out the traces of slavery in his essay "Jane Austen and Empire". The book shows that the seventeenth century aristocratic lifestyle was shaped by the slave labour in the

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[1]Toni Morrison. *Playing in the Dark.* Massachusetts: Picador, 1992, p 5
[2] William C. Spengemann. "The Earliest American Novel: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*". *Oroonoko.* New York: A Norton Critical Edition, 1997, p 199
[3] Of Norton Edition of *Oroonoko*

West Indies. Although the book does not provide us detailed images of slavery, the domestic structure of the book echoes an imperial structure.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a retelling of an imperial story from a West Indian's point of view. The novel retells the story of Bertha Antoinette Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1848). From the beginning of imperialism till the early twentieth century, Europeans dominated the imperial and colonial stories. It is from the late twentieth century, these European accounts have started to receive some responses.

Aphra Behn, Jane Austen and Jean Rhys are three writers from different backgrounds. These three novels show that women are part of the imperial history. The impact of colonisation has an effect on women of both coloniser and colonised society whether they are residing in their own country or visiting other countries.

The purpose of this thesis is to look at some accounts of imperialism in three literary texts. The first chapter will look at Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688). This chapter will analyse the images of slavery in Surinam. The second chapter will look at Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814). This chapter will analyse a European domestic setting and will show how the setting has been shaped by notions and processes of imperialism. The Third chapter will look at Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and will refer to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1848) and analyse an imperial story from two perspectives.

Chapter 1

Images of Slavery in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*

> However the slaves were estimated, slavery was freely recognised to be a cruel business. Men directly involved denounced the practices of others. Colonial visitors thought both slaves and servants overworked and wretchedly treated and left unattractive portraits of the colonists.[1]

Such a portrait can be found in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko or, The Royal Slaves: A True History* (1688). The novel gives detailed images of slavery and British imperialism in Surinam. A question to be asked is whether a fictional text can be a reliable document to depict the history of slavery. Edwin D. Johnson discusses Aphra Behn's background in his essay "Aphra Behn's "Oroonoko" which lends some historical credibility to the novel:

> Aphra Behn was born in Canterbury in Kent in the year 1640. Her father, whose name was Johnson, through relationship with Lord Willoughby received an appointment as Governor of Surinam. This was an English possession in the northeast portion of South America, and is known today as Dutch Guiana. Johnson died at sea in a hurricane, but the rest of the family, which included the daughter, proceeded to the new country; and it was in Surinam on a nearby plantation that Mrs. Behn met Oroonoko, a handsome slave who she says had a "kindly air."[2]

But he doubts that there is the possibility of imaginations in the story. When she returned to England, she became acquainted with Charles II. She was appointed as

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[1] Joanna Lipking. "The New World of Slavery-An Introduction". *Oroonoko*. New York: A Norton Critical Edition, 1997, p 81-82

[2] Edwin D. Johnson. "Aphra Behn's "Oroonoko". *The Journal of Negro History*. 10.3 (July, 1925), p 334

a spy and sent to Antwerp to collect some information. Although, Behn was unsuccessful as a spy, but she "gained great favour of the Court"[1]. She related the story of Oroonoko to Charles II. Charles II was impressed by "the fate of "this great man" and requested the narrator to put her charming as well as touching story into the form of a novel"[2].

Another important question that posed in about for a woman living in the seventeenth century England can experience and write about such an unconventional situation. It can be said that she learnt the story of slavery from someone else and wrote it out of her imagination. Spengemann expresses his doubt that the story is merely an imaginary tale:

> And because the experiences reported in these narratives of New-World travel were necessarily unverifiable, the form permitted her to call her tale a true history without fear of rebuttal. By enfolding her romance of the Royal Slave in a Brief True Relation, Behn could stick to her romantic lust, proffer her fiction as news from the New World, and thus foist it upon the very audience whose members were busily dismantling the world that the romance had been devised to validate.[3]

Alfred J. Rivero also expresses the same doubt in his essay ""Oroonoko" and the "Blank Spaces": of Colonial Fictions" that the story of Oroonoko and Imoinda is fictional since there is "no historical record testifying"[4] their existence. But critic

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[1] Ibid, p 335
[2] Ibid, p 335
[3] William C. Spengemann. "The Earliest American Novel: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*. *Oroonoko*. New York: A Norton Critical Edition, 1997, p 202
[4] Alfred J. Rivero. ""Oroonoko" and the "Blank Spaces": of Colonial Fictions". *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. 39.3. Restoration and Eighteenth Century (Summer, 1999), p, 446

Laura Brown claims that Behn is writing from her experiences in the New World. She says,

> The account of the Indians belongs in part to the tradition of travel narratives, by Behn's period an established and widely popular mode describing voyages and colonial expeditions to the new world and including detailed reports of marvels, which range from accurate botanical and ethnographic records to pure invention.[1]

She also adds,

> Behn's description of the slave trade, highly accurate in many of its details, is the shaping economic and historical context of *Oroonoko*. A letter written in 1663 to Sir Robert Harley, at whose house at St. John's Hill the narrator claims to have resided, from one William Yearworth, his steward, may describe the arrival of the slave ship which Behn would have witnessed during her visit to the colony.[2]

She claims that Behn had witnessed a slave ship from the Guinea Coast containing 130 slaves of which 54 died on the journey on the 24th of January in the year 1663 or 1664. So it can be said that the images of slavery in the novel are authentic. Critic Joanna Lipking discusses historical accounts of British imperialism that testify that Behn is writing from her experiences. She says that as an adult Aphra Behn stayed in Surinam in the early 1660's and "the publication of *Oroonoko* in 1688 - England actively entered the slave trade, spurred by the needs of its planters in Barbados, Surinam, and Jamaica."[3] Oroonoko is the name of a river in South America. So it is highly possible Behn named the protagonist of the

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[1] Laura Brown. "The Romance of Empire: Oroonoko and the Trade in Slaves". *Oroonoko*. New York: A Norton Critical Edition, 1997, p 236
[2] Ibid, p 237-238
[3] Lipking, p 80

novel after the river. Rivero says that Behn was importing an exotic setting for marketability of her work in England.[1] Behn may have collected materials for writing the novel from her New World experiences but the story she tells is fictional. However, this fictional tale provides us with some true images of slavery in Surinam. In the very beginning of the novel, we find a very detailed image of the slave trade:

> Those who want slaves make a bargain with a master or a captain of a ship, and contract to pay him so much apiece, a matter of twenty pound a head for as many as he agrees for, and to pay for them when they shall be delivered on such a plantation. So that when there arrives a ship laden with slaves, they who have so contracted go aboard and receive their number by lot[2]; and perhaps in one lot that may be for ten, there may happen to be three or four men, the rest women and children; or be there more or less of either sex, you are obliged to be contented with your lot.[3]

The above excerpt portrays how a slave is bought and sold in Surinam. Slaves are meant to be the properties of their master and thus slaves are well treated as commodity as Peter Child defines them as "simply machines for labour."[4] Therefore, they have no rights over their bodies and minds. They are also not allowed to give their consent to work, all work decisions were taken without consulting them and they are bound to obey their white masters. Moreover, they

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[1] Rivero, p 447

[2] The contract sale of slaves in lots was a common method of sale, and twenty pounds a frequently method practice.

[3] Aphra Behn. *Oroonoko*. London: Penguin Classics, 2003, p 12-13

[4] Peter Child. "Introduction". *Post-Colonial Theory and English literature: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p 13

have a price and they are bargained over like animals or are auctioned like property. Lipking says,

> Most early documents on the slaves are commercial letters or circulars, written for particular readers, to advance particular policies, against rivals nations or groups. The official agencies reiterate the "necessity" for slaves, to be provided solely by themselves. Individual captains and agents enumerate the cargoes of men, women, boys, girls, and describe their own tribulations: tricks that left them with unfit slaves, ship blockaded or seized, problems with weather, provisions, disease, pilfering, private dealings on the side.[1]

The above excerpt explains that the concept of slavery was deeply embedded in the world economic system at that time. French priest Antoine Biet says in his essay "They Came Here in Order to Become Wealthy" that the slaves were the greatest source of wealth in Surinam. Each slave earned twenty-five pounds a year for his master and less then one pound was spent on the slaves' upkeep:

> The slaves go around almost entirely naked, except on Sundays when they put on some worthless canvas breeches and a shirt. The small Negroes and Negresses always go about completely naked until they are fourteen or fifteen years old. As for their food, there is no nation which feeds its slaves as badly as the English because for all meals the slaves only get potatoes which serve them as their bread, their meat, their fish, in fact, everything. The slaves raise some poultry so as to have eggs which they give to their little children. They are only given meat one time in the whole year, namely Christmas Day, which is the only holiday observed in this island.[2]

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[1] Lipking, p 81

[2] Antoine Biet. "The Came Here in Order to Become Wealthy". *Oroonoko*. New York: A Norton Critical Edition, 1997, p 105-106

From the time of 'discovery' of the Americas in the late fifteenth century till the emancipation act in the mid-nineteenth century, slave labour shaped the world economy. This economic system not only depended on a human labour but a human being became a property of an entrepreneur. Oddvar Holmesland points out that slaves in Surinam were won through warfare, which was considered an honourable way of procuring slaves in the seventeenth century. Traditionally, during warfare, a king of a country fought and defeated his opponent and occupied the defeated country. As a result, the people of the defeated country became slaves and the property of the victorious country. But in *Oroonoko* we do not find the same case:

> *Have they vanquished us nobly in fight? Have they won us in honourable battle? And are we by the chance of war become their slaves? This would not anger a noble heart, this would not animate a soldier's soul. No, but we are bought and sold like apes, or monkeys...*[1]

The above excerpt explains the difference between European slavery and other form of slavery. The excerpt also explains that not only white people enslave black people but black people themselves were involved in the process. Slavery is an age-old practice and was a part of war-fare. In the novel, we are shown how Imoinda and Oroonoko were captured and became slaves. Imoinda receives a Royal Veil from the king of Coramantien and grandfather of Oroonoko and is forced to become the king's mistress. As soon as the king finds out that Oroonoko

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[1] Behn, p 62

and Imoinda love each other, he sells her off to a slave master. She is taken to Surinam. Meanwhile, Oroonoko was busy at the battlefield and returned as a victorious hero. Shortly after his return, an English ship arrived in the port of Coramantien. Oroonoko was an acquaintance of the captain. He was invited to a feast on the ship. Here, Behn gives us the detailed image of how Oroonoko with other Africans were cheated and abducted by the captain:

> The prince having drunk hard of punch, and several sorts of wine, as did all the rest (for great care was taken they should want nothing of that part of the entertainment), was very merry, and in great admiration of the ship, for he had never been in one before, so that he was curious of beholding every place, where he decently might descend. The rest, no less curious, who were not quite overcome with drinking, rambled at their pleasure fore and aft, as their fancies guided them; so that the captain, who had well laid his design before, gave the word and seized on all his guests, they clapping great irons suddenly on the prince when he was leaped down in the hold to view that part of the vessel, and locking him fast down, secured him. The same treachery was used to all the rest; and all in one instant, in several places of the ship, were lashed fast in irons and betrayed to slavery.[1]

After being deceived and captured, Oroonoko becomes a slave. It is at this point that slaves including Oroonoko were given a new different name. As Behn informs us "Christians never buy any slaves but they give them some names of their own, their native ones being likely very barbarous and hard to pronounce."[2] The name of a person is a very important factor of his identity. The name also bears the sign of nationality and religion of a person. In the novel, the African

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[1] Ibid, p 37
[2] Ibid, p 43

name of the protagonist was 'Oroonoko' and European name was 'Caesar'. His wife's African name was 'Imoinda' and European name was 'Clemene'.

Another image that Behn draws in the novel is of the condition of women and children under slavery. Toni Morrison in her novel *Beloved* (1987) shows that there is nothing more horrible for a girl than to be born under slavery. Under slavery, mothers do not have any right to protect their children from the violence of their white masters. A slave's child becomes a property of her master. Toni Morrison draws an example from an American novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) by Willa Cather:

> Because Till's (Nancy's mother) loyalty to and responsibility for her mistress is so primary, it never occurs and need not occur to Sapphira that Till might be hurt or alarmed by the violence planned for her only child. That assumption is based on another – that slave women are not mothers; they are "natally dead," with no obligations to their offspring or their own parents.[1]

So a mother under slavery does not hold any rights over her children. Her children can be tortured and daughters can be raped, but a slave mother has no right to protest against her master to protect her children. Moreover, her children can be bought and sold and enslaved without the consent of the mother. Behn gives us a similar picture in the novel:

> They spared Imoinda, and did not let her see this barbarity committed towards her lord, but carried her down to Parham and shut her up, which was not in kindness to her, but for fear she

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[1] Toni Morrison. *Playing in the Dark.* Massachusetts: Picador, 1992, p 21

> should die with the sight or miscarry, and then they should lose a young slave, and perhaps the mother.[1]

The above excerpt shows clearly that women and children were treated as economic commodities. Under slavery, mothers would not be mothers of their own children but the bearers of slaves of their masters. Instead of a family, slaves were "*ravaged by every brute, exposed first to their nasty lusts, and then a shameful death*"[2]. Therefore, Oroonoko kills his pregnant wife because he loves her and wants to protect her from a shameful death. *Beloved* shows a similar fate of a slave child. The protagonist of the novel Sethe kills her new-born daughter Beloved because she loves her and wants to protect her from the tortures and upcoming rapes by their white masters.

From the reading of the novel, many readers can think that Behn does not believe in hierarchy and racial discrimination as she appears to be a liberated woman. But critic Oddvar Holmesland says that Behn also believes in the hierarchy. She holds double standards:

> Though she apparently encourages liberty and enlightenment, she seems to rely on virtues valued by the traditional hierarchy for order and stability. Her dual position seeks its dialectic reconciliation in *Oroonoko*. … Thus in *Oroonoko*, she uses the black prince to figure a nobility that encompasses features of progressive individualism. From the same meditative perspective, she can be seen to superimpose romance and allegorical patterns on a realist form suggestive of novel, travel narrative, or both.[3]

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[1] Behn, p 67-68
[2] Ibid, p 71
[3] Oddvar Holmesland. "Aphra Behn's "Oroonoko": Cultural Dialectics and the Novel". *ELH*. 68.1 (Spring, 2001), p 57

Behn's romanticising the images of Africans shows that she fails to think of them as having the same status as a European has. In the novel, she is being sarcastic to those Europeans, who are dehumanising Africans. But it is very evident that she is confused about how and where to place Africans:

> He (Oroonoko) was pretty tall, but of a shape the most exact that can be fancied; The most famous statuary[1] could not form the figure of a man more admirably turned from head to foot. His face was not of that brown, rusty black which most of that nation are, but a perfect ebony or polished jet. His eyes were the most awful that could be seen, and very piercing; the white of them being like snow, as were his teeth. His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His mouth the finest shaped that could be seen, far from those great turned lips which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes.[2]

In the above excerpt, Behn compares Oroonoko's features with European one. Although his eyes appear dreadful and skin colour is the same as that of his race but his nose is like Romans not flat like Africans and the mouth of the finest shape. Rivero also points out that in the very beginning of the novel she describes the animals of the land using human imagery:

> ...marmosets, a sort of monkey, as big as a rat or weasel, but of a marvelous and delicate shape, and has face and hands like an humane creature; and *cousheries*, a little beast in the form and fashion of a lion, as big as a kitten; but so exactly made in all parts like that noble beast, that it is in miniature.[3]

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[1] sculpture
[2] Behn, p 15
[3] Ibid, p 9-10

It can be suggested that Behn expected to find human beings coherently to combination of human features with animal features in far away Surinam. She romanticises the relationship between Oroonoko and Imoinda and portrays them as the most perfect couple on earth. She uses beautiful imagery to describe them thus romanticising and exoticising them. Spengemann comments on the novel that Behn has written a romantic tale which hampers the authenticity of the novel.

> The strategy Behn devised to reconcile the conflicting demands of personal inclination and public taste is, on the face of it, ingeniously simple. She merely fashioned a romantic tale of highborn lovers caught in the crosscurrents of desire and duty and then presented this old story in the very modern guise of a Brief True Relation of her own travels to America.[1]

He also adds that both the place and the natives have been romanticised. Surinam has been described as paradise on earth where Adam and Eve were before their fall:

> Ever since the discovery, narratives of New-World travel had couched their actions in the tropes of chivalric romance and described America in images of the Earthly Paradise, the Garden of Eden, and the Golden Age. If the discovery, exploration, and settlement of America formed an inextricable part of that historical change which had removed humankind from its primal condition, then by casting themselves upon this historical tide men might hope to complete the circular course of human history, arrive again at the beginning, and remain in that perfected state forever.[2]

It was common in the seventeenth century and the eighteenth century literature to romanticise the new world. Since those lands were unseen and unknown to the

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[1] Spengemann, p 201
[2] Ibid, p 202

readers, people would imagine and haunt them with slaves and creatures. Her over-romanticising of the tale shows that she does not want to accept all the established social ideas about the land and people:

> Not all the gardens of boasted Italy can produce a shade to out-vie this which Nature had joined with Art to render so exceeding fine. And it is a marvel to see how such vast trees, as big as English oaks, could take footing on so solid a rock and in so little earth, as covered that rock; but all things by Nature there are rare, delightful and wonderful. But to our sports.[1]

Her comparison of other places with Surinam shows that Surinam is a better place than places in Europe. Another account from Biet gives us a different image of Surinam:

> The greatest of all the vices which prevail in this country is lewdness. It is a horrible thing to think about: adulterers, incest and all the rest. I will not say anymore on this. Drunkenness is great, especially among the lower classes. Cursers are rare because the police punish them severely. There are arguments, but no one would dare to fight with swords for he would be punished at once. They settle their differences by fist fighting. They give each other black eyes, scratch each other, tear each other's hair, and do similar things.[2]

In the above excerpt, the place Surinam has been described as a barbarous place and Biet does not describe Surinam as cultured land as Behn has described in *Oroonoko*. Henry Whistler almost gives us the same account of Surinam as Biet has provided us:

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[1] Behn, p 52
[2] Biet, p 107

> The Island is the dunghill whereon England doth cast forth its rubbidge[1]: rogues and whores and such like people are those which are generally brought here. A rogue in England will hardly make a cheater here; a bawd brought over puts on a demure comportment, a whore if handsome makes a wife for some rich planter.[2]

However, he gives us a different image of the land though not as exaggerated as Benh who describes it as a heaven on earth:

> But in plain the Island of itself is very delightful and pleasant; it is manured the best of any Island of the Indies with many brave houses, and here is a brave harbor for ships to ride in.[3]

Moreover, Behn compares Oroonoko with other Europeans and even Africans and find him more gentle and polite:

> ...and especially in that country (Africa), where men take to themselves as many as they can maintain and where the only crime and sin with woman is to turn her off, to abandon her to want, shame and misery. Such ill morals are only practised in Christian countries, where they prefer the bare name of religion; and without virtue or morality think that is sufficient. But Oroonoko was none of those professors; but as he had right notions of honour, so he made her (Imoinda) such propositions as were not only and barely such; but, contrary to the custom of his country, he made her vows she should be the only woman he would possess while he lived...[4]

Behn as a liberated woman in patriarchal European society felt more liberated in Surinam since there she occupies the position of superiority. At least it appears to Behn that African women are enjoying more freedom than European women as she finds out that both men and women are working in the sugar plantations

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[1] rubbish
[2] Henry Whistler. 'They and There Seed". *Oroonoko*. New York: A Norton Critical Edition, 1997, p 108
[3] Ibid, p 108
[4] Behn, p 17

despite the fact they are forced to work. In the seventeenth century, it was a very rare scene in any European country. As a result, *Oroonoko* does not show that Surinam imposes lots of rules on their women. But the fact is that women in other parts of the world are more confined by customs. Imoinda is an example as the status of African women, who are treated like an object and thus she had to submit herself to the king.

Although the novel can be dismissed by saying that it is a highly romanticised tale, Laura Brown claims that the book gives us important and precise images of the slave trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Therefore, it can be read as an imperial text:

> *Oroonoko* can serve as a theotrical test case for the necessary connection of race and gender, a model for the mutual interaction of the positions of the oppressed in the literary discourse of its own age, and a mirror for modern criticism in which one political reading can reflect another, one revisionist school a variety of revisions.[1]

She also accepts the fact that the novel tells us a highly romanticised tale. But this should not deter us from reading it as a history of slavery:

> In fact, neither the theme of slavery nor the romantic action explain(s) the extended description of the Caribs, the native Americans of Guiana, with which Behn begins. This opening description deploys another set of discursive conventions and opens another range of ideological expectations than those of romance.[2]

She also adds that although Behn's account of the slave uprising is fictional, it is important because there was an actual rebellion around this time. Slave uprisings,

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[1] Brown, p 232
[2] Ibid, p 236

revolts, slave runaways, maroons are very common factors in slavery and slave trade and Behn describes how all these occurred as results of oppressions. Brown gives us evidence from historical events that from 1665-1740 there was method out to continuous slave uprisings. She says that while Behn was in Surinam, a group of slaves had escaped and attacked local plantations in the region of Para[1]. These uprisings eventually led to the emancipation act in 1834.

[1] Ibid, p 238

Chapter 2

Images of imperialism in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*

> When we work in the sugar mills and the grindstone catches our fingers, they cut off the hand; when we try to run away, they cut off a leg. Both these things happened to me. This is the price paid for the sugar you eat in Europe.[1]

The above excerpt is from an account written by a slave in Surinam while it was under Dutch rule. Lipking argues that under Dutch rule, exploitation of blacks heightens in Surinam and the excerpt portrays one of the examples. In 1665, Surinam was taken over by the Dutch thus the British government was confined to Antigua where sugar plantations were established. However, the excerpt answers Michael Gorra's question "Who Paid the Bills at Mansfield Park?"[2]. Mansfield Park is dependent on the lives of slaves in the West Indies. From a wider view, the excerpt also explains that the European economy was largely dependent on slave labour. Joanna Lipking says that "(b)y the early eighteenth century, England dominated the slave trade"[3] in the West Indies. While Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) portrays an image of slaves and European exploitation, Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) portrays an image of an imperialism that shows

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[1] Quoted in Joanna Lipking's "The New World of Slavery-An Introduction". *Oroonoko*. New York: A Norton Critical Edition, 1997, p 87-88

[2] Quoted in Susan Fraiman's 'Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism" from *Cultural Forms, Disciplinary Boundaries*, p 20 source: https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/orientalism-spring2011/files/Fraiman0001.pdf. Access date: December 05, 2012

[3] Lipking, p 88

how European economy is benefited by slaves whose labour forms the basis for their lifestyle and culture. The novel is set in England and focuses on the domestic setting of Mansfield Park, which is a manor house. Sir Thomas Bertram, the head of the family owns a sugar plantation in Antigua in the West Indies but people at Mansfield Park are hardly aware of the working conditions of the slaves. Edward W. Said has termed Sir Thomas's West Indian estate as a "colonial garden"[1] in his essay "Jane Austen and Empire", from where he received his economic profits. He argues that a parallel of the master-slave structure can be found in Sir Thomas's relationship with his family. He also points out that Sir Thomas's absence from Mansfield Park has a colonial purpose. Like Said, Michael Karanous argues in his essay "Ordination and Revolution in "Mansfield Park"" that the novel focuses on the ordinations of people at Mansfield Park set by Sir Thomas's codes of conduct, which they often try to bend when he is not around. Edward M. White sees his absence that leads to violation of rules and disorder at Mansfield Park.

Austen's *Mansfield Park* shows that from the eighteenth century and nineteenth century, the European domestic sphere was being benefited by slave labour. Despite this, most of the households in England remained ignorant of the severity of the inhumane activity that was the price for their extravagant lifestyle. In the novel, Austen informs us that the owner of Mansfield Park, Sir Thomas

[1] Edward W. Said. "Jane Austen and Empire". *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage Books, 1994, p 102

Bertram depends on the income of his investments in the West Indies and he will be "straitened, if the Antigua estate is to make such poor returns"[1] but if "(h)is business in Antigua had latterly been prosperously rapid, and he came directly from Liverpool."[2]:

> Sir Thomas, however, was truly happy in the prospect of an alliance so unquestionably advantageous, and of which he heard nothing – but the perfectly good and agreeable. It was a connection exactly of the right sort; in the same county, and the same interest; and his most hearty concurrence was conveyed as soon as possible.[3]

The interests on the investments in sugar plantations influence the lifestyle at Mansfield Park and Austen in the novel made it clear that these interests are earned by using slave labour, despite the fact that the novel dwells on domestic issues in England. It is quite possible that slaves had to lose their hands, legs or even lives for the extravagant lifestyle at Mansfield Park. Sir Thomas intends to make his West Indian property into a family estate as the estate is the source of income in the family:

> … and as his own circumstances were rendered less fair than heretofore, by some recent losses on his West India Estate, in addition to his eldest son's extravagance, it became not undesirable to himself to be relieved from the expense of her (Fanny) support, and the obligation of her future provision[4]

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[1] Jane Austen. *Mansfield Park*. London: Penguin Classics, 1966, p 64
[2] Ibid, p 195
[3] Ibid, p 73
[4] Ibid, p 59

Therefore, he takes his eldest son Tom Bertram to Antigua to prepare him as the successor to the sugar plantation:

> Sir Thomas found it expedient to go to Antigua himself, for the better arrangement of his affairs, and he took his eldest son with him in the hope of detaching him from some bad connections at home. They left England with the probability of being nearly a twelvemonth absent.[1]

Said points out that the estate defines them in the society. He says that "(t)he Bertrams could not have been possible without the slave trade, sugar, and the colonial planter class"[2]. He also says that their upper class status in the society is maintained by the estates in the West Indies. Therefore, for Europeans the West Indians are commodities. So the people at Mansfield Park are indirectly related to the West Indian exploitations as critic Karounos points out "just as the estates suffered from mismanagement in Sir Thomas's absence, so does Mansfield Park."[3] The bridge between Mansfield Park and the West Indian plantation is Sir Thomas as he had to govern both with an iron hand. If Sir Thomas's sugar plantation fails in the West Indies, the extravagant lifestyle of the Bertram family would suffer. Critic Susan Fraiman points to Lady Bertram's shawl as a symbol of luxury that depends on the exploitations of labours in the other parts of the world:

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[1] Ibid, p 65-66

[2] Said, p112

[3] Michael Karounos. ""Ordination and Revolution in "Mansfield Park"". *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. 44.4 The Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 2004), p 718

> ...William (Fanny's brother) must not forget my shawl, if he goes to the East Indies; and I shall give him a commission for any thing else that is worth having. I wish he may go to the East Indies, that I may have my shawl. I think I will have two shawls ...[1]

Fraiman comments on the passage in her essay "Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism" saying that Lady Bertram represents "a figure of indolence without a shred of moral credibility." [2] She also adds that the passage represents that part of European society who spend their time in laziness and are "leisured consumer(s)."[3] In other words, these extravagances including Tom's extravagances are oiled by slave labour. In the wider view, European extravagant and luxurious lifestyles are aided by slave labour and slave trade. Said says:

> The Bertrams and other characters in *Mansfield Park* are a subgroup within the minority, and for them the island is wealth, which Austen regards as being converted to propriety, order, and, at the end of the novel, comfort, an added good. [4]

For a British person, the West Indies are treasure islands, which form the base for their lifestyle, social status and politics. Europeans treat the West Indies and its people as a good to be exploited to satisfy their luxury and extravagant habits. Said strongly claims that "Sir Thomas's property in the Caribbean would have had to be a sugar plantation maintained by slave labour."[5] He also adds that

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[1] Austen, p 308
[2] Fraiman, p 28
[3] Ibid, p 28
[4] Said, p108
[5] Ibid, p107

"these are not dead historical facts but, as Austen certainly knew, evident historical realities."[1] He also gives us the historical facts that claim that it has to be a sugar plantation:

> Far from being nothing much 'out there', British colonial possessions in the Antilles and Leeward Islands were during Jane Austin's time a crucial setting for Anglo-French colonial competition. Revolutionary ideas from France were being exported there, and there was a steady decline in British profits: the French sugar plantations were producing more sugar at less cost. However, slave rebellions in and out of Haiti were incapacitating France and spurring British interests to intervene more directly and to gain greater local power.[2]

The above excerpt shows that colonial competitions coupled with slave rebellions were important events in Austen's time. Austen must have picked up imperialist ideas for her writing. Karanous says:

> Antigua in those days was the site of heavy missionary activity, and it was also a focus of the political and Evangelical debate on the horrible conditions of slavery.[3]

He also informs us that Austen had read Clarkson's book against slavery.[4] It can be suggested that she was trying to collect materials for her novel.

Frequent traveling to other parts of the world during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was guided by imperial concern. As Said points out Sir Thomas's frequent absences from Mansfield Park is his presence in Antigua that creates a disturbance in the domestic sphere:

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[1] Ibid, p 107
[2] Ibid, p107
[3] Karounos, p 730
[4] Ibid, p 730

> Sir Thomas, absent from Mansfield Park, is never seen as *present* in Antigua, which elicits at most a half-dozen references in the novel.[1]

From the fifteen century to the nineteenth century, European businessmen and explorers travel to trade and make profits in foreign lands. Later, we also learn that Fanny's brother William Price travels a lot:

> ...William had already seen a great deal. He had been in the Mediterranean – in the West Indies – in the Mediterranean again – had been often taken on shore by the favour of his Captain, and in the course of seven years had known every variety of danger, which sea and war together could offer.[2]

These travels and absences from their own lands also tell stories of exploration for treasures and exploitation of slaves in other lands.

Austen shows us English interests in lands under their government. As economy and lifestyle was becoming largely dependent on these lands, a simple geography lesson acquires great significance:

> 'Dear Mamma, only think, my cousin cannot put the map of Europe together or my cousin cannot tell the principal rivers in Russia – or she never heard of Asia Minor...'
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> 'But aunt, she is really so very ignorant! – Do you know, we asked her last night, which way she would go to get to Ireland; and she said, she should cross to the Isle of Wight. She thinks of nothing but the Isle of Wight, and she calls it in *the Island*, as if there were no other island in the world.[3]

The above excerpts show that geography was a very important subject, from the very beginning of imperial history with the age of exploration, when Christopher

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[1] Said, p 108
[2] Austen, p 245
[3] Ibid, p 54

Columbus (1451-1506) 'discovered' America in 1492. Said has pointed out in *Orientalism* (1978) that knowledge gives them a sense of power[1]. Chinua Achebe in his essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" argues that acquired knowledge has a great influence on the process of colonisation. He says that traveller Marco Polo (1254-1324) gave "his impressions of the peoples and places and customs"[2] in his book *Description of the World* published in 1300. Achebe adds that because of two omissions in his book "Europe had to wait another hundred years for Gutenberg".[3] Firstly, after spending twenty years in the court of Kublai Khan (1215-1294) Marco Polo did not notice the art of printing in China. Secondly, he could not see how this art could contribute to the process of European colonisation. Moreover, the Isle of Wight is an important geographical location because Europeans have to cross the Isle of Wight to get to the West Indies. Fanny's purpose in life is also measured through growing interests in the lands, thus she is considered to be more mature:

> 'I suppose I am graver than other people,' said Fanny. 'The evenings do not appear long to me. I love to hear my uncle talk of the West Indies. I could listen to him for an hour together. It entertains *me* more than many other things have done – but then I am unlike other people I dare say.'[4]

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[1] Edward W. Said. *Orientalism*. India: Penguin Classics, 2001, p 32
[2] Chinua Achebe. "An Image of Africa". *Research in African Literature*. 9.1, Special issue on Criticism (Spring, 1978), p 12
[3] Ibid, p 12-13
[4] Austen, p 212

The above excerpt shows that the dark sides of the slave trade and slavery does not form a part of travellers' stories. Fanny is unable to think of the extreme situation of slaves because she has never witnessed such a situation.

Living in 'civilised' European society, it may have been very difficult for Austen to understand the intensity of the oppressions that Europeans conducted in other lands. Austen may have known about the sugar-plantations in the West Indies but has never seen any situation by herself. However, she tries to understand the master-slave situation in a European setting. In the novel, Sir Thomas's authoritarian characterisation can be read as an imperial figure. People at Mansfield Park appreciate his capability and obey his behaviour of conduct although most of the time he is absent from his home:

> I do not think we do so well without him. He has a fine dignified manner, which suits the head of such a house, and keeps every body in their place. Lady Bertram seems more of a cipher now than when he is at home; and nobody else can keep Mrs Norris in order.[1]

The above excerpt is comparable to a master-slave image. The patriarchal order is kept intact in Mansfield Park through the figure of Sir Thomas Bertram. He controls his West Indian estate, where he decides on everyone's place. His authority keeps everyone in their places in Mansfield Park as well. Said says,

> And it bears stressing that because *Mansfield Park* connects the actualities of British power overseas to the domestic imbroglio within the Bertram estate, there is no way of doing such readings

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[1] Ibid, p 182

> as mine, no way of understanding the 'structure of attitude and reference' except by working through the novel.[1]

Codes of conduct in the family are set by Sir Thomas and in his absence the people at Mansfield Park try to bend the rules:

> I think he values the very quietness you speak of, and that the repose of his own family-circle is all he wants. And it does not appear to me that we are more serious than we used to be; I mean before my uncle went abroad.[2]

The decision of staging Kotzebue's play *Lover's Vows* is one example of stepping outside the limits set by Sir Thomas. On his return, he burns every copy of *Lover's Vows*. The same image can be suggested in the case of Antigua. When Sir Thomas is absent in Antigua, slaves revolts against their master that eventually leads to the emancipation act in 1834. Moreover, it can be assumed that Sir Thomas was never whole-heartedly welcome in Antigua in the way his arrival at Mansfield Park causes alarm. In the novel, November has been described as the "black month"[3] because the month is fixed for his return and when he left Mansfield Park the persuasive force and "blind moral severity have left the Park in the person of Sir Thomas; careless opportunism and indiscriminating wit have arrived to take advantage of his absence."[4] So the month of November must have been a good time for slaves, as they also dare to revolt in Sir Thomas's absence.

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[1] Said, p 114
[2] Austen, p 211
[3] Ibid, p 134
[4] Edward M. White. "A Critical Theory of Mansfield Park". *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. 7.4. Nineteenth Century (Autumn,1967), p 664

The relationship between Sir Thomas and his daughter Maria Bertram can be read in terms of a rebellion:

> She was less and less able to endure the restraint which her father imposed. The liberty which his absence had given was now become absolutely necessary. She must escape from him and Mansfield as soon as possible, and find consolation in fortune and consequence, bustle and the world, for a wounded spirit. Her mind was quite determined and varied not.[1]

Maria feels so confined to home that when her father returns to Mansfield Park, she decides to get married to Mr. Rushwarth in order to get out from the strictness of the house. Although the marriage proved to an unsuccessful one, she was so desperate for her liberty that she agreed to a bad marriage. It appears that a marriage is better for Maria than the harsh codes of behaviour set by her own father. Thus Austen forces her readers to think about a situation in which his power could be even greater. These slaves would probably run away and starve to death unable to tolerate the tortures inflicted by their white masters. Edward M. White also points out Sir Thomas's authoritative influence on other people at Mansfield Park:

> Sir Thomas Bertram, who had set the tone of unloving moral rigour and distant kindness for the Park, is called away to the West Indies. Left in authority are the vegetable Lady Bertram, the pleasure-seeking elder son Tom, and nasty and foolish Aunt Norris. The impoverished niece Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram both feel strong allegiance to Sir Thomas and the order he has established, but neither of them is in a position to direct or even influence action. Mary and Henry Crawford, witty and

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[1] Austen, p 216

> irresponsible sophisticates, arrive from London hoping to find amusement in the country and (because of their faulty education) feeling free to ignore the implications of their behaviour to others.[1]

Sir Thomas's absence is welcome in both places. Austen shows that people at Mansfield Park enjoy complete freedom when Sir Thomas is not around. Similarly, slaves also get relief from their work to some extent, when Sir Thomas is in Mansfield Park. Said also gives the same kind of opinion:

> There is nothing in *Mansfield Park* that would contradict us, however were we to assume that Sir Thomas does exactly the same things – on a large scale – in his Antigua "plantations". ... She (Austen) sees clearly that to hold and rule Mansfield Park is to hold and rule an imperial estate in close, not to say inevitable association with it. What assures the domestic tranquility and attractive harmony of one is the productivity and regulated discipline of the other.[2]

He ends his essay commenting on Austen:

> There is a paradox here in reading Jane Austen which I have been impressed by but can in no way resolve. All the evidence says that even the most routine aspects of holding slaves on a West Indian sugar plantation were cruel stuff. And everything we know about Austen and her values is at odds with the cruelty of slavery.[3]

So Sir Thomas's codes of conduct and rules in both places are cruel and harsh. There is no doubt that slave labour and slavery are both indictments on humanity. That is why Karanous comments on the novels' final scene:

> By [the] novel's end, the values of slavery are no longer Sir Thomas's and never were Fanny's. ... Austen's position on slavery

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[1] White, p 664
[2] Said, p 104
[3] Ibid, p 115

> is so simple as to have been overlooked: Fanny is Mansfield Park's slave.[1]

So we can say that Austen tried to portray a master-slave like situation in Europe through characters such as Fanny and Sir Thomas and the strict codes of conduct imposed on his family. Austen also successfully portrays the images of a European society, which is highly benefited by the lives of slaves:

> *Mansfield Park* is a rich work in that its aesthetic intellectual complexity requires that longer and slower analysis that is also required by its geographical problematic, a novel based in England relying for the maintenance of its style on a Caribbean island.[2]

Moreover, the portrayal of the extravagant lifestyle of European society shows the discrimination in distribution of wealth and European oppressions around the world. So the novel portrays the different side of slavery and answers the questions why Europeans were more interested in other lands and in exploiting peoples.

It can be easily assumed that as Austen was living in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was very difficult for her to know about the details of life in the British colonies in the West Indies. Before the early twentieth century, middle-aged women were mostly confined to the home, and hardly travelled outside the country. Virginia Woolf says in her book *A Room of One's Own* (1928) that for a long time women were denied property rights:

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[1] Karounos, p 729
[2] Said, p 115

> Moreover, it is equally useless to ask what might have happened if Mrs Seton and her mother and her mother before her had amassed great wealth and laid it under the foundations of college and library, because, in the first place, to earn money was impossible for them, and in the second, had it been possible, the law behind them the right to possess what money they earned.[1]

The above excerpt explains that European women had been dependent on their male guardians for their survival for a long time. Austen was not different from her time although she is a great writer. Fraiman claims that Austen was dependent on her father and brother:

> Lacking the franchise, enjoying few property rights (and these because she was single), living as a dependent at the edge of her brother's estate, and publishing her work anonymously, Austen was arguably a kind of exile in her own country.[2]

The important question to ask here is how Austen could be aware about the conditions of slavery in other parts of the world. How could she possibly write about slave labour and the slave trade? Karounos answers this question in his essay "Ordination and Revolution in "Mansfield Park'." He informs us that both Austen's father and brother were related to sugar-plantations in the West Indies:

> The poor economic conditions in Antigua and the suffering of the slaves were well-known facts to Austen since, as Brian Southam notes, her own father had been "appointed the principal trustee of plantation in Antigua." Furthermore, her brother Francis reported on the "harshness and despotism" he observed while on duty in the West Indies.[3]

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[1] Virginia Woolf. *A Room of one's Own.* New Delhi: Manas Saikia Foundation Books, 1998, p 31
[2] Fraiman, p 20
[3] Karounos, p 729

So it is quite possible that she knew about the happenings in the New World. The references to slaves in *Mansfield Park* were not imaginary completely. We can go on to claim that Austen herself led her life on the profit of slave labour. Although Austen did not experience slavery she was aware of it. It can also be claimed that being a woman, Austen had to limit the sphere of her writing, as codes of respectability. But this does not mean that Austen wants to be dependent on others like other dependent women of her time. She took the liberty to write and becomes a writer, which was quite unconventional for an eighteenth century European woman. She also took the liberty to express her own thoughts as Virginia Woolf points out that like Charlotte Brontë, Austen never makes sudden breaks in her writings although Austen "suffered in any way from her circumstances it was in the narrowness of life that was imposed upon her"[1] or Austen may not have wanted to push social convention very far. Therefore, *Mansfield Park* touches upon the idea of slavery and provides us with enough images to understand the influence of imperialism on European society itself. A very critical reading of *Mansfield Park* fills the gap in the images of imperialism.

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[1] Woolf, p74

Chapter 3

Reading two accounts of Imperialism: Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

> In order to keep the unintelligible realm of historical diversity at bay, History as system attempts to systematise the world through ethnocultural hierarchy and chronological progression. Consequently, a predictable narrative is established, with a beginning, middle, and end. History then becomes, because of this almost theological trinitarian structure, providential fable or salvational myth. ... History ultimately emerges as a fantasy peculiar to the Western imagination in its pursuit of a discourse that legitimises its power and condemns other cultures to the periphery. [1]

J. Michael Dash argues in his book *Caribbean Discourse* (1989) that in the case of colonial discourse "European history appears triumphant because it has achieved, thorough the conquest of the other, the Hegelian dream of modernity as the manifestation of the Absolute Spirit, contain within them the strains that rupture the totality of the colonising structure."[2] He also says that these strains are bases for subverting colonial discourse for Caribbean writers and intellectuals. Therefore, there is only one history of colonisation in focus in the Caribbean Islands until the twentieth century that is European history. Similarly in the field of literature, only European writings can be found in the region from the beginning of imperialism till the mid twentieth century. Charlotte Brontë's

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[1] Quoted in Simon Gikandi's "Introduction" in *Writing in Limbo*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1992, p 7

[2] Ibid, p 8

Jane Eyre (1848) just like Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) can be read as a document of colonisation. The novel is written as an autobiography, covering twenty five years of the protagonist, Jane Eyre's life. Susan L. Meyer argues in her essay "Colonial and the Figurative Strategy of Jane Eyre" that *Jane Eyre* "suppresses the damning history of slavery and racist oppression, its ending betrays an anxiety that colonialism and the oppression of other races constitute a 'stain' upon English history".[1] The slaves were set free in the West Indies by an emancipation act passed in 1834. But this Act and the freedom did not ensure the end to imperialist power in the West Indies. The British still owns lands in the West Indies. Its wealth in the focus of plantations and so on it remained European lands. The imperialism continued repellent as the West Indian continued to be a part of the British Empire. Under colonial rule, the land was called British West Indies. It is told in the novel that Bertha comes from the West Indies, but English readers are not informed about how and why she is in England, until the West Indian writer Jean Rhys has pointed this in *Wide Sargasso Sea*[2] (1966). Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a response to Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in the mid twentieth century. In the novel, she tries to fit Antoinette's story with the situation of Edward Rochester's wife Bertha Antoinette Mason in *Jane Eyre*. Brontë's portrayals of Bertha in *Jane Eyre* and Rhys's account of Antoinette's

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[1] Susan L. Meyer. "From 'Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of Jane Eyre'". *Post-Colonial Theory and English literature A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999 p 150

[2] *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a response to *Jane Eyre*. The novel narrates the story of Antoinette from her childhood till her death. The novel overlaps the novel *Jane Eyre*.

life in *Wide Sargasso Sea* depict a portrait of white settlers in the West Indies. The patriarchal marriage and the patriarchal inheritance laws are shown as the domestic corollary to the imperial power motives.

The other side of Bertha's story is narrated by Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha is portrayed as Antoinette. In the beginning of the novel, we see the slaves are set free but the effects of long term oppression are present in their lives. In this colonial settup, the position of women is important. In letter 157, Rhys gives us an account of the Creole woman in *Jane Eyre*: "That unfortunate death of a Creole! I'm fighting mad to write *her* story.[1] Rhys also writes in her letters: "The West Indians *had* a (melo?) dramatic quality. A lot that seems incredible could have happened. And did. Girls *were* married for their [wealth] at that time, taken to England and no more heard of. Houses were burnt down by ex-slaves ... I don't know if obeah still goes on. But it did."[2] Meyer says:

> In the context of a colony where blacks outnumbered whites by twelve to one, where it was a routine and accepted practice for white planters to force female slaves to become their 'concubines,' and where whites were consequently uneasily aware of the large population of mulattoes, Rochester's phrase accrues a significance beyond its immediate reference to his old family name.[3]

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[1] Quoted in Rose Kamel's "Before I Was Set Free": The Creole Wife in "Jane Eyre" and "Wide Sargasso Sea". *The Journal of Narrative Technique*. 25.1 (Winter, 1995), p 3
[2] Quoted in Kamel. p 5
[3] Meyer, p 151

As such, the identity crisis among the people of the West Indies, especially among women is very evident. Firstly, women are not allowed to have their own identity as they were identified by their fathers, brothers or husbands. Secondly, both imperialist history and slave history make their identity more problematic as Simon Gikandi argues in his essay "Writing in Limbo", that between two histories a new identity is forming. So the mulattoes neither belong to the white community nor to the black community as Antoinette says in *Wide Sargasso Sea*:

> '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 [and] 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]

Antoinette's madness becomes symbolic here. Her process of becoming mad is a part of long term imperial process. From her childhood she was treated as if she did not belong to the West Indies because she has white blood. In the very beginning of the novel, she informs us that they are marooned thus "few people came to see [them]"[2]. People around them laughed at her, which affected both Antoinette and her mother Annette and was leading them towards their gradual insanity:

> My mother usually walked up and down the *glacis*, a paved roofed-in terrace which ran the length of the house and sloped upwards to a clump of bamboos. Standing by the bamboos she had a clear view to the sea, but anyone passing could stare at her. They

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[1] Jean Rhys. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. New York: A Norton Critical Edition, 1982,, p 102
[2] Ibid, p 17

> stared, sometimes they laughed. Long after the sound was far away and faint she kept her eyes shut and her hands clenched. A frown came between her black eyebrows, deep – it might have been cut with a knife.[1]

Antoinette's only childhood friend Maillotte's daughter Tia ridiculed her. She stole her clothes and money. Moreover, Antoinette's relationship with her mother, Annette was not an intimate one. Antoinette claims that Annette thinks that Antoinette was "useless to her"[2]. In short, Antoinette felt alienated in her own birthplace. Her servant Amélie ridiculed her, even slapped her once although she felt in her heart to be sorry for her situation.[3] On the other hand, she is isolated from European society because she was born in the British West Indies and such people are looked at with a suspicious eye as she may have black blood. Only Aunt Cora and Christophine give her advice when needed. Aunt Cora takes Antoinette and her brother Sandi Cosway in after the Coulibri Estate was burnt down and Annette became mad. Christophine remained loyal to both Annette and Antoinette. In addition, her marriage to Rochester makes Antoinette's situation even worse. Rochester was attracted by Antoinette's exotic beauty but he could not accept her ways or share her ideas:

> 'Is it true,' she (Antoinette) said, 'that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so. She said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes, I want to wake up.'

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[1] Ibid, p 19-20
[2] Ibid, p 20
[3] Ibid, p 141

> 'Well,' I (Rochester) answered annoyed, 'that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream.[1]

Rather he tried to shape her to European customs. This gradually leads Antoinette to her madness. Rochester imposes an English name on Antoinette, 'Bertha' which means "an Anglo-Saxon vampire"[2] and Antoinette keeps refusing it:

> 'Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name.[3]

However, Rochester keeps ignoring it and did not realise that how it could affect her. The change of her name makes her situation worse. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" argues that in the second part of the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, "Rhys makes it clear that he (Rochester) is a victim of the patriarchal inheritance law of entailment."[4] As a result, he also becomes a victim of a marriage of convenience. In this case, both Antoinette and Rochester suffer though in different ways. But it can not be overlooked that Rochester remains an oppressor in two ways. Firstly he is a patriarchal figure as Antoinette's husband. Secondly, he is a European, who judges the world from a Eurocentric point of view. At the surface level, both Brontë and Rhys show that the relationship suffers because of colonial tensions. It is

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[1] Ibid, p 80
[2] Kamel, p 8
[3] Rhys, p 147
[4] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism". *Critical Inquiry*. 12.1. "Race," Writing, and Difference (Autumn, 1985) p, 251

Antoinette who was left behind to suffer and she ended by killing herself. In the second part of the novel, Antoinette's voice is heard when she goes for advice to Christophine. This shows that Rochester's voice is heard because Antoinette finds it impossible to narrate her story by herself due to both patriarchal and European pressures. His voice occupies a central point to give expressions to male sufferings. Spivak also argues in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", that a subaltern especially being a woman cannot speak because there is no space offered to her.[1] She says,

> Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernisation.[2]

Antoinette's story remained untold during the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century because she does not have the opportunity to speak.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea,* Rhys describes that how the Bertha figure went unnoticed in *Jane Eyre*. She tries to set this right in the novel where after the honeymoon in Windward Island, Antoinette and Rochester started for Jamaica. Rochester rented a furnished house which is "not too near the town, [but] commodious enough to allow for two separate suites of rooms"[3] and he engaged

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[1] Spivak also adds that if a subaltern manages to speak out, she loses the status of belonging to a subaltern group.

[2] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory A Reader*. London: Prentice Hall, 1993, p 102

[3] Rhys, p 162

"a staff of servants whom [he] was prepared to pay very liberally, - so long as they keep their mouths shut"[1]. He locked her up because he claimed that she had lost her sense of decency and to avoid disgrace. As Antoinette informs us in the novel "he hates scandal."[2]

Like Antoinette, Annette went through colonial tensions through out her life. She was married twice and both the marriages were shadowed by colonial anxiety. Her first marriage was with Alexander Cosway who had "a heart like stone"[3] and when he got tired of a woman he abandons her with little property as he abandoned Annette. Therefore, although Annette was married, she was denied the status of a wife. Her second marriage was with Mr. Mason. Antoinette says in the novel that Mr. Mason married her mother "to make money"[4] in the West Indies:

> Some of the big estates are going cheap, and one unfortunate's loss is always a clever man's gain.[5]

This marriage was also a marriage of convenience. After the Coulibri Estate was burnt down, Mr. Mason also abandoned Annette and left her in the care of a black couple in the same way Antoinette was left under the watch of Grace Poole in Thornfield Hall at the end of the novel *Jane Eyre*. In the very beginning of the novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it is evident that Annette was already on the brink of

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[1] Ibid, p 162
[2] Ibid, p 113
[3] Ibid, p 122
[4] Ibid, p 30
[5] Ibid, p 30

madness. From Antoinette's account it appears that Annette lost faith in people around her. She doubts that Godfrey is greedy and willingly neglects his duties while he keeps defending that he is old enough to retire from his work. She also has negative attitude towards Sass. Sass leaves them when he finds out that there is nothing left in Coulibri Estate. However, he returns when Annette is married to Mr. Mason as "[he] can *smell* money."[1] It shows that she is loosing the ability to judge people around her. Like Antoinette, Annette's relatives did not treat her well.

Jane Eyre is the novel that tells Antoinette's story from a European point of view. Like Austen's *Mansfield Park, Jane Eyre* is a domestic novel, but the portrayal of Bertha tells an imperial story. Brontë writes about Rochester's past connection to the West Indies. We learn that Rochester has some acquaintances in Jamaica, Kingston and Spanish Town. These kinships are parts of history of imperialism in the West Indies. Edward Rochester had an older brother, Rowland Rochester. Their father refused to divide his property among them thus Rowland inherited the whole property. Mr. Rochester arranges Edward's marriage with a West Indian girl named Antoinette which secures him with a property worth thirty thousands pounds:

> She is the heiress to a West Indian fortune, the daughter of a father who is a West Indian planter and merchant, and the sister of the yellow-skinned yet socially white Mr Mason. She is also a woman

[1] Ibid, p 30

> whom the younger son of an aristocratic British family would consider marrying, and so she is clearly imagined as white – or as passing as white - in the novel's retrospective narrative.[1]

Therefore, through the marriage, Rochester becomes owner of lands in the West Indies. Thus the marriage seemed to maintain the British colonial procedure in the West Indies. Soon after the marriage Edward Rochester realised that he had made a great mistake. I*n Wide Sargasso Sea* he says that he has sold his soul with a "bad bargain"[2] thus the relationship between him and Antoinette suffers and ends abruptly. In the nineteenth century novel, Bertha was shown as a mad-woman locked up in an attic and as Dash points out that there is only a European history of colonisation that can be told. *Jane Eyre* is one of the examples of European accounts. Bertha is the victim in both novels. However, Brontë has drawn the character of Rochester with sympathy in the novel. Rochester justifies himself to Jane in the novel:

> ... suppose you were no longer a girl well reared and disciplined, but a wild boy indulged from childhood upwards; imagine yourself in a remote foreign land; conceive that you there commit a capital error, no matter of what nature or from what motives, but one whose consequences must follow you through life and taint all your existence.[3]

Even when Bertha becomes violent, the first person narrator shows Rochester as a civilised heroic figure:

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[1] Meyer, p 151
[2] Rhys, p 70
[3] Charlotte Brontë. *Jane Eyre*. India: Penguin Classics, 1993, p 247

> Mr Rochester flung me behind him: the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled. She was a big woman, in stature almost equaling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest - more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was. He could have settled her with a well-planted blow; but he would not strike: he would only wrestle.[1]

Rochester is never seen hurting Bertha in the novel. It is only Bertha who is violent. Therefore, Brontë portrays Bertha with animal images in the same way Rochester treats her as a vampire. In the first encounter between Jane and Bertha, the first person narrator describes her in a manner neither places her in the human being nor animal would but somewhere in between:

> 'It seemed, sir, a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back. I know not what dress she had on: it was white and straight; but whether gown, sheet, or shroud, I cannot tell.'
>
> ...
>
> 'Fearful and ghastly to me - oh sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discoloured face – it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments.[2]

When Rochester first introduces Jane to Bertha, Bertha is seen:

> In the deep shade, at the further 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: it groveled, 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.[3]

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[1] Ibid, p 335
[2] Ibid, p 323
[3] Ibid, p 334

Meyer shows that Bertha has been dehumanised, when she is brought to Europe:

> Her (Spivak) reading describes Bertha as a 'white Jamaican Creole' who can nonetheless be seen in the novel as a 'native "subject"', indeterminately placed between human and animal and consequently excluded from the individualistic humanity which the novel's feminism claims for Jane.[1]

When Rochester first discloses Antoinette as his wife, it is very evident that he did not declare his first marriage at Thornfield Hall:

> Some have whispered to you that she is my bastard half-sister: some, my cast-off mistress; I now inform you that she is my wife, whom I married fifteen years ago, - Bertha Mason by name; ... Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; - idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad woman and a drunkard! - as I found out after I had wed the daughter: for they were silent on family secrets before. ... I was cheated into espousing, and judge whether or not I had a right to break the compact.[2]

Rochester thinks that he has been cheated in his marriage and thus he has the right to break the bond of wedlock and make a new start. But Jane is not as sympathetic towards Bertha as she is to Rochester. As a result, Bertha never gets the opportunity for a new start. Although, Jane found it offensive that Bertha was locked up in a secret place and protests for her:

> ...'you are inexorable for that unfortunate lady: you speak of her with hate – with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel - she cannot help being mad.[3]

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[1] Meyer, p 149-150
[2] Brontë, p 333
[3] Ibid, p 345

However, she does not offer any solution for her nor does she encourage Rochester to bring her out and give her some space. Rather she is more concerned about Rochester's situation and forgives him:

> Reader! - I forgave him at the moment, and on the spot. There was such deep remorse in his eye, such true pity in his tone, such manly energy in his manner; and, besides, there was such unchanged love in his whole look and mien - I forgave him all: yet not in words, not outwardly; only at my heart's core.[1]

Rochester's marriage with Bertha was not a marriage based on love or affection. It was a marriage of convenience.

Although *Jane Eyre* was meant to be a domestic English novel, it is not the free from the notions of imperialism. Meyer finds the fire imagery significant, giving it in relation to Bertha:

> Then my own thoughts worried me. What crime was this, that lived incarnate in this sequestered mansion, and could neither be expelled nor subdued by the owner? – What mystery, that broke out, now in fire and now in blood, at the deadest hours of night?[2]

Meyer says that "(t)he language of this passage strongly evokes that used to describe slave uprisings in the British West Indies, where slaves used fires both to destroy property and to signal to each other that an uprising was taking place.[3]" In the novel, Bertha dies burning in the fire. She does not only burn herself but also burns down Thornfield Hall to kill its master. It was her final rebellion against imperial processes.

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[1] Ibid, p 342
[2] Ibid, p 238
[3] Mayer, p 152-153

The class oppression is very evident in Rochseter's relationship with both Jane Eyre and Antoinette Mason. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* although Antoinette is a white woman she may have black blood as Rochester finds a resemblance between Antoinette and Amélie and is attracted to both. Therefore, Bertha holds an inferior status to Rochester. But this difference is fixed and cannot be minimised at any cost. The class oppression is very evident in Rochester's relationship with Jane as well. In the last section of *Jane Eyre*, Jane inherited property in Madeira worth five thousands pounds from her paternal uncle John Eyre. The ownership gives us another account of establishing a colony in Caribbean islands. He returns to Edward Rochester as a wealthy lady. She told Rochester that she would have a house of her own, where she invited Rochester. Moreover, when she gets married she declares "Reader, I married him"[1]. The line shows that she was not obliged to marry him. She herself willingly married him as she once announced in the novel that she does not "care about being married"[2] Earlier in the novel, when Rochester takes Jane shopping, her "cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation."[3] Meyer says:

> *Jane Eyre* associates dark-skinned peoples with oppression by drawing parallels between the black slaves, in particular, and those oppressed by the hierarchies of social class and gender in Britain. So far the narrative function of the dark-featured Bertha and of the novel's allusions to colonialism and slavery has a certain fidelity to history, although as the association between blacks and apes reveal

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[1] Brontë, p 514
[2] Ibid, p 499
[3] Ibid, p 306

> (to take only one example), these analogies are not free from racism.[1]

Meyer argues that Bertha's situation is parallel to other class oppressions in Britain. The difference between Jane and Bertha is that Jane was able to minimise the difference by inheriting property worth five thousands pounds but Bertha will not be able to minimise the difference between her and Rochester.

If we put *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* together we see that Bertha/Antoinette is never given a safe and stable position. All of her relationships are shadowed by the notions of imperialism. Although both novels are not set in the same time period[2], *Wide Sargasso Sea* completes the story of a West Indian woman thus completing a portrait of imperialism. As Dash says for a long time Caribbean history has been told from a Europeans point of view; *Jane Eyre* mentions Bertha Mason in passing. Rhys tries to retell the story of imperialism from her point of view. If subalterns start to tell their history, then we will find a different aspect of the same picture. *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows us the sequence of events that turn Antoinette into Bertha in *Jane Eyre*.

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[1] Meyer, p 154

[2] Meyer argues that according to Brontë's *Jane Eyre,* Edward Rochester marries Bertha Antoinette Mason in 1821 and locks her up in 1825. But when *Wide Sargasso Sea* opens it shows that it is in or after the year 1834 because slaves were set free.

Conclusion

> More than three-quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism. It is easy to see how important this has been in the political and economic spheres, but its general influence on the perceptual frameworks of contemporary peoples is often less evident.[1]

The above excerpt is from the first sentences of the book *The Empire Writes Back* (1980) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. The excerpt points to the fact that the effect of imperialism and colonialism are present in contemporary world literature. Contemporary lives still bear the effect of colonialism and literature continues to reflect these realities. There are many traces of imperialism and colonisation in different forms. As Chinua Achebe has pointed out in his essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" there are whole libraries of European books that can be classified as colonial, imperial or racist texts. The problem with the existing historical and literary accounts of imperialism is that we see it from a European standpoint. Therefore, these documents are read in a one-sided manner. But the imperialism and colonialism left dual stories, one from a European point of view and the other that can be read from a non-European point of view. In the field of literature, Aphra Behn gives us the earliest account of imperialism in *Oroonoko* (1688). Jane Austen gives us the European part of the imperial story in *Mansfield Park* (1814). On the other hand, Jean Rhys's retelling of Bertha's story in *Wide*

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[1] Bill Ashcroft and others. *The Empire Writes Back*. London: Roulatge, 2002 p 1

Sargasso Sea (1966) explains that these accounts need to be analysed from different perspectives to get a fuller picture.

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