

# *The “Other” Women in Jane Eyre*

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**Abstracts:** Widely considered a classic, *Jane Eyre* gave new truthfulness to the Victorian novel with its realistic portrayal of the inner life of a woman, noting her struggles with her natural desires and social condition. Thus, critics had interpreted it from perspectives of Feminism, Marxism, New Historicism and so on. This paper tries to read it from a Postcolonial Feminist Approach by illustrating the concept as “Other” and investigating it for the roles of the female characters.

## 1. Introduction

*Jane Eyre* is Charlotte Brontë’s best known novel. When first published in 1847 in London, it became an immediate success. Contemporary critics claimed it to be “an extraordinary book” “unlike all that we have read” and full of “originality and freshness”[1] (Allott, 1974: 78, 79, 87). Until now, it is widely considered a classic. Literature critics have investigated it from multiple perspectives. The very first and most popular approach is feminism since the female protagonist Jane Eyre is portrayed as a rebel against the male dominated society. As Margaret Oliphant puts it: “The most alarming revolution of modern times has followed the invasion of *Jane Eyre*. It was a wild declaration of the ‘Rights of Woman’. ... Here is your true revolution. France is but one of the Western Powers, woman is the half of the world” (Allott, 1974:312) Another aspect to interpret this masterpiece is New Historicism because of the close match in the protagonist’s experience to the author’s. English philosopher George Henry Lewes wrote in *Recent Novels: French and English*: “Reality – deep, significant reality – is the great characteristic of the book. It is an autobiography, – not, perhaps, in the naked facts and circumstances, but in the actual suffering and experience...” (1847:691) *The Christian Remembrancer* argued that Charlotte Brontë “like her heroine, an oppressed orphan, a starved and bullied charity-school girl, and a despised and slighted governess” (Curren, 1848: 397). Leslie Stephen, writing in 1877, remarked that: “The most obvious of all remarks about Miss Brontë is the close connection between her life and her writings.” (1877: 726) Cecil, claimed in *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Reevaluation* that Charlotte: “is our first subjective novelist” and her protagonists “are all the same person; and that is Charlotte Brontë” (1935: 122) Meanwhile, as this book was first published in mid-19th century, during the peak time of Victorian Age, when the British Empire was busy expanding its colonies, many critics detected imperialist and colonial elements in the book. Thus, post-colonial approach provided the novel a new direction and meaning. In *Three women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism*, Gayatri C. Spivak claimed: “It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, ..., was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English” (243) There are studies reading the book

by revealing and criticizing the oppression of the British colonialism.

## 2. Historical Background and Theoretical Review

### 2.1 Historical Background

Jane Eyre was originally published in 1847 and the events of the novel take place relatively contemporaneously, in an unnamed area of Northern England in the early decades of the nineteenth century. This is a time when British Colonialism was growing increasingly important. Fueled by the industrial revolution, the demand for raw materials to feed the factories increased badly. There's also need for cheap labour and new markets abroad. Economy is the most important reason for imperialism, because it provided Great Britain an opportunity to expand colonialism. It is believed that the extension of colonies was an act of humanitarianism in Great Britain. The famous saying "The sun never sets on the British Empire" was gained during the time of British Imperialism of 1870- 1914. This was not only a time of treasure collecting or finding, it was also a time of white supremacy. The wealth gained was crucial for Britain's economic rise, which rendered the Industrial Revolution possible. With an increased amount of economic power, the British Empire gained political and military power over large parts of the world. As Charlotte Brontë lived during this time, her writing was certainly influenced by a colonial belief system. There are studies focusing on the colonial oppression expressed in the novel or exploring the colonialist theme in the novel. Critics home and abroad revealed and criticized the oppression of the British colonialism.

### 2.2 Imperialism and Postcolonialism

Frantz Fanon is considered to be the father of postcolonialism. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), he claimed some key concepts: race is a social rather than biological category; hybridity is common in the context of postcolonialism as it not only refers to biological mixture, but also a mixture of cultures. Another prominent postcolonial critic is Edward W. Said. He deconstructs Western mainstream culture and argues that European center is man-made and reexamine and define Eastern cultures. His *Orientalism* was regarded as the origin of post-colonial theory. He calls attention to "political and material effects of Western scholarship and academic institutions" and "producing the East discursively as the West's inferior "other" and strengthens West' self-image of superiority" (Moor-Gilbert, 1997:36) Said's another masterpiece *East isn't East* writes:

My way of doing this has been to show that the development and maintenance of every culture require the existence of another different and competing alter ego. The construction of identity — for identity whether of Orient or Occident, France or Britain, while obviously a repository of distinct collective experience, is finally a construction — involves establishing oppositions and "Other" whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation of their differences from "us". (Marrouchi, 1998:195)

With respect to the above definitions of Orientalism, we see that all the binary distinctions between the East and the West presuppose the former as the inferior and the latter as the superior. East was portrayed as the other. In her most famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak tries to overthrow the binary opposition between self and other, subject and object, Occident and Orient, center and marginal and the majority and minority. According to Spivak, "Subaltern" refers to those who belong to third world countries and are unable to speak up as they are divided by gender, class, caste, region, religion and other narratives. Since its publication, *Can the Subaltern Speak* has been cited, invoked, imitated, and critiqued. It's unique because it differs from those traditional studies by providing a better reading strategy to interpret the literatures in the nineteenth century.

In *Imperialism at Home*, Susan Meyer explores Charlotte Brontë's metaphorical use of race and empire in *Jane Eyre*: "Why would Brontë write a novel permeated with the imagery of slavery, and suggesting the possibility of a slave uprising, in 1846, after the emancipation of the British slaves had already taken place?" "Perhaps the eight years since emancipation provided enough historical distance for Brontë to make a serious and public, although implicit, critique of British slavery and British imperialism in the West Indies" (71).

As a theoretical approach, Postcolonialism argues that Western culture is Eurocentric because it presents European values as natural and universal. Traditionally, eastern culture is considered to be inferior. As a major critical discourse in the humanities, Postcolonialism examines the culture of former colonies of the European empires. As a branch of humanities, it explores liberty, politics, and history of colonized countries as well as the relation to the rest of the world. It also investigates social, cultural and political effects of decolonization. By rethinking the Western dominance, readers can interpret the books from another perspective, and more importantly, readers can look into the world after the colonial age.

### 2.3 Feminism and Postcolonial Feminism

Feminism is defined briefly as the political, social and economic equality with men. It focuses on the issue of gender difference, advocate equality for women, and campaign for women's rights and interests. Feminist theory deals with the approaches to women's roles and lives and so on. It aims at the nature of inequality, gender politics, power relations and sexuality. The history development of feminism is commonly divided into two peaks — first wave feminism and second wave feminism. The first wave is usually defined as the suffrage movement, which started in the 1840s. The second wave was in the 1960s and 1970s. A third wave of feminism emerged in the mid-1990s. Some also claim that a fourth wave of feminism began in 2012. Feminism in the third wave has many directions, including "generational/ youth feminism", "postcolonial feminism" and "ecofeminism". All these branches of feminisms have similarities and work for more perspectives and inclusivity. (cf. Mack-Canty 2004) Colleen Mack-Canty explains the reasoning behind these feminisms in the following quote:

"These feminisms, in their current stage of theoretical development, together with important feminisms not discussed here because of space limitation (most notably queer theory), all broaden the explanatory power of feminist theory, allowing feminism to deal more adequately with the complex and myriad issues we face today, issues not yet quite so compellingly evident during much second-wave feminism, such as globalism, multiculturalism, and environmentalism. (Mack-Canty 2004, 156)"

Postcolonial feminism, often referred to as Third World feminism, centers around the idea that racism, colonialism, and the long-lasting effects (economic, political, and cultural) of colonialism in the postcolonial setting. It is a form of feminism that developed as a response to feminism focusing solely on the experiences of women in Western cultures and former colonies. Postcolonial feminists investigate oppression that related to the colonial experience, particularly racial, class, and ethnic oppression, which has marginalized women in postcolonial societies. Postcolonial feminism was born as a response to colonialism, imperialism, and Euro-American feminist. It arose out of the third wave of feminism and shares with it the concept of intersectionality.

For postcolonial feminists it is important to discover, analyze and be aware of continuing negative effects of colonialism in the feminist movement. Postcolonial feminism also aims to recognize that feminism is not just for the western world, but also for women from developing nations who have often not been heard. Furthermore, postcolonial feminists search to explore the intersection of sexism and multicultural identity. (cf. Mack-Canty 2004)

### 3. The “Other” women in Jane Eyre

According to Said, “Other” refers to those Easterners who are dominated and marginalized by the Westerners. As Orientalism operates from a Eurocentric assumptive base, other cultures are perceived as inferior in it. And Eurocentrism is the attitude, because European culture is regarded as the standard to which all other cultures are negatively contrasted. So European consider themselves as the center of the world and the colonized margins. Thus, the practice of judging the group of a different race or gender as inferior is called “Other”. The impression of “otherness” in postcolonial theory refers to the place of the colonized or those affected by colonial discourse. It highlights the operations and effects of imperialism.

#### 3.1 Jane Eyre as a Gender “Other”

As the heroine, Jane Eyre is white, specifically British, she is a colonizer. In this sense, Jane will not be defined as an “Other”. However, she is also a member of a colonized group. Thus, Jane’s position is very conflicted. She emphasizes the colonized status of all women. Meanwhile, during the Victorian Age, women were seen as second-class citizens, with few rights, opportunities or ways of supporting themselves. They were expected to be arranged, to marry and obey their husbands. Therefore, as a female in male-dominant world, Jane can be regarded as a gendered “Other” All women are enslaved by male despotism.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir emphasizes the fact that economy has a great impact on women’s role. (1974:116) Luhman, Reid (1982) claims the importance of family background as it has a great impact on later generations because when the new generations are born into the society, they will likely step onto the shoes waiting for them. They will become high or low in both social class and social status as they inherit their parents’ wealth and good name simultaneously. As for Jane, her father had been a poor clergyman; her mother had married her father against the wishes of her friends and parents because they thought the match beneath her. Therefore, the newlywed was cut off without a shilling. Because of her poor family background, Jane was regarded as “Other” in social class.

#### 3.2 Bertha Mason as Racial “Other”

Bertha Mason is a Creole, the daughter of a European settler in the West Indies. Bertha is portrayed less as a human being than as a Gothic monster or a vampire. She is “Tall and large, with thick and dark hair, as well as a discoloured [black] – savageface,” This “alienness” is made apparent upon her introduction in Chapter 25, when she tears Jane’s wedding veil (Brontë, 280). In addition to her “alien” appearance, Bertha even exemplifies a disposition entirely different from those of cultivated England. For instance, described as a “hyena,” Bertha stands on her “hind feet,” crawling on the floor, “[gazing] wildly at her visitors” (Brontë, 289). Here, she is represented as coarse, lustful, and unrestrained. The imagery is vivid and unsettling, leaving the impression that Bertha is anything but human. Bertha’s character is important because she seems to be a representation of the “other,” as she is not fully English. Because of her Creole or mixed-race parentage, Bertha reveals Victorian prejudices about other ethnicities.

Post-colonial critics also argue that Bertha, as a foreign woman, is sacrificed so that British Jane can achieve self-identity. The representation of Bertha presents the colonized as coarse, lascivious, and ignorant, thus justifying St. John’s missionary colonizer’s perspective: Bertha is a foreign “savage” in need of British guidance and enlightenment should be on any land that. She is a complete opposite of the polite, educated, and restrained Victorian woman. Bertha’s character poses another interesting question, however. In terms of Jane’s story, Bertha is a mad, unrestrained “monster,” living in the confines of a secure, domestic home. Trapped and forced to live in an attic, Bertha is left

marginalized. Her rights, both as a woman and, actually, as a human, have been removed because she is forced to live in a room where she is “incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger” (Brontë, 300-301).

### 3.3 Céline Varens’s Otherness

Céline Varens, a French opera dancer, with whom Rochester once had an affair. She is also voiceless in Charlotte Brontë’s novel. It is Rochester who describes her behavior and justifies his womanizing by telling Jane how he was ‘innocently’ led and fooled by her: “I installed her in an hotel; gave her a complete establishment of servants, a carriage, cashmeres, diamonds, dentelles, etc. In short, I began the process of ruining myself in the received style, like any other spoony.” Attracted to luxury, to satin robes and silk stockings, Adèle displays a materialism Rochester dislikes primarily because it reminds him of her mother, Céline Varens, who charmed the “English gold” out of his “British breeches.” Emphasizing his British innocence, Rochester’s comments are ethnocentric, but they also show that he dislikes the “artificiality” and the materialism of women who, like Céline, are pleased with “nothing but gold dust.” Rochester continues to create a contrast between Céline’s superficiality and Jane’s sincerity. While Céline pretended to admire his physical appearance, for example, Jane honestly tells him that she doesn’t find him handsome. Céline presents an unsavory model of femininity, but also an image of unattractive foreignness. Jane’s comment implies that the English, unlike their French neighbors, are deep, rather than superficial, spiritual rather than materialistic. Not only does the novel question class and gender roles, but it also develops a specific ideal of Britishness. Jane provides a prototype of the proper English woman, who is frank, sincere, and lacking in personal vanity. Rochester is intrigued by the honesty of Jane’s conversation and the spirituality of her drawings, which clearly contrast with the values of the women with whom he has previously consorted.

As Rochester’s mistress, Céline was essentially a hired woman, submitting to the shallow status of a dependent. Readers may easily consider Céline Varens and her daughter Adèle Varens are superficial and materialistic. For example, Rochester is proud of being a British and think highly of his British innocence by contracting with Céline’s wily French ways. Another example is Jane’s comments. According to Jane, Adèle has a superficiality of character, “hardly congenial to an English mind.” She also claims that “a sound English education corrected in a great measure her French defects.” These comments show her ethnocentric ideology that the English are deep and spiritual than their French neighbors, who are criticized of materialism and sensuality. By learning English language and culture, acquiring a good English lifestyle can the inferior French get rid of their flaws.

## 4. Conclusion

As a book written in the nineteenth century, *Jane Eyre* bears the features of Victorian novels, including imperialism. As a new approach to literary reading, postcolonialism provides new perspective to this novel. Just as women are regarded as inferior subject in male dominated world, the colonized subject is considered inferior to the colonizer as well. Thus, the colonized women are not only treated as the gender “Other”, but also as the racial “Other”. This paper focus on *Jane Eyre* as a gender “Other”, Bertha Mason and Celine Varens as the racial “Other”. As a result, we can say that *Jane Eyre* reproduces the imperialistic ideology of its time by failing to portray Bertha and colonized women at large as British women’s equals.

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