

The Sound of Silence: Through “Things Fall Apart” by Achebe and “Wide Sargasso Sea” by Rhys

Bora ARGA¹

¹Asst. Prof. Dr., English Language Teaching Programme, Faculty of Education, Maltepe University, Türkiye, boraarga@maltepe.edu.tr, ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0001-5706-6340

Abstract

The canonical works *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad (first published in 1899) and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë (first published in 1847) had their reflection in literature with their modern counterparts, Chinua Achebe’s (1995) *Things Fall Apart* and Jean Rhys’ (1997) *Wide Sargasso Sea*, respectively. Both written in an attempt to offer a re-examination of traditional colonial discourse, *Things Fall Apart* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* have major differences in their methodologies. While Achebe offers a pre-colonial insight to underline the impact of colonial forces on African societies, Rhys instead derives a prequel mainly addressing gender issues from *Jane Eyre* for similar purposes. Comparing *Heart of Darkness* with *Things Fall Apart* and *Jane Eyre* with *Wide Sargasso Sea* through a postcolonial reading, this paper aims to explore to what extent these works differ from each other in terms of their approach to colonialism, racism, and gender roles. It is concluded that the modern works by Achebe and Rhys succeed in levelling criticism at their canonical counterparts by skilfully surfacing the effects of colonialism, racism and patriarchy as they give voice to voiceless people, who are initially left silenced by Conrad and Brontë.

Keywords: colonialism, patriarchy, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Things Fall Apart*

1. Introduction

As one might argue, Joseph Conrad’s ghastly description of Africa in *Heart of Darkness* heavily influenced Chinua Achebe —especially while writing the *Things Fall Apart*:

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to looking upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. (Conrad, 2006, p. 36)

Achebe strongly believes that Conrad, in fact Western psychology as a whole, has a desire “to set Africa up as a foil to Europe” (Achebe, 1978, p. 2). Taking the stance that Conrad

was “a bloody racist” (p. 9), Achebe (1978) aims to correct the image of Africa and African society that was created by *Heart of Darkness* and similar colonial novels in Westerners’ minds by giving voice to the voiceless African people. Similarly, but by developing an alternative approach, Jean Rhys (1997) seeks to achieve the same by depicting *Antoinette* as the protagonist or to be more precise, by giving voice to *Bertha* of *Jane Eyre* in her prequel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. With an almost complete reversal of roles in *Jane Eyre*, she attempts to give her readers an insight into “the other side” which “always” exists (Rhys, 1997, p. 82), thus creating an opportunity to discover the depths of patriarchy as well as the racial issues of the period.

Colonialism can be defined plainly as “a lucrative commercial operation, bringing wealth and riches to Western nations through the economic exploitation of others” (McLeod, 2010, p. 18). In the early years of the twentieth century, the British vastly expanded their empire over New Zealand, Ireland, Canada and parts of Africa, Asia, Australia and the Caribbean. Although barely any of ‘British Overseas Territories’ survives to date, the British imperial legacy lives on in the countries they colonized, to which they exported their education, administration, economic and legal systems; cuisine, architecture, sports and religion(s) (Töngür, 2022, pp. 1-2; McLeod, 2010). In this sense, postcolonial reading, as a literary theory, involves engaging with texts that were written under the influence of colonialism. Through challenging colonial views and practices, a postcolonial reading thus involves reinterpretation of texts that were written from a colonial standpoint to shed light on new perspectives. In an attempt to offer a postcolonial reading of *Heart of Darkness* and *Things Fall Apart*, this paper will first compare Conrad (2006) and Achebe (1995), respectively, while touching briefly on *An Image of Africa* (Achebe, 1978). Secondly, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* will be explored with the same methodology. In doing so, this paper aims to explore to what extent *Things Fall Apart* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* differ from *Heart of Darkness* and *Jane Eyre* in terms of racism, colonialism and patriarchy.

2. Conrad’s ‘Dark-heartedness’ and Achebe’s Criticism

During the late-twentieth century in critical circles, especially as a reaction to the orientalist view, re-reading of classical works and recovering colonial contexts became popular, in line with the idea that “literature can frame ideological and historical material in different ways” (Harrison, 2003; as cited in McLeod, 2010, p. 27). One and perhaps the most popular of these ‘canonical’ works was *Heart of Darkness*, as the colonialist views that the text brings into play have been widely disputed. Critics have not been able to settle the argument whether Conrad’s novel indeed proposes the inferiority of African people, or instead criticizes the idea of colonialism in its entirety through an absolutely ill-looking portrayal (Bratlinger, 1985; Hawkins, 1982; Guerard, 1958). It is yet barely difficult to conclude that Achebe, one of the

leading figures of the above-mentioned postcolonial critical movement, rules out the latter alternant in his *An Image of Africa*.

2.1. *Heart of Darkness* as ‘*An Image of Africa*’

In the published version of his lecture, *An Image of Africa*, Achebe (1978) sets Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* up as the best example for his argument since he holds that it displays the previously-mentioned desire and need of Westerners better than any other work that he knows (p. 3). One might take the stance that Achebe's above-mentioned decision is proven right at the very beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, as Conrad (2006) foreshadows what readers should expect in the remainder of the novel with a biblical reference: “In a very few hours I arrived in a city that always makes me think of a whited sepulchre” (p. 9). Subsequently, in the following paragraphs (Conrad, 2006, pp. 9-11), women knitting the names of the people to be executed cement the probable expectations of the readers on the upcoming instances of cruelty, torture and death.

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. [...] They were dying slowly—it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now, nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. (Conrad, 2006, p. 17)

Evidently, the “black shapes” referred to are the native Africans who are being exploited by the colonizers. This portrayal, according to which the natives are being reduced to mere shadows of their former selves due to disease and starvation, describes the dehumanizing effects of colonialism on people. In other words, Africans are no longer seen as human beings but rather as ‘muted’ objects.

Despite the sheer horridness in his descriptions, however, Conrad is not the only name to blame according to Achebe (1978), as he points out that “there are whole libraries of books devoted to the same purpose” (p. 2). In fact, Achebe (1978) totally respects Conrad, setting him apart as “one of the great stylists of modern fiction and a good story-teller in the bargain” (p. 2). However, this does not mean that *Heart of Darkness*, a direct consequence of Conrad's “peculiar psychology” (Achebe, 1978, p. 10) as he calls, does not need to be addressed:

Whatever Conrad's problems were, you might say he is now safely dead. Quite true. Unfortunately, his heart of darkness still plagues us. Which is why an offensive and totally deplorable book can be described by a serious scholar as “among the half dozen greatest short novels in the English language.” And why it is today perhaps the most commonly prescribed novel in twentieth-century literature courses in our own English Department here. Indeed, the time is long overdue for a hard look at things. (Achebe, 1978, p. 12)

Moreover, as one might argue, Conrad's success and popularity as an author magnifies the negative effect that *Heart of Darkness* spreads. Accordingly, Achebe (1978) rightly claims that Conrad's "irrational hate" and antipathy towards Africans threatens the existence of African communities (p. 10), as they are described as a 'mere crowd', not a society. One might thus explain Achebe's commitment not only to show that they are different but also they "had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity" (Achebe, 1973; as cited in Rhoads, 1993, p. 61). However, what could be found more disturbing than the colonial project itself is Conrad's "adjectival insistence" (Achebe, 1978, p. 3) and overall writerly-identity. One example concurring with this proposition can be the obvious understatement of the colonialism:

The conquest of the earth, which mostly means taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. (Conrad, 2006, p. 7)

Drawing attention to some striking parts within the novel, Achebe (1978) prefers to touch firstly on the image of Africa "as the other world" and he provides an example through the rivers Thames and Congo, taking the stance that the difference between them is way complex than it seems (p. 3). The Thames used to be "one of the dark places of the earth" (Conrad, 2006, p. 5) but now it is tranquil, resting peacefully "at the decline of day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks" (Conrad, 2006, p. 4). On the contrary, going up the River Congo is "like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world" (Conrad, 2006, p. 33) as "it has rendered no service" (Achebe, 1978, p. 3). Agreeing with other critics, Achebe (1978) thus finds Conrad's "evocation of the African atmosphere" (p. 3) rather disturbing and argues that his portrayal barely goes beyond purveying "comforting myths" (p. 4), as Conrad depicts Africa entirely in line with the other works that were shaped through a colonial perspective, therefore far from reality.

I am talking about a book that parades in the most vulgar fashion prejudices and insults from which a section of mankind has suffered untold agonies and atrocities in the past and continues to do so in many ways and many places today. I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called into question. It seems to me totally inconceivable that great art or even good art could possibly reside in such unwholesome surroundings. (Achebe, 1978, p. 12)

One of many supporting evidence for the above-mentioned stance can be found in the section where it is evidently implied that one has to be mad to go to Africa:

He smiled as if at some quiet joke. 'So you are going out there. Famous. Interesting too.' He gave me a searching glance and made another note. 'Ever any madness in your family?' he asked in a matter-of-fact tone. I felt very annoyed. 'It would be,' he said without taking notice of my irritation, 'interesting for science to watch the mental

changes of individuals on the spot, but...' 'Are you an alienist?' I interrupted. (Conrad, 2006, p. 12)

Thus, it can be claimed that Conrad's first dehumanizing description of African people further justifies Achebe's motive:

Now and then a boat from the shore gave one a momentary contact with reality. It was paddled by black fellows. You could see from afar the white of their eyeballs glistening. They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks—these chaps; but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. (Conrad, 2006, pp. 13-14)

As the storyline proceeds, Conrad (2006) evidently insists on portraying Africans as mere body parts but nothing else: "But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be [...] a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling [...]" (p. 35). In doing so, he leaves them voiceless and automatically defenceless to all types of claims from different views—which, to many, is probably the most insulting aspect of the novel. "They howled and leaped and spun and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity— like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly" (Conrad, 2006, p. 36).

2.2. *Things Fall Apart*

In *Things Fall Apart*, readers start to explore the events with the brief story of the protagonist, Okonkwo, as the very first sentence of the novel is about his fame in his community called Ibo "and even beyond" (Achebe, 1995, p. 1). In fact, the first paragraph tells a lot about Okonkwo's community, starting with a piece of information mentioning an unbeaten wrestler called Amalinze the Cat. Okonkwo has become famous for throwing him in a wrestling competition and brought honour to his community, as Amalinze had formerly lived up to his title by not being beaten for seven years. Arguably, even this paragraph alone is enough to deduce that Ibo society is not a mere crowd but a community with history, traditions and culture. This surely contrasts with Conrad's (2006) standpoint: "The prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell?" (p. 35). Likewise, as the storyline moves on to describe Okonkwo's late father Unoka, and how the father and son differ in essence, it is made possible to discover more of the community's culture and to find out that Africans in reality are not far short of any Western society—and not at all voiceless:

Just then, the distant beating of drums began to reach them. It came from the direction of the ilo, the village playground. Every village had its own ilo, which was as old as the village itself and was where all the great ceremonies and dances took place. The drums beat the unmistakable wrestling dance - quick, light and gay, and it came floating on the wind. (Achebe, 1995, p. 12)

Not only do they have music and poetry, as Achebe (1978) also draws attention to in *An Image of Africa*, but also proverbs: "Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe, 1995, p. 2).

While the first chapters of the novel allow for establishing the fact that Africans are quite different from what is portrayed by *Heart of Darkness* and similar colonial works, the remaining parts of the novel depict the Ibo community as a society that functions fairly well by itself. This is mostly due to their ability to live in peace and honour while showing respect to each other even on the brink of warfare (Achebe, 1995, pp. 3-4). As the storyline proceeds, signs of a well-established culture with unwritten yet strictly obeyed rules become further visible. When Okonkwo's gun goes off accidentally in Ogbuefi Ezeudu's funeral and kills one of his sons, for example, it is declared that he "must flee from the clan" for committing a crime against the earth goddess by killing a clansman (Achebe, 1995, p. 41). No signs of objection come from Okonkwo as he accepts his seven-year exile and loses his everything. Eventually, villagers burn down his house to "cleanse the desecrated land" (Achebe, 1995, p. 68) with "no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo" (Achebe, 1995, p. 41).

Of course, Ibo society is not without its considerable weaknesses. Chief among those faults are the sheer patriarchy and sexism claimed to exist by critics (Brogdon, 2012; Strong-Leek, 2001). One immediate example for these claims can be the classification of crimes, as defined shortly after Okonkwo's incident: "The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female because it had been inadvertent" (Achebe, 1995, p. 41). On the subject of the legal system, the above-mentioned punishment inflicted on Okonkwo might as well be considered a defect due to the way it is enforced. Seeking vengeance for Okonkwo's involuntary manslaughter by destroying his property concurs solely with tradition and customs but not modern law. One might argue that this proposition about the outdatedness of Igbo laws is also supported by the significant role of the Egwugwu, religious figures responsible for law enforcement and maintaining order in the community.

Yet, the Ibo community continues to portray an image of a respectable and stable society overall until the very point when white people arrive in Umuofia, to 'civilize' them. Much to the surprise of the white missionaries, to begin with, the voiceless community that they set out to civilize has a considerably complex language that does not allow for a direct translation into English. Eventually, the locals end up mocking their translator:

When they had all gathered, the white man began to speak to them. He spoke through an interpreter who was an Ibo man, though his dialect was different and harsh to the ears of Mbanta. Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely. Instead of saying "myself," he always said "my buttocks." [...] "Your buttocks

understand our language," said someone light-heartedly and the crowd laughed. (Achebe, 1995, p. 47)

Furthermore, the acts of storytelling coming into play throughout the storyline arguably underpin the aforementioned proposition that the Ibo society has its own unique culture and it is not voiceless at all. In chapter nine, for instance, an example of a story living on through generations comes into play, which thus provides indications for a traditionally rich verbal culture:

He stretched himself and scratched his thigh where a mosquito had bitten him as he slept. Another one was wailing near his right ear. He slapped the ear and hoped he had killed it. Why do they always go for one's ears? When he was a child his mother had told him a story about it. But it was as silly as all women's stories. Mosquito, she had said, had asked Ear to marry him, whereupon Ear fell on the floor in uncontrollable laughter. "How much longer do you think you will live?" she asked. "You are already a skeleton." Mosquito went away humiliated, and any time he passed her way he told Ear that he was still alive. (Achebe, 1995, p. 25)

Another emphasis on the tradition of storytelling in the same chapter highlights the well-established culture of Ibo society, as Ekwefi and Ezinma casually refer to a story during a daily conversation:

Ekwefi went into her hut to cook yams. Her husband had brought out more yams than usual because the medicine man had to be fed. Ezinma went with her and helped in preparing the vegetables. "There is too much green vegetable," she said. "Don't you see the pot is full of yams?" Ekwefi asked. "And you know how leaves become smaller after cooking." "Yes," said Ezinma, "that was why the snake-lizard killed his mother." "Very true," said Ekwefi. "He gave his mother seven baskets of vegetables to cook and in the end there were only three. And so he killed her," said Ezinma. "That is not the end of the story." "Oho," said Ezinma. "I remember now. He brought another seven baskets and cooked them himself. And there were again only three. So he killed himself too." (Achebe, 1995, p. 27)

Achebe draws further attention to the tradition of storytelling in chapter eighteen, describing it as the sole reason why the stories about the acts of missionaries are found fictitious by the locals. Clansmen are so used to stories that the tragedy coming to their ears cannot reflect the reality:

But stories were already gaining ground that the white man had not only brought a religion but also a government. It was said that they had built a place of judgment in Umuofia to protect the followers of their religion. It was even said that they had hanged one man who killed a missionary. Although such stories were now often told they looked like fairytales in Mbanta and did not as yet affect the relationship between the new church and the clan. (Achebe, 1995, p. 56)

As Achebe (1995) proceeds, the fact that white missionaries 'use' Ibo people to achieve their goals becomes more observable. In doing so, they gradually exploit society by destroying

their customs, traditions, and beliefs. Although the heroic protagonist decides to take action to stop the tragic chain of events, it is no use since they are no longer a 'society' capable of acting in unison. When he kills the messenger, Ibo people do nothing but let the other messengers flee. Eventually, Okonkwo kills himself to avoid being tried in the colonial court.

Based on the discussion made so far, it can be concluded that Chinua Achebe and Joseph Conrad have entirely different outlooks on African society and the effects of colonialism. While Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (2006) portrays the natives as 'unearthly beings', they are instead proud and dignified people who are capable of governing themselves, according to Achebe's descriptions in *Things Fall Apart* (1995). Thus, Achebe's work is seen as a response to Conrad's work and an attempt to correct the negative stereotypes that Conrad perpetuated to the point that far exceeds a mere signaling of inferiority. In doing so, Achebe (1995) successfully deconstructs and subverts Conrad's colonial views by giving voice to voiceless people. As both authors have different views on African society and people, comparing their works is significantly useful in creating an understanding of the impact of colonialism on Africa.

3. *Wide Sargasso Sea*: A prequel to *Jane Eyre*

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a 1966 prequel that is widely regarded as the late masterpiece of the Dominican-British author, the desire to change the outlook of people on Africa by giving voice to voiceless people is equally present, in line with *Things Fall Apart*. However, the novel Rhys (1997) draws inspiration from is far from being infamous for having a colonialist or a racist perspective, unlike the *Heart of Darkness*. Instead, it is Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and the events are mainly seen through the lens of Bertha Mason, appearing as Antoinette in the prequel, from whom it was impossible to hear in *Jane Eyre* up until the point where she sets the house on fire. Furthermore, Rhys (1997) also gives voice to the black servants, for example, Christophine, making it possible to regard *Wide Sargasso Sea* as both a post-colonial and a feminist novel simultaneously.

3.1 Rhys' point of departure: Bertha's portrayal in *Jane Eyre*

In *Jane Eyre*, male dominance, selfishness, and othering (also underpinned by verbal violence and the promotion of Englishness) are pushed far as themes. While subscribing to the above view is made possible throughout the entire novel, the following section, where both Jane and Rochester talk about 'other women' in general, contributes vastly to the understanding of Rhys' motive in writing a prequel:

He smiled; and I thought his smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his hold gems and had enriched [...] [...] He chuckled; he rubbed his hands, 'Oh, it is rich to see and hear her!' he exclaimed, 'Is she original? Is she piquant? I would not exchange this one little English girl for the Grand Turk's whole seraglio – gazelle-eyes, houri forms, and all!' The Eastern allusion bit me again. 'I'll not

stand you an inch in the stead of seraglio,' I said; 'so don't consider me an equivalent for one. If you have a fancy for anything in that line, away with you, sir, to the bazaars of Stamboul, without delay, and lay out in extensive slave-purchases some of that spare cash you seem at a loss to spend satisfactorily here.' 'And what will you do, Janet, while I am bargaining for so many tons of flesh and such an assortment of black eyes?' (Brontë, 1994, p. 267)

The assumed Victorian superiority over other nations is also signified through Adele, a ward of Rochester. Evidence for this claim can be found in the section where her education is being discussed: "As she grew up, a sound English education corrected in a great measure her French defects; and when she left school, I found in her pleasing and obliging companion – docile, good-tempered, and well-principled" (Brontë, 1994, p. 445). Evidently, Victorians regarded education at that time as "a convenient tool to ensure the obedience and silence of the colonized to the rule of the British" (Hall, 2008, p. 774; as cited in Töngür, 2022). Education was used by the British as a medium, through which Victorian history and achievements were promoted in colonies –to create the illusion that Englishness is an identity to be proudly identified with (Töngür, 2022). In doing so, they ignored and suppressed local ideologies, norms, values, and above all, languages (Brathwaite, 1981; as cited in Töngür, 2022). Similar to Adele's example, another direct reference to France can be found in Chapter 31, where Jane imagines living there:

Whether it is better, I ask, to be a slave in a fool's paradise at Marseilles – fevered with delusive bliss one hour – suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next – or to be a village schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England? (Brontë, 1994, p. 356)

As highlighted in the beginning of this section, male dominance is among the major themes in *Jane Eyre*, the severity of which marks it as an issue for Rhys to be duly addressed in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Among ample evidence concurring with this theme is the instance where Jane expresses her willingness to be used 'as a tool' by St. John:

'I can do what he wants me to do: I am forced to see and acknowledge that' [...]. 'Consent to his demand is possible: but for one item – one dreadful item. It is – that he asks me to be his wife, and has no more of a husband's heart for me than that frowning giant of a rock, down which the stream is foaming in yonder gorge. He prizes me as a soldier would a good weapon, and that is all.' (Brontë, 1994, pp. 399-400)

Amongst all these, Bertha Mason shines out as one of the critical characters in Brontë's novel. She is a Creole woman from a wealthy family in Spanish Town, Jamaica, and has one older brother, Richard Mason, and a younger brother, who is intellectually disabled. Bertha is described as the violently insane first wife of Edward Rochester, who moved her to Thornfield Hall and locked her in a room on the third floor. Bertha is thus portrayed as less of a human

being than an unworldly creature by the retrospective first-person narrator —with a noteworthy vocabulary:

‘Fearful and ghastly to me – oh, sir, I never saw a face like it! It was a discolored 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!’ (Brontë, 1994, p. 281)

Grace Poole bent over the fire, apparently cooking something in the saucepan. In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled-hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. [...] A fierce cry seemed to give the lie to her favourable report: the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind-feet. ‘Ah! Sir, she sees you!’ exclaimed Grace: ‘you’d better not stay.’ (Brontë, 1994, p. 291)

‘That is *my wife*,’ said he. ‘Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know – such are the endearments to solace my leisure hours! And *this* is what I wished to have’ (laying his hand on my shoulder) ‘this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon. I wanted her just as a change after that fierce ragout. Wood and Briggs, look at the difference! Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder – this face with that mask – this form with that bulk; then judge me [...]’ (Brontë, 1994, p. 292)

Consequently, due to her Creole parentage —in other words, mixed racial background, it is through Bertha that Victorian prejudices about other ethnicities are revealed. She is depicted as a figure impeding Jane's happiness while mainly contributing to the self-understanding of Jane at the same time. The mystery built up around Bertha, which overweighs the biblical references, establishes suspense and a Gothic atmosphere to the plot. As a result, these are the reasons why Rhys intends to give voice to 'muted' Bertha, about whom a one-sided and brutal portrayal is made in *Jane Eyre*.

3.2 Bertha as Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

No signs of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* can be seen until the twenty-sixth chapter. However, Rhys begins her novel with Bertha's childhood: A daughter of an English Creole woman, Antoinette is hated by the black people just like her mother Annette Cosway, who was widowed when Antoinette was ten years old, around the time of the Emancipation Act of 1833 that abolished slavery in British Colonies. Annette, having been able to marry a rich man called Mr. Mason, goes mad soon after their house is burnt down and Antoinette's disabled brother Pierre is killed consequently. Despite Antoinette's failure in fitting in society, her loneliness throughout her childhood, and of course, the problematic nature of her family overall provide enough clues about her mental state, Rhys adds even more to the drama: When Antoinette is at a convent school, her mother dies, and her stepfather's son, Richard, arranges a marriage to free Rochester financially from his family:

[Rochester:] ‘What is the matter, Antoinette? What have I done?’

She said nothing.

‘You don’t wish to marry me?’

‘No.’ She spoke in a very low voice. [...]

‘But don’t you remember last night I told you that when you are my wife there would not be any more reason to be afraid?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Then Richard came in and you laughed. I didn’t like the way you laughed.’ (Rhys, 1997, p. 48)

After a short while, they get married, and Rochester gets his thirty thousand pounds of payment but for Antoinette, this proves to be another sharp turn in her life. Arguably, this is foreshadowed by Rhys at the end of the first chapter with a portrayal of an English garden. Different from Jane, who is told by the fortune-telling gypsy woman that she is going to have a happy marriage (Brontë, 1994, p. 195), Antoinette is to walk into the unknown when she gets married:

We are no longer in the forest but in an enclosed garden surrounded by a stone wall and the trees are different. I do not know them. There are steps leading upwards. It is too dark to see the wall or the steps [...]. (Rhys, 1997, p. 34)

Moreover, the pitch-black steps leading upwards foreshadows the attic in *Jane Eyre*. As Rochester realizes that he does not actually love Antoinette*, things start to get even worse for her; her half-brother tells Rochester that his arranged marriage with the daughter of a mad woman was sheer trickery. When Antoinette gets imprisoned in Thornfield Hall by Rochester and the narration is handed over to him, the storyline gets more in line with *Jane Eyre*: “Thus the two voices tell us one story, giving us not merely the contrast of their attitudes, but more important for the effect of horror which it produces, the contrast of the victim who knows her fate with that of the victim who must gradually learn his” (Mellown, 1972, p. 471).

Evidently, by giving voice to Antoinette, in addition to Rochester’s account, which Brontë (1994) solely relies on in *Jane Eyre*, Rhys creates a way of reading that operates on another level. Rhys (1997), by giving readers an opportunity to look at Antoinette’s (Bertha of *Jane Eyre*) situation and the course of events from two different perspectives, makes the novel more influential, while the comprehensive background information provided for characters, specifically Antoinette, Annette and other family members including the neighbours, contributes to this fact. Readers’ perspective shifts as they realize the real victim is Antoinette, in other words, Brontë’s Bertha Mason. However, Rochester is not solely responsible for

* At the beginning of part two, Rochester, who remains nameless throughout the novel, takes over the narration and says “So it was all over [...] Everything finished, for better or for worse,” quoting from the marriage vows of Anglican wedding service (Rhys, 1997, p. 38).

Antoinette's so-called madness as Rhys also puts the blame on society —thus, this is not an exact reversal of roles.

In this regard, Christophine plays a crucial part as well. She proves herself to be a powerful woman, 'despite' coming from Martinique like her masters, occasionally challenging even Rochester: "Richard Mason is no brother to her. You think you fool me? You want her money but you don't want her. It is in your mind to pretend she is mad. I know it" (Rhys, 1997, p. 103). She would typically be a silent and possibly oppressed figure in the Victorian author's novel, yet in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she poses a considerable threat to Rochester and his authority as a white Englishman while she protects Antoinette and helps Rhys give voice to Antoinette. Furthermore, the portrayal of Christophine as a strong figure also allows for considering the feminist aspect of the *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Some of the dialogues between Antoinette and Christophine, to this end, simultaneously draw attention to the themes of race, Victorian (English) superiority and patriarchy as highlighted so far:

She kissed Antoinette on the cheek. Then she looked at me, shook her head, and muttered in patois before she went out.

'Did you hear what that girl was singing?' Antoinette said.

'I don't always understand what they say or sing.' Or anything else.

'It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all. Will you go now please. I must dress like Christophine said.' (Rhys, 1997, p. 64)

It is important to note that the above-given dialogue takes place before Antoinette's madness issue supposedly develops. Although her feelings are perfectly rational, they are regarded as inconceivable by Rochester in the belief that she is losing her sanity. It is this very perception of Rochester, which is shaped mainly by a lack of understanding, prejudice and the patriarchal structure of the society, that designates the fate of Antoinette. On the other hand, Antoinette's obvious sense of unbelonging contributes to the theme of racism. At this point, the sympathetic feelings of the readers on behalf of Rochester, which has been mainly developed on the basis of the account he provides in *Jane Eyre*, start to shift towards Antoinette. In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester is believed to be —mainly by Jane— a dignified, kind-hearted person who made a mistake, therefore readers are supposed to pity him:

[Jane:] [...] he stooped towards me as if to kiss me; but I remembered caresses were now forbidden. I turned my face away, and put his aside. 'What! — How is this?' he exclaimed hastily. 'Oh, I know! you won't kiss the husband of Bertha Mason? You consider my arms filled and my embraces are appropriated?' (Brontë, 1994, p. 297)

Yet, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it is Antoinette being pitied instead, as she is unloved and being marginalised by Rochester. Thanks to Rhys giving voice to Antoinette, readers' feelings change direction when she is allowed to give her own account of the story:

'I will be quiet, I will not cry. But Christophine, if he, my husband, could come to me one night. Once more. I would make him love me.'

'No *doudou*. No.'

'Yes, Christophine.'

'You talk foolishness. Even if I can make him come to your bed, I cannot make him love you. Afterward he hates you.'

'No. And what do I care if he does? He hates me now. I hear him every night walking up and down the veranda. Up and down. When he passes my door he says. "Good-night, Bertha." He never calls me Antoinette now. He has found out it was my mother's name. (Rhys, 1997, p. 71)

Moreover, Rhys (1997) refers back to Brontë's protagonist Jane in various ways. One uncanny example of these references can be seen in part three of the novel. Antoinette believes that she has seen a ghost, which creates an impression in the readers that it could actually be Jane Eyre:

Turning a corner I saw a girl coming out of her bedroom. She wore a white dress and she was humming to herself. I flattened myself against the wall for I did not wish her to see me, but she stopped and looked around. She saw nothing but shadows, I took care of that, but she didn't walk to the head of the stairs. She ran. She met another girl and the second girl said, 'Have you seen a ghost?' — 'I didn't see anything but I thought I felt something.' — 'That is the ghost,' the second one said and they went down the stairs together. (Rhys, 1997, p. 118)

This instance also reminds readers of Jane's dream in Chapter 25 of *Jane Eyre*:

'I dreamt another dream, sir [...] On waking, a gleam dazzled my eyes: I thought — oh, it is daylight! But I was mistaken; it was only candlelight. [...] There was a light on the dressing-table. [...] I heard a rustling there. I asked, "Sophie, what are you doing?" No one answered; but a form emerged from the closet, it took the light, held it aloft [...] Mr. Rochester, this was not Sophie, it was not Leah, it was not Mrs. Fairfax [...] It was not even that strange woman, Grace Poole.' 'It seemed, sir, a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back. [...] she took my veil from its place: [...] she threw it over her own head and turned to the mirror.' (Brontë, 1994, p. 281)

Concurring with the assumption that Jane appears as a ghost in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a reversal of roles between Jane and Antoinette is manifestly present, as being a ghost can be associated with voicelessness and passiveness. However, at the ending of the novel, a key moment clarifies the premature thoughts of the readers as Rhys gives voice to Antoinette:

I went into the hall again with the tall candle in my hand. It was then I saw her — the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her. I dropped the candle I was carrying and it caught the end of the tablecloth and I

saw flames shoot up. As I ran or perhaps floated or flew I called help me Christophine help me and looking behind me I saw that I had been helped. (Rhys, 1997, p. 123)

At this point, readers realize that what Antoinette believes to be a ghost is actually herself, based on the assumption that the gilt frame is a mirror. Even though the image she sees looks familiar, it is beyond her recognition, as she has not seen herself for years. Building upon this view, it can also be proposed that Antoinette has been gradually driven mad by the various forms of repression, chief among which are patriarchy and colonialism. In this sense, the fire she inadvertently starts can be regarded as the tipping point of her sanity. Another theme Rhys plays with, to that end, is time. As the storyline proceeds from part two to part three, time flies (a decade is covered within almost ten pages), suggesting that it is of no importance. Rhys' extensive use of flashbacks and foreshadowing overlaps with this assumption.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe portrays the impact of colonialism on African culture and society through the story of Okonkwo, a respected leader in his community who struggles to maintain his cultural identity in the face of British imperialism. As an African who lived through the difficulties of colonialism, Achebe succeeds in showing that African societies, in reality, are different from their descriptions reflected in pieces of nineteenth century colonial literature, which echo "the global reach of English" and "the heyday of the British empire" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). He manages to 'regain dignity' with *Things Fall Apart* by becoming the voice of the Africans who are 'muted' in Western novels and provides solid evidence for who is at fault, i.e., people behind the whole colonization project that spoiled a well-established civilization. Similarly, *Wide Sargasso Sea* explores the impact of colonialism on Caribbean society through the story of Antoinette Cosway, a white Creole woman who is marginalized by both her race and gender. In line with *Things Fall Apart*, Rhys also manages to change the general perception towards the characters of a classic nineteenth-century novel, *Jane Eyre*, by giving voice to voiceless people. In doing so, Rhys brings the patriarchy and racism in Brontë's novel skillfully to the surface without turning the novel into a simple reversal of the classic. She also proves that "the other side" (Rhys, 1997, p. 82), which is barely thinkable under the influence of Brontë's narration, does indeed exist.

Set in Africa and the Caribbean, respectively, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys are two novels that offer potent critiques of patriarchy and colonialism during the colonial period. They demonstrate how these systems of oppression can have devastating effects on individuals and communities alike. By exploring these themes through the experiences of their characters, Achebe and Rhys provide essential insights into the complex legacies of colonialism and patriarchy that continue to shape the world today.

Disclosures

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Achebe, C. (1978). An image of Africa. *Research in African Literatures*, 9(1), 1-15.
- Achebe, C. (1995). *Things fall apart*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Bratlinger, P. (1985). Heart of Darkness: Anti-imperialism, racism, or impressionism? *Criticism*, 27(4), 363-385.
- Brogdon, J. M. (2012). Reverential feminism: (Re)considering the status of women in the African novel. *The Corinthian*, 13(7), 85-95.
- Brontë, E. (1994). *Jane Eyre*. Penguin Popular Classics.
- Conrad, J. (2006). *Heart of darkness* (4th Ed.). WW. Norton & Company.
- Guerard, A. J. (1958). *Conrad the novelist*. Harvard University Press.
- Hawkins, H. (1982). The issue of racism in Heart of Darkness. *Conradiana*, 11(3), 163-171.
- McLeod, J. (2010). *Beginning postcolonialism*. Manchester University Press.
- Mellown, E. W. (1972). Character and themes in the novels of Jean Rhys. *Contemporary Literature*, 13(4), 458-475.
- Oxford University Press. (n.d.). Nineteenth-century English: An overview. In *Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved December 15, 2023, from <https://www.oed.com/discover/nineteenth-century-english-an-overview>
- Rhys, J. (1997). *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Penguin.
- Rhoads, D. A. (1993). Culture in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. *African Studies Review*, 36(2), 61-72.
- Strong-Leek, L. (2001). Reading as a woman: Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and feminist criticism. *African Studies Quarterly*, 5(2), 29-35.
- Töngür, A. N. (2022). From colonial to postcolonial: Dissemination of the English language. *TranSynergy*, 1(1), 1-8.