Representation of the ‘Other’
in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*

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This study aims at examining the representation of the ‘Other’ as portrayed in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). It attempts to inspect how the ‘Other’ is viewed in nineteenth-century England and the cultural ideology behind such specific representation. It poses crucial questions as to why the ‘Other’ is constantly represented negatively in mainstream western narrative, as in the case of Bertha Mason, who is portrayed as a madwoman and a voiceless monster who deserves a ten-year rigorous confinement in the Attic. I will attempt to focus on the cultural and historical context of *Jane Eyre* and its impact on the representation of the ‘Other.’ I will also draw on Edward Said’s theorization related to race, representation, and resistance in my analysis.

1. Representation

I am going to explore the meaning of representation and its enormous power of construction of social reality, especially if it is allied with political and imperial conquests. For that reason, we have to put into our account the historical and theoretical relations between western economic-political domination and western intellectual production. A case that I will examine thoroughly is Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, with special reference to the character Bertha Mason. My objective is to show how the ‘Other’ is represented negatively and how such representation usually involves unequal power-relations.

Representation and resistance are very broad arenas within which much of the drama of colonialisit relations, postcolonial examination and subversion of those relations has taken place. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue that “in conquest and colonization, texts and textuality played a major part. European texts, anthropologies, histories, fiction, captured the non-European subject within European frameworks which read his or her alterity as terror or lack” (1995:83). Meanings are constructed in and through systems of representation and they are mediated through dominant hegemonic discourses which can reproduce unequal social relations. Representation is a vital part of a process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It also produces cultural values and constructs identity. According to Stuart Hall,

> Representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the ‘real’ world of objects or imaginary world of fictional objects, people and events. The relation between ‘things’ concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call “representation” (1997:19)

Representation produces and circulates cultural meanings, values and identities through the use of language. It is important to highlight that meaning is not static but is socially constructed and can change depending on the context in which people of a particular culture
construct it. We construct the meaning through the ways in which we represent ‘things.’ This in turn creates cultural codes, values and identity. Hall argues that “meanings regulate our conduct and practices as they help set up the rules and conventions by which social life is ordered” (1997:4)

However, the real concern is not how representation and language produce meanings but also the consequences of representation. Therefore, it is of great importance to focus on the ways in which meaning is produced and reproduced as the result of a particular discourse. According to Tam Donnelly, “Discourses are sets of experiences that are displayed through language, they are ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice” (2002:57). One tends to see that representation is a form of discourse which involves social conventions and unequal power-relationships where some people have more power to speak than others. For instance, western scholars use Oriental images and ideologies to consolidate the intellectual awkwardness of the ‘Other.’ These views of the Orient are attempts to portray the superiority and intellectuality of the western status. (Said 1979). Edward Said observes that the modern western view of the Orient as an outsider phenomenon, inferior to the West, is manifested in the academic sphere.

For Gayatri Spivak, representation is not only a matter of ‘speaking about,’ but also “speaking for and the role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored” (Spivak 1988). She adds that many western writings, for example Jane Eyre, have not adequately portrayed the reality of the colonized ‘Other’ and tend to exclude the voices of the ‘Other.’ She concludes that the colonized subaltern (women included, as in the case of Bertha Mason) cannot, or can scarcely, speak. Consequently, exclusion of the ‘Other’ produces and reproduces unequal social relations. Representation of so-called third world women in a negative light is pervasive in western dominant discourse. Many western political and discursive representations of third world women are problematic because they present these women (like Bertha Mason) as a homogenized group very different from the women of the West (like Jane Eyre). These representations of third world women take many forms in the West that range from being sexually ‘hot’ to being submissive and willing slaves.

It is worth mentioning that in society, cultural practices as manifested in the work of publishing companies, television and the press are important dimensions of the social, political, and economic organizations. ‘It shouldn’t be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English.’(Lewis and Mills 2003:306). These cultural practices represent society’s dominant ideologies which become a standard against which other forms of social relations and productions are interpreted and judged. For Edward Said, the question is not to represent cultures but how to represent other cultures. ‘Other’ is the keyword, evoking not only the extremely complex category of alterity but the position from which this word ‘Other’ is uttered. (Said 1978). Here, I find that Said tries to find an answer for a most important question, namely how we can represent a culture that is not ‘ours’ from within a culture that is ‘ours.’ Said adds that in order to represent other cultures, one has to pass through a social space of interpretation on the grounds that the diverse cultures of the world are autonomous and self-contained.
conceptual entities that can be understood only from the inside. (Said 1994) The approach adopted by Said lies in the space of intercultural contact if we accept that differences are real among cultures, without, however, hypostasizing these differences into some principle of absolute difference. Said tries to show how the Orient is portrayed as an inferior and barbaric civilization by the West through a series of negative misrepresentations invoked to justify the mission of the West to redeem the Orient and bring enlightenment to its darkness by salvation through physical conquest. It seems that the Orient remains the object of the hypostasizing gaze of the West, which claims to define properly the field of representation promoted in the name of science. Said highlights the dangerous power of literature in imperial conquest as an active force in the social construction of reality and representation. Prendergast finds that “Said’s book Culture and Imperialism is an attempt to break this vicious circle of misrepresentation with a powerful plea for the possibilities of dynamic cultural encounters in the late 20th century as a way of negotiating the problematic of self and ‘Other,’ where dialogue takes place on equal terms” (2000:97).

2. Jane Eyre and representation

However, a contrapuntal reading of Jane Eyre reveals that literary texts have complex engagements with the historical, political and social conditions of their times where colonialism is crucial and fundamental in the nineteenth and the twentieth century. Edward Said defines a contrapuntal reading as one which remains simultaneously aware “both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which the dominating discourse acts. Such approach encourages contrapuntal readings of literary texts” (1994:59). It is important to discern that reading Jane Eyre contrapuntally not only involves spotting incidents where the colonies are represented but also producing an acknowledgment of the history of the Caribbean which the novel is not necessarily writing ‘about,’ but which it ultimately depends upon. The history which helps shape Jane Eyre involves not only the social changes occurring in England in the early years of the nineteenth century, but also the history of colonization and resistance to it. Charlotte Brontë represses the recent and immediate history of British slaveholding by alluding to a safely remote history of Roman acts of enslavement. Jane cries out to John Reed in the opening chapter, “You are like a murderer—you are like a slave-driver—you are like the Roman emperors!” (6). The importance of the contrapuntal approach illustrated by Edward Said lies in the continuing value of the literary text being studied. According to Said’s book Culture and Imperialism, Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park may have “affiliations with a sordid history” of slavery. (Said 1978:114). Moreover, he emphasizes that there is no need to devalue that novel as a consequence, and asserts that Jane Austen’s brilliance is evidenced in the complex ways in which she configures the relations between Mansfield Park and Antigua.

In Jane Eyre, through the Masons, we are introduced to the plantation–owning community in Jamaica, while St John Rivers connects the novel with the British missionary work in India. These can be interpreted as overt references to the history of the British Empire and its colonies. The economic relationships among the novel’s characters are especially vital to the plot, since Edward Rochester’s first marriage to the Jamaican–born Bertha Mason gains him a fortune of thirty thousand pounds, which makes possible his
affluent and lavish style at Thornfield. Within this context, Susan Meyer affirms that Jane’s inheritance of twenty thousand pounds has a colonial source:

It comes from her uncle in Madeira, who is an agent for a Jamaican wine manufacturer, Bertha’s brother. The location of Jane’s uncle John (Eyre) in Madeira, off Morocco, on the West African coast, where Richard Mason to stop on his way home from England, also indirectly suggests, through Mason’s itinerary, that John Eyre’s wealth is implicated in the slave trade. (1996: 93)

It is clear that without the money accrued from colonialism, Rochester could not have and enjoy the luxuries of Thornfield Hall, nor could Jane be able to facilitate the respectable marriages of her cousins. Without such colonial wealth, Jane and her cousins were destined to live as humble governesses for wealthy families in England. Judie Newman construes this change of social status by saying that “Jane and Rochester settle down to a happy married life on the proceeds of Empire” (1995: 14).

It seems that Jane Eyre is implicated seriously in colonialism not just in terms of economic wealth but at the level of representation too, as it is “littered with overt and covert references to ‘Other’ cultures and representations of civilized and savage ones” (Childs 1999: 145). The scene where Rochester takes Jane to see Bertha just after the Wedding Ceremony is full of misrepresentation of the ‘Other’, “a figure whether beast or human being, one couldn’t at first sight tell” (321). Rochester describes Bertha as a monster: “a fearful voyage I had with such a monster in the vessel” (92). Bertha’s supposed bestial and violent nature is linked to her mixed Creole lineage and Jamaican birthplace. This tallies with the frequent assumptions in colonial discourses that those born of parents not from the same ‘race’ are degenerate beings and perhaps closer to animals (Mcleod 2000): “There it is not known what a sullied name you bear, nor what a filthy burden is bound to you. You may take the maniac with you to England; confine her with due attendance and precautions at Thornfield” (91). Here, we find that Bertha Mason is robbed of human selfhood. She has no voice in the novel except abrupt demonic bursts of laughter and unintelligible murmurs throughout the night, as reported by the narrator Jane Eyre. This animalistic portrayal deprives her of her identity and selfhood. She never achieves her independent selfhood in the novel. Negative representation of the ‘Other’ continues when Rochester describes his night in Jamaica:

Being unable to sleep in bed, I got up and opened the window. The air was like Sulphur-streams-I couldn’t find no refreshment any where. Mosquitoes came buzzing and hummed sullenly round the room…I was physically influenced by the atmosphere and scene, and my ears were filled with the curses the maniac(Bertha) still shrieked out (90).

This passage seems to consolidate many frequent colonial assumptions which tarnish the image of the ‘Other.’ Rochester depicts Jamaica as a satanic and hellish location. Phrases such as ‘sulphur-streams’ or ‘the ominous noise of the sea’ give the impression of Jamaica as hell on earth. We find that that Jamaica is linked and associated with inferiority, lunacy and demonic forces. Such negative representation is contrasted sharply with the positive
representation of Europe, which symbolizes salvation for Rochester from the maddening atmosphere of Jamaica.

The sweet wind from Europe was still whispering in the refreshed leaves, and the Atlantic was thundering in glorious liberty, my heart dried up and scorched for a long time, swelled to the tone, and filled with living blood my being longed for renewal—my soul thirsted for a pure drought. I saw hope revive—and felt regeneration possible. (91).

The beauty of Europe, is contrasted sharply with the mosquito-infested environment of Jamaica. We can notice clearly that the relationship between Jamaica and Europe is both contrasting and unequal. If the West was considered the place of historical progress and scientific sophistication, then the Orient was considered remote from the influence of historical change. The Orient is represented as a timeless place, static and trapped in antiquity. According to Said’s argument in Orientalism, the westerner’s views of the Orient do not depend on what existed in the Orient but are dreams and fantasies of the West based on an institutional framework. A series of images concerning the exotic East are fabricated and become an object suitable for study in the academy (Said 1978). It is notable that the representation of ‘Others’ by Europe is a sign of its cultural and political dominance. These representations focus on North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean and more significantly on the Third World in general.

For Frantz Fanon, to be “the ‘Other’ is to feel that one is always in a shaky position, to be always on guard, ready to be rejected and …unconsciously doing everything needed to bring about exactly this catastrophe” (1967:76). For example, Bertha Mason is represented as a degenerate and half-animal, a figure whose behaviour is affected by the fiery environs of Jamaica. It is crucial to recall here that Charlotte Brontë was writing Jane Eyre in the 1840s. Many of the slaves working on the plantations in Jamaica were originally Africans who had been captured and sold to the plantation owners. During the 1830s, resistance by slaves to their horrible conditions was widespread everywhere. Fires functioned as beacons to let other slaves know that uprising had begun and the burning of the plantations was an important feature of the slaves’ resistance. This may account for Bertha Mason’s attempt to set fire to Rochester’s room while he is asleep and her eventual destruction of Thornfield Hall. Bertha’s revolt against her confines and setting fire to Thornfield cannot be seen as an act of suicide: it is a revolt against colonialism in all its negative manifestations and representation. Susan Meyer says in this regard that “the story of Bertha does make an indictment of British imperialism in West Indies and the stained Wealth that came from its oppressive rule” (1996:71). Her death can be seen as a revolt of colonized against colonizer, seeking ultimate freedom through death. Bertha’s suicide does bear witness to resistance to the colonial role and its negative misrepresentation since the novel never allows her to tell her own story. We have her story narrated and represented by Rochester and Jane Eyre. Bertha’s unruly presence can be read contrapuntally as resistant to the role of those who deem her less than human. Throughout the novel, Bertha seems to resist the representation of the narrator Jane Eyre.
a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human, one
couldn’t, 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. (70)

Hiding her face and head can be seen as a purposeful act to resist representation and escape it
metaphorically. Bertha’s unruly resistance is an evidence of colonialism’s failure to control
those from whom it commanded utter subordination. Firdous Azim comments that “Bertha
escapes the dominating and hegemonising imperialist and educational processes” (1993:
183).

Orientalists circulated negative assumptions about third world women as being
sexually promiscuous. Frantz Fanon comments on that, “For the majority of white men, the
Negro represents the sexual instinct in its raw state” (1967:177). Hence, we will not find it
surprising that Bertha is described as a sensual woman who attracts the fantasy of Rochester
at the beginning of their courtship, “tall, dark and majestic” (P.86). Edward Said says in this
regard that third world women are represented by the West as “the creatures of a male
power—fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all
they are willing” (1978:207).

Misrepresentation persists when Rochester continues: “her family wished to secure
me because I was of a good race” (86). In the context of a colony, blacks outnumbered
whites by twelve to one and it was a routinely accepted island practice for white planters to
force female slaves to become their mistresses. Rochester’s phrase accrues significance
beyond its immediate reference to lineage (Meyer 1996). It suggests cunningly that Bertha
herself many not be of as good a race as he. This may conform with Said’s view that the
West considers the East and people living there as degenerate, less than human, and
unsophisticated. In another episode, Rochester exclaims that “she came of a mad family,
idots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a mad
woman and a drunkard” (69). By doing so, he links that lineage with two of the most
common stereotypes (drunkenness and madness) associated with blacks in the nineteenth
century. Bertha’s bestiality and blackness is made more explicit despite Rochester’s wish to
convince Jane, and perhaps temporarily himself, that “the swelled black face” and
“exaggerated stature” of the woman she has seen are “figments of imagination, results of
nightmare” (59). But when Jane sees Bertha’s face reflected in her mirror, she describes that
face to Rochester:

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 .... Ghosts are usually pale, Jane.’ This
sir, was purple! The lips were swelled and dark; the brows furrowed: the black
eyebrows widely raised over bloodshot eyes. (57).

The emphasis on Bertha’s colouring in this passage—she is emphatically not “pale” but
‘discolored,’ ‘purple,’ ‘blackened’—along with the references to rolling eyes and full,
‘swelled,’ ‘dark’ lips, all insistently and conventionally mark Bertha as black. Jane’s use of the
word ‘savage’ underlines the negative representation of her description of Bertha’s features, and the redness that she sees in Bertha’s rolling eyes suggests stereotypical black drunkenness. Adrienne Rich refers to Bertha as a “dark sensual beauty” (1973:99) while Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe her as “a Creole, swarthy, livid” (1979:680). Sander Gilman associates the racial ‘Other’ with madness. (Gilman 1985). Resisting that, Spivak describes Bertha as a native-born white Jamaican woman. She argues that Jane Eyre gives the white Jane individuality at the expense of the ‘native’ Bertha. (Spivak 1985). Criticizing the western feminist attitude towards Bertha Mason, Black feminist theorists have argued that “white western feminist theory needs to confront its implicit racism and racial stereotyping” (Lewis and Mills 2003:4-5). We see that Bertha has become black, though she is not, as she is misrepresented and constructed by the narrator Jane. In this regard, Fanon comments: “As color is the most obvious outward manifestation of race, it has been made the criterion by which men [sic] are judged, irrespective of their social and intellectual attainments” (1967:118)

However, Jane Eyre has provided the most powerful fictional misrepresentation of the ‘Other’ in terms of gender too. The character of Bertha has been reread by a feminist postcolonial discourse as the obliteration of the ‘Other’ woman. Bertha only comes into the novel after about a third of its action has taken place. There is a complete obliteration of the character of Bertha Mason compared to the glorifying depiction of Jane Eyre as the new emerging western white feminist as celebrated by many western feminist studies, such as those of Elaine Showalter, Adrienne Rich, or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. To counter the western feminist prejudice meted out to Bertha Mason, Jean Rhys’s novel Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) retells the story of Jane Eyre from Bertha’s perspective. Rhys tries to give Bertha that voice which is completely silenced throughout Brontë’s novel. Gayatri Spivak adds that the ‘Other’ woman cannot be given the central role in a novel which remains a discourse of the Enlightenment subject (cited in Azim 1993:107). Firdous Azim situates Jane Eyre as part of the imperialist genre in which a central subject seeks to establish itself through the eradication of ‘Other’ subjects. (Azim 1993). Bertha functions in Jane Eyre as the denied and repressed ‘Other’ who is necessary for the emergence of the central female subject, Jane. We come to see that western feminism has ignored the sheer suffering of Bertha Mason as a woman and has bestowed all of its critical attention on the character of Jane and the stages of her development from which emerge finally as a symbol of the ‘new woman’ who resists the domination of tradition, religious institutions and patriarchal order.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, my argument is that representation plays a decisive role in constructing meanings and identities about others and that there is also a strong alliance between knowledge and power which has destructive consequences on the representation of the ‘Other.’ We find that Bertha Mason, for example, is represented negatively in regard to her race and gender. One comes to find out that the real reason behind a continuous negative representation is the desire to rule and colonize others. It is seen that literature, especially in its most popular form, the novel, has played a decisive role in misrepresenting those seen as the ‘Other.’ It is evident that the representation of the ‘Other’ is based on false stereotypical ideas and concepts—here, about those who live in Jamaica. One tends to think where there is representation, there is also misrepresentation, since we represent things and objects
according to certain concepts in our mind influenced by gender, the ethnic group we belong to, religion, and other factors. We finally conclude that the most dangerous type of representation is the constructionist one, where we construct realities and then misrepresent them in order to serve our political agenda. This is evident in *Jane Eyre*, where we have a one-sided story told to us by the narrator Jane Eyre while the other story on the other side is completely ignored. Those living in Jamaica were misrepresented, and their identities were falsely constructed.

**Note**
1. All references will be henceforth taken from Brontë, Charlotte, *Jane Eyre*. London: Everyman’s Library, 1908.

**Works Cited**
