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INTERTEXTUALITY IN POST-MODERN FICTION: A STUDY OF JEAN RHY'S NOVEL  
*WIDE SARGASSO SEA*

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this research paper is to give an intertextual analysis of Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Jean Rhys authored many novels like *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) but she is widely famous for *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Different scholars have studied her differently. Some said that she is a feminist while others studied her from racist point of view. I decided to analyze the intertextuality of her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. To achieve this goal, I divided the whole research paper into three small sections. Section first takes into consideration Victorian tradition and its influence on Jean Rhys novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In Section second I discuss narrative convention of Victorian period and their adoption in Jean Rhys text, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In third and final section I focus on patriarchy and power.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Post -Modern, Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

The term intertextuality was coined by the post structuralist Julia Kristeva in 1960 and since then it has been widely accepted by postmodern literary critics and theoreticians. She says that readers are always influenced by other texts. Basically, when writers borrow from previous texts, their work acquires layers of meaning. In addition, when a text is read in the light of another text, all the assumptions and effects of the other texts give a new meaning and influence the way of interpreting the original text. It shapes the text's meaning by another text. Julia Kristeva says that text is not only product of author and its environment but it is created by using another existing texts. It puts two texts in an interdependent situation in order to produce meaning. These texts stand in relation to one another. In Julia Kristeva's view literary texts are constructed of mosaic of quotations and has relation to other texts. She believes that any text is transformation and assimilation of another text. She obtains her theory of intertextuality from Michel Bakhtin's Idea of Polyphonic which describes a literary text as a part of literary texts in the history of literary tradition and it is open to various interpretations and voices. By using intertextuality, Julia Kristeva wants to explain the heterogeneous nature of literary texts. She argued that texts have two axes: a horizontal axis which connects the author and reader of a text to each other and a vertical axis which connects the text to other texts.

### Victorian tradition and its adaptation in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Our study throws light on intertextual nature of Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Our aim is to show that *Wide Sargasso Sea* in fact acts as a demonstrator of intertextuality. It makes the reader aware that its text rests upon and is read in the context of a larger network of formal conventions. While going through the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* the reader finds clearly visible traces of Victorian authors. Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is commonly held to be the major point of reference for Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Many issues that the Victorian authors faced in their own times have been transported into *Wide Sargasso Sea* in such a way that they now reflect the major concerns of Jean Rhys' own age. Victorian writers especially Bronte sisters produced notable works of the Victorian period. *In Wuthering Heights (1847)* Emily depicts the gothic scenes. *Jane Eyre (1847)* by Charlotte Bronte is another major novel that has gothic themes. Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of wildfell (1848)* is considered to be the first feminist novel. Jean Rhy's portrays the gothic scenes while dealing with desperation situation of Antoinette Cosway living with her mother, Anette and brother, Pierre at Coulibri, her family estate near Spanish town, Jamaica. With the passage of Emancipation Act and death of her father the family is financially ruined. Black people despise them because they were slave holders in their recent past and while people looked down upon them because they are very poor. Family needs and demands force Anette, Antoinette's mother to marry Mr. Mason, a rich planter but her second marriage doesn't bring good fortune for the family as was expected earlier instead it created racial tension in their neighborhood. One night rioters got assembled around their house and burnt it down to ashes. The family had narrow escape except Antoinette's brother Pierre who dies due to exposure of smoke. After his death, Anette Pierre's mother goes mad with grief. This gothic scene of *Wide Sargasso Sea* strongly refers to Charlotte Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre* where Bertha, former wife of Rochester sets the house on fire when she was locked in because of her madness. Jean Rhy's in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* uses the Victorian theme of madness in the same way Victorians portrayed in their novels. Rochester, the husband of Antoinette when receives the letter from Antoinette's step brother, Daniel Cosway. The letter alleges that there is a history of sexual degeneracy and mental illness in Antoinette's family. Rochester confines Antoinette in Thornfield Hall. When her step brother Richard Mason visits her she attacks him. Bronte Evokes a frightening atmosphere of mystery and supernatural in Thornfield Hall. In order to invoke fear in the reader, she describes these events with an eerie mood to Bessie. She tells "I saw a light, and I thought a ghost would come" (*Jane Eyre*, 122). The main setting of the *Jane Eyre* in Thornfield Hall with the moon light, lightening, coldness, mysterious, noises and footsteps uses to create tension in the novel.

Bronte portrays effigies of strange flowers and stranger birds and strangest human beings to create fear in the novel, *Jane Eyre*. Rhys' also wants to create this feeling of suspense and frightening in the reader and she takes these elements from *Jane Eyre* and brings them to *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In *Jane Eyre*, Bronte makes use of dreams to express the repressed material in the unconscious mind of the Jane. Rhys under the influence of *Jane Eyre* making use of the same theme in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette sees disastrous doom in her dream which shows her repressed desire for escape. Antoinette dreams that she steals the keys from the Grace Poole opens the door and goes through the way while carrying candles.

One more theme that Rhys takes from Charlotte Bronte is the idea of marriage. Rochester, husband of Bertha, in *Jane Eyre*, plays the major role in both the works while Bertha has been given minor place in the Charlotte's novel in comparison to Antoinette's place in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Through the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* Antoinette is many times called Bertha.

"..... Then I said sharply. Bertha, are you asleep, are you ill, why don't you answer me?

Certainly I will my dear Bertha, not Bertha tonight. She said. Of course, on this of all nights you must be Bertha" (Rhys 123)

Victorian writers also confronted issues like poverty and depression. Charles Dickens introduced the life of poor and depressed people to public in his works like *Oliver Twist (1838)* and *David Copperfield (1849)*. He sketch the pictures of hunger and thirst. Charlotte did it in *Jane Eyre (1847)* while Emily Bronte in

*Wuthering Heights* (1847) Rhys created such type of atmosphere in Antoinette's family. She shows then financially damaged and mentally disturbed.

#### **Narrative conventions of Victorian period**

In order to analyze the precise functioning of the Victorian Literary elements in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, we bring narrative technique of Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea* in confrontation to the Victorian conventions. It is argued that there is an intertextual interplay between the conventions of Victorian narration and conventions of narration found in postmodern novels.

The assumption here is that, although novels appear as individual texts, they nevertheless always share certain conventions with other novels which enables us to create classificatory categories. This also enables us to read groups of novels from a specified period as coherent system of signs. David Lodge provides useful comparison between contemporary fiction and Victorian fiction in his *Working with Structuralism* :

The fundamental principle of aesthetics before the modern era was that art imitates life, and is therefore in the last analysis answerable to it: Art must tell the truth about life, and contribute to making it better, or at least more bearable..... The basic premise that art imitated life prevailed in the west from classical times till the late eighteenth century. It was temporarily reinforced by the considerable achievement of the realistic novel in the nineteenth century, but by the end of that century, it had been turned on its head. "Life imitates art" declared Oscar Wilde, meaning that we compose the reality we perceive by mental structures that are cultural, not natural in origin, and that it is art which is most likely to change and renew those structures when they become inadequate or unsatisfying. (P.5)

From the lodge discussion it is clear that there appeared in the twentieth century a notion of art as a result of intertextuality. Lodge again says that

but if life imitates art, where does art come from? The answer given is: from other art, especially art of the same kind (P.5)

Miller in *The Form Of Victorian Fiction* indicates that

the Victorian novelists..... place themselves in imagination within the mind of the community, or at least within the mind of the past of the community which most interests them. This means for most of the Victorian novelists, the mind of middle and upper classes. This mind is assumed to be already there. It has been brought into existence by living together of a group rather than imposed from the .....(P.67)

In each of the above discussion our aim is show that Rhys creates her novel to operate as an intertextual game in terms of narrative systems and that while he apparently writes a free flowing postmodern text, the deterministic aspect of Victorian didacticism remains strongly inscribed in the way the text guides the reader's responses.

Victorian novelists use loose and ill constructed plots in their novels but they tell the story so well. They are so entertaining that still we all love to read and enjoy a novel of Dickens or Thackeray. The readers attention is not allowed to flag even for a single moment. They don't like to give it up unfinished. Victorian novelists have capacity of varied moods. They crowd realism and fantasy, thrills and theories. Their imagination works on their personal expertness and transform and transmutes them the act of creation is always performed. Dickens is called the romancer of London streets and Thackeray transports us to an entirely new world, calls it vanity fair or Thackeray-land. The creative imagination of the Victorian novelists works on

the setting of his story and transforms it. The Victorians are all able to make their characters live. Their characters may not always be real, We find much in them that is improbable and false but they are live. They wonderfully energetic and vital. A Victorian novel is a crowd of breathing, Crying, Living , laughing people but Victorians lack uniformity. Their novels are extremely unequal and extra ordinary mixture of strength and weakness but technically faulty. Their novels are still considered as a light entertainment and not serious work of art.

While studying Rhys` novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* the reader finds numerous hints to Victorian conventions of novel writing . Rhys` constructed complex plot with a number of characters in *Wide Sargasso Sea* which is the main future of Victorian novel. Rhys divided the whole plot of novel into three parts. In part one of the *Wide Sargasso Sea* Antoinette narrates her own story unlike Charlotte Bronte`s novel where Bertha mason doesn`t tell her own story. It`s told for her by Jane Eyre, The narrator who provides her version of mad woman`s story from the information she is given by others and her observations at Thornfield Hall. Jane Rhys in giving Bertha her own voice, effects a major change. Even though plots narrated by different characters but still both the characters run parallel to each other. It shows clearly that Rhys was greatly influenced by the Victorian narrative conventions most particularly by Charlotte Bronte. Through Antoinette`s first person narration readers can be brought closer to this character, To share her thoughts and emotions and take the journey from Jamaica to imprisonment in Rochester`s house alongside her. Antoinette is allowed to voice her own experience and so to restore the balance. She remembers experience of life from childhood to adulthood when her marriages arranged by Mr. Mason to Mr Rochester. Charlotte Bronte in her novel *Jane Eyre* creates the same type of characterization. She allows character of Jane to grow from childhood to adulthood. Jane Rhys uses stream of consciousness to represent the mingling of a child`s perception with an old narrator`s memories. In part one, section 7 for example, Antoinette remembers feeling very ominous atmosphere at Coulibri and goes into her brothers room. As she watches him asleep, She muses on Mr Mason`s plans to cure the little boy. Jane Eyre certainly hints at stream of consciousness, take for instance, the way Jane goes into her head and ponders why she is treated injustice by her aunt she asks herself my questions. She imagines how Mrs. Reed must hate to take care of her uncle in his grave, and recalls false stories she has heard of dead man`s souls revisiting those still alive.

Jane Rhys employs supernatural element in the *Wide Sargasso Sea* to make it look a fairy tale. Charlotte Bronte did it in *Jane Eyre*. Rochester, husband of Jane once said to Jane that she looks like a fairy.

In part two Jane Rhys gives Rochester his own voice. This means that different point of view on his experiences are relationships will be offered to readers, Instead of stable consistency possible trough a single narrative voice. By constructing Rochester through his own first person narration, Jane Rhys ensures that readers feel closer to his experience and have more understanding. In part three Jane Rhys chooses another character to narrate the story. It has been given to Grace first and then to Antoinette. Annette, Antoinette`s mother is not given her own first person narration. Readers have to construct her character from Antoinette`s memories of her mother .The complex plot and structure and giving place to number of characters to narrate the plot from different perspective is main characteristic of Victorian novel which Rhys adopted in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

#### Patriarchy and Power

Patriarchy is one of the main concerns in Jane Rhys novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rhys wanted to give Bertha, Mr. Rochester`s wife, a life since Bertha was only portrayed as a mad ghost in Bronte`s novel. Rhys main female character is named Antoinette but she is representation of Bronte`s Bertha before her arrival in England to her husband Mr. Rochester`s estate, Thornfield hall. Mr. Rochester is described as a man who wants to stay in control and keeps his patriarchal and colonial position of power, While Antoinette is described as an innocent being who seeks love and appreciation but patriarchal domination and control reduce women self esteem. The cultural differences between the main characters Antoinette and her English husband, Mr Rochester, Create a wide gap between them, A gap they will never bridge. A persons cultural differences in

norms and values can be looked upon as madness but madness can also be consequence of operation in society.

In Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, the characters Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason are both oppressed by the patriarchal system of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Each woman refuses to conform to a patriarchal society but in the manner by which each rebel against culture determine a very different future. By the time *Jane Eyre* is nine years old, she receives a great deal of injustice at Gateshead Hall. She decides to rebel against the harsh treatment that she receives from her family. They consider her desire to learn and her independent thought to be disobedient and her punishment becomes so intolerable that she could no longer restrain herself. She attacks the rich and spoiled John Reed. Then she is locked in a hunting chamber known as a red room. In male dominated societies women are still considered objects of pleasure. Patriarchal structure of society does not allow women to live independently as they wish. Men always try to make them their slaves. They want them to do everything for men which they need in their lives. In such societies women get ready to fight against a male dominated world. Rhys' development of patriarchal structure in *Wide Sargasso Sea* reminds the reader that Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* where Jane and Bertha are dominated by the world of men at different places in the novel. Jane being an orphan was mistreated at Gateshead in her childhood and Bertha when she gets married with Rochester, he considers Bertha lusty, improper and deviant. She was called low, narrow, incapable and common woman.

Mr. Rochester's obsession to dominate and control his wife makes him alienate Antoinette from her own identity. Her female sexuality gives him a feeling of insecurity and fear by calling Antoinette, Bertha, he tries to eliminate Antoinette's identity and turn her into Victorian English women. He explains to Antoinette why he calls her Bertha:

"It is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha" [Rhys 86]

By calling her Bertha he alienates her from West Indian identity and forces a British identity upon her. He tries to create a woman he can control, dominate and possess. In the end of part two, when Mr. Rochester and Antoinette are about to leave for England, he fears that he has gone too far. She does not express any feelings anymore. She has lost her vitality and acts completely passive. He fears that he has destroyed her beyond all knowledge. Although he eliminated her identity on purpose in order to turn her into an English Victorian wife, whom he can control, he fears she is beyond repair and feels remorse:

She said she loved this place. This is the last she'll see of it.

I'll watch for one tear, one human tear. Not that blank hating moonstruck face. I'll listen .....if she says good bye perhaps adieu like those old time songs she sang. Always adieu (and all songs say it). If she too says it, or weeps, I'll take her in my arms, my lunatic (Rhys 107).

He is afraid that she is beyond his control that she has turned inward with her madness. Furthermore, his patriarchal personality is evident in the phrase, "Mine, Mine", it indicates his obsession for material success, control and power.

### **Conclusion**

The main aim of our study is to show the Rhys novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the novel of intertextuality. In its all aspects we find the traces of *Jane Eyre*. It is clear from the above discussions and citations that the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* follows the whole structure of *Jane Eyre* exactly. This study covers the idea of intertextuality through examination of three aspects of the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. One of the aspects is the Victorian tradition where we take into study the thematic concern of the Victorian novelists especially Charlotte Bronte. Gothic or horror scenes, supernatural, fairy tales, dreams, slavery, oppression are some of the themes which she uses in her novel *Jane Eyre*. We find the traces of same themes while going through the *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The second aspect is narrative conventions of Victorians and their adoption in Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Only setting of the novels is different while plot construction and characterization are exactly same. The third one is patriarchal structure Rochester, the patriarch, exercises the brutal force upon his female partners in a both novels these three aspects prove the existence of one of the post-modern characteristics,

intertextuality in this novel which shows that there is no originality in literature and any literary work can be the mixture of previous texts.

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