The Spectre of the Other in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Nadine Gordimer’s *A Sport of Nature*

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The three novels by Charlotte Brontë, Jean Rhys and Nadine Gordimer under discussion in this paper—*Jane Eyre* (1847), *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), and *A Sport of Nature* (1987)—were produced in different centuries and depict widely divergent cultural, political and social settings. Gordimer’s narrative, for example, differs greatly from the earlier novels in that it is a postmodern work, written in the spirit of the picaresque. Whereas the alienated female in the earlier novels was deprived of all possibility to develop her own identity, in Gordimer’s narrative the female character’s destiny involves an invention of self. However, despite their differences, presentations of childhood, female otherness and aspects concerning selfhood can be compared in the authors’ depictions of the threatening female Other.

In these novels, the female Other is perceived as an enigmatic force, in some instances demonic, but in all respects mysteriously threatening. The female Other is depicted as deeply alienated, growing up keenly aware that her actions are the subject of rumour, gossip and conjecture; according to Rhys’ character it is “the sound of whispering that I have heard all my life” (Rhys 148), and as Gordimer’s character puts it: “… all through childhood the monologue never stops” (Gordimer 25).

In Brontë’s text reflections of colonial matters provide examples of what Elleke Boehmer identifies as the Victorian impulse to rely on “stereotyped images of threat or allure” (Boehmer 22). The narrative combines exotic metaphors of a slave or slavery with orientalism and these are compounded in the text, leading finally to the vivid depiction of a demonised and alien female Other who is described as being so cunning that “it is not in mortal discretion to fathom her craft” (Brontë 292).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the Orient as that “part of the earth’s surface situated to the east of some recognized point of reference…” adding that the term is “[n]ow “poetic or literary.” The Orient, in this paper, will thus be regarded as having a relative rather than an absolute geographical frame of reference; consequently I argue that it describes a geography of
the imagination, not of actuality. Furthermore, this approach holds that Brontë’s depictions of orientalism clearly reflect how this concept was an accepted projection of western imagination at the time. Joyce Zonana also highlights this aspect of Brontë’s narrative and further argues that the novel is permeated by a “feminist orientalist” discourse (Zonana 59).

Edward Said argues that Orientalism as a discourse reveals the “enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient” (Said 235). Consequently, the Orient as something alien holds a suggestion of that which is threatening at the same time as providing cohesion to the threatened, defining its own identity. For Said such a dialectic relationship, ironically, results in privileging the orient as the site of fantasy, beauty, the exotic and frequently also the feminine (Said 6).

Joyce Zonana’s approach is similar to that of Said’s in that she, too, focuses on the opposition “West/East,” arguing that gender oppression could also be effectively linked to “oriental despotism” (Zonana 59). She argues, for example, that “Jane Eyre focuses on a form of oppression that is, from the first, conceived by Westerners in terms of gender” (Zonana 59). She points out how Brontë’s various references to a sultan and his female slave can be interpreted as evidence that “not only despotism but bigamy and the oriental trade in women are on Jane’s mind” (Zonana 59). There seems to be ample support for this interpretation in, for example, Brontë’s depiction of the humiliating excursion when Rochester (who already has a wife) takes his “betrothed” shopping at a silk warehouse and a jeweller’s.

In this incident, Jane experiences the situation as intensely degrading: “the more he bought me,” she tells the reader, “the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation” (Brontë 267). Their shopping completed, they return to Thornfield and Jane recounts how Rochester smiled at her: “He smiled; and I thought his smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched” (Brontë 267). Zonana’s interpretation is directly applicable to the contention of this paper when she argues that by calling Rochester a “sultan” and herself a “slave,” Jane provides herself and the reader with a culturally acceptable simile by which to understand and combat the patriarchal “despotism” (Brontë 267) central to Rochester’s character. Part of a large system of what I term feminist orientalist discourse that permeates Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë’s sultan/slave simile displaces the source of patriarchal oppression onto an “Oriental,” Mahometan” [sic] society, enabling British readers to contemplate local problems without questioning their own self-definition as Westerners and Christians. (Zonana 59)

*Jane Eyre*, with its combination of fantasies and fears of the Other plus its many examples of orientalist discourse is a text that could be regarded as an excellent example of Said’s contention that “European culture gained in
strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (Said 236). Elleke Boehmer also points out how “the Empire in its heyday was conceived and maintained in an array of writings” (Boehmer 13). A further example of this is Brontë’s narrative from 1847 where the setting is the first decade of the nineteenth century when colonial matters were reflected in much of the writing of the day.

Brontë’s novel depicts a time when Englishmen travelled to distant places and wrote prolifically of their experiences. According to Boehmer, Victorian genres such as, for example, the triple-decker and the adventure tale are “infused with imperial ideas of race pride and national prowess” (Boehmer 13). Traces of these elements are clearly discernable in Brontë’s text to the extent that it could, at times, be used to illustrate Boehmer’s contention that a text becomes the “vehicle of imperial authority” and consequently symbolises “the act of taking possession” (Boehmer 13).

In Brontë’s novel, the Englishman, Edward Rochester, keeps the identity of his first wife secret by locking her away in the attic of his estate. When the truth of his first marriage to a Creole from the colonies is revealed, his Jamaican wife is vividly depicted as the demonised Other:

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. …The maniac belowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage and gazed wildly at her visitors. (Brontë 291)

To echo Boehmer’s contention, Brontë’s narrative can be regarded as a valid example of how a colonial text can reveal “the ways in which that world system could represent the degradation of other human beings as natural, an innate part of their degenerate or barbarian state” (Boehmer 21).

Brontë’s text presents the colonised female as the depraved and demented Other, and, as already suggested, the narrative thus becomes what Boehmer terms the “vehicle of imperial authority” in that it reflects the symbolic “act of possession” through the Englishman’s attempts to incarcerate and thus “silence” his mad wife, the colonial Other (Boehmer 13). Boehmer’s understanding of the Other signifies what she identifies as “that which is unfamiliar and extraneous to a dominant subjectivity, the opposite or negative against which an authority is defined” (Boehmer 21).

The repressed female is frequently presented in nineteenth-century texts as a silenced and passive Other, incapable of representing itself. As an example of the latter we can take Said’s interpretation of Flaubert’s depiction of the Oriental female which, according to Said, has engendered a “widely influential model” for rendering, in literature, the female Other (Said 6). Said’s analysis holds true even in respect of Brontë’s text in that it bears
striking resemblance to her textual depiction of the “silenced” female Other from the West Indies.

In keeping with this, in Jane Eyre, the alien female is imprisoned and silenced by the Englishman who tells her story when he is no longer able to keep her presence a secret. We see how in Said’s example of Flaubert’s depiction, like in Brontë’s text, the female Other never “spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence or history. He spoke for and represented her”; and as Said points out he was a foreign, comparatively wealthy male; “such were the historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess [her] physically but to speak for her and to tell the reader in what way she was “typically Oriental” (Said 6).

Echoing Said’s contention, Gayatri Spivak argues that it “should not 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” (Spivak 262). However, with her narrative, Rhys counters a representation which is coloured by, to borrow Veronica Gregg’s terms, “ideological presumptions of the metropolitan centre” (Gregg 408). There can be no doubt that Rhys objected to presumptions concerning the colonial “Other,” and her comments on what it means to be English can be effectively applied to the behaviour of the Englishman in Wide Sargasso Sea:

You cannot understand it unless you understand the English social system. It is a great crime to feel intensely about anything in England, because if the average Englishman felt intensely about anything, England as it is could not exist; or, certainly the ruling class in England could not continue to exist. Thus you get the full force of a very efficient propaganda machine turned on the average Englishman from the cradle to the grave, warning him that feeling intensely about anything is a quality of the subject peoples. (qtd. in Gregg 408)

Jean Rhys’ novel, Wide Sargasso Sea, responds directly to the prejudiced facts provided about the West Indies in Brontë’s novel. In Rhys’ narrative, the voiceless Creole “Other” speaks, the outskirts become the centre, and the English become the “Other,” living somewhere in a place heard of, but never seen:

‘England,’ said Christophine, who was watching me. ‘You think there is such a place?’ ‘How can you ask that? You know there is.’ ‘I never seen the damn place, how I know?’ ‘You do not believe that there is a country called England? She blinked and answered quickly, ‘I don’t say I don’t believe. I say I don’t know, I know what I see with my eyes and I never see it. Besides I ask myself is this place like they tell us? Some say one thing, some different, I hear it cold to freeze your bones and they thief your money, clever like the devil. … Why you want to go to this cold thief place? If there is this place at all, I never see it, that is one thing sure.’ (Rhys 93)
Moreover, Rhys objected to Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, essentially because of its depiction of the lunatic Creole “Other;” she felt compelled to present the Creole female of Brontë’s narrative from a different perspective. Rhys’ letter to Selma Vaz Dias, 9 April 1958, explains her stance:

I’ve read and re-read *Jane Eyre*.... The Creole in Charlotte Brontë’s novel is a lay figure—repulsive which does not matter, and not once alive which does. She’s necessary to the plot, but always she shrieks, howls, laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry—off stage. For me... she must be plausible with a past, the reason why Mr Rochester treats her so abominably and feels justified, the reason why he thinks she is mad and why of course she goes mad, even the reason why she tries to set everything on fire, and eventually succeeds...

(qtd. in Gregg 414)

We see how, in her exploration of female identity, Rhys’ narrative focuses on the forces that shape the Creole woman’s fate. Deanna Madden, in her analysis of Rhys’ narrative, also examines this aspect of the work, drawing the following conclusion: “The novel asks, who is she and who made her like this? In Jean Rhys version, the woman glimpsed by Jane Eyre in Thornfield Hall is a product of place, time and culture, her identity shaped by race, class, gender and the colonial experience” (Madden 162). This paper argues that the Englishman’s own thoughts on his wedding day hold the key to the fate of the Creole woman who is kept locked away in the attic of Thornfield Hall:

It was all very brightly coloured, very strange, but it meant nothing to me. Nor did she, the girl I was to marry. When at last I met her I bowed, smiled, kissed her hand, danced with her. I played the part I was expected to play—she never had anything to do with me at all. Every movement I made was an effort of will and sometimes I wondered that no one noticed this. I would listen to my own voice and marvel at it, calm, correct but toneless, surely. But I must have given a faultless performance. (Rhys 64)

There can be no doubt that Brontë’s novel provoked a negative response from the start, prompting Rhys to write the Other’s side: “Of course Charlotte Brontë makes her own world, of course she convinces you, and that makes the poor Creole lunatic all the more dreadful. I remember being quite shocked, and when I re-read it rather annoyed. That’s only one side—the English side” (qtd. in Gregg 413). Rhys’ opinion is echoed in *Wide Sargasso Sea* when the Creole wife reminds her English husband that “there is always the other side, always” (Rhys 106).

Judy Newman argues that Brontë’s characterisation of Rochester reveals how a patriarchal system, as represented by his father and older brother, facilitates the manipulation of the younger son into marrying a Creole woman for her dowry although both father and older brother are fully aware that insanity runs in her family (Newman 14). Newman holds that contrary
to Brontë’s text which depicts Rochester as a victim, the aim of Rhys’s novel, is to highlight the plight of the marginalised, colonial female Other through a presentation of her personal history: “the vital point was that Bertha was West Indian, a white Creole from Jamaica” (Newman 14). According to Newman, Rhys felt that Brontë “had something against the West Indies” and she was “angry about it” (qtd. in Newman 14).

Newman further argues that Rhys’ vindication of the madwoman kept hidden in Rochester’s attic not only gives voice to the Creole female who is silenced in Brontë’s text, but in doing so it reveals “the legacy of imperialism concealed in the heart of every Englishman’s castle” (qtd. in Newman 14). For Newman, the private history of Rhys’ female character represents the wider history of West Indian society:

In a society founded upon the buying and selling of human beings, Antoinette’s marriage to Rochester is also envisaged as an economic transaction. Acquired for profit, given a more “English” name, transported overseas, economically enslaved and then quite literally a captive with a keeper, treated as an animal and a degenerate, Antoinette experiences some, at least, of the evils of slavery in her own person. It is not surprising that she reacts, much as her father’s ex-slaves did, by setting a torch to the Great House. (Newman 15)

Critics have pondered the question of whether Wide Sargasso Sea can stand and be judged on its own, and not merely as a response to Jane Eyre. Michael Thorpe, for example, quotes Walter Allen who argues that Rhys’ narrative is only “a triumph of atmosphere [which] does not exist in its own right, as Mr. Rochester is almost as shadowy as Charlotte Brontë’s Bertha Mason” (Thorpe 99). However, Thorpe refers to Rhys’ Creole character’s words to her English husband: “There is always the other side, always” and he argues that Rhys’ narrative presents a “passionate voice to make the other side felt,” thus refuting Allen’s generalization which suggests that “Rhys expended her whole creative effort upon an act of moral restitution to the stereotyped lunatic Creole heiress in Rochester’s attic” (Thorpe 99).

This study agrees with Thorpe who contends that although it might be argued that Rhys’ earlier novels between the wars were “more concerned to do fictional justice rather to her women than their men, Wide Sargasso Sea stands out as her most balanced novel in its even-handed treatment of the sexes. Her inward presentation, in the second part of the novel, of Rochester’s view-point—complex but not ‘shadowy’—is unmatched in her earlier work, and its strength is enhanced by our contrasting recollections of Jane Eyre” (Thorpe 99). Thorpe’s assessment of these narratives is well worth quoting as an apt conclusion to any analysis of the two works:

An unexpected consequence of re-reading Jane Eyre in search of links with Wide Sargasso Sea is finding Brontë’s novel a more “dated” work, marred by stereotyping and crude imaginings… I do not refer to the crude ‘gothic’ of
Bertha’s characterisation, which has been often enough deplored since the novel appeared, but the course assumptions about madness, mingled with the racial prejudice inherent in the insistent suggestion that the “the fiery West Indian” place of Bertha’s upbringing (Ch. XXVII) and her Creole blood are the essence of her lunacy: “Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard” (Ch. XXVI). Later she is “my Indian Messalina” (Ch XXVII), a byword for debauchery, while Rochester’s own confessed peccadilloes go under the milder name of “dissipation.” (Thorpe 101)

The title of Nadine Gordimer’s novel, A Sport of Nature, refers directly to the deviant female protagonist whose threatening refusal to conform to the norms of a white racist environment earns her the reputation of the title of the novel: she is a “Lusus Naturae--Sport of Nature. A plant, animal, etc., which exhibits abnormal variation or a departure from the parent stock or type ... a spontaneous mutation; a new variety produced this way” (Oxford English Dictionary). Like the female Others presented in the two earlier novels, Gordimer’s female character is regarded as a threatening force and she too is ostracised and rejected by her family because of her individuality; in their eyes and in the eyes of a racist society she personifies the Other.

Similar to Rhys’ narrative, Gordimer’s novel explores the fates of a mother and her daughter. The mother abandons her child and escapes the stifling control of an orthodox Jewish family in quest of “passion and tragedy, not domesticity” (Gordimer 59). When the woman leaves her husband and child for a fado singer, she also escapes the narrowness and constraint of white South Africa. She runs away to a new life in Lourenco Marques, believing that living there would be more cosmopolitan.

Echoes from Rhys’ novel resonate in Gordimer’s narrative; the young girl, Hillela, never forgets her mother’s “scandalous” flight, and although the woman’s defection is treated as a carefully guarded family secret it leaves a deep scar. From the start the girl’s behaviour is perceived as being as dangerously “different” as that of her mother and as a result of what is perceived as her defiant bent, she is observed with deep suspicion by those around her and in their eyes she, as the deviant and non-conforming Other, becomes a “sport of nature.”

Various incidents, including the threat of miscegenation, add to the girl’s list of misdemeanours; as a result of an incident involving a “coloured” boy, she is expelled from boarding school. Furthermore, we see how any understanding of the girl, whose behaviour is regarded as “a-moral. …in the sense of the morality of [South Africa]” (Gordimer 56) comes to an abrupt end when it is discovered that she has been having a sexual relationship with her first cousin. Because of this incestuous affair the final rejection of their sister’s deviant daughter becomes a fact and as a consequence, Hillela, like her mother, leaves South Africa.

The similarity to the tragic female fate depicted in the earlier novels ends at the point where the young woman in Gordimer’s narrative leaves her
country. It must be emphasised that it is the marginality of Gordimer’s female character during her childhood and early adolescence and the way in which she is perceived—her deviant and disturbing “Otherness”—that bears a striking resemblance to depictions of the alienated female of the earlier texts.

Unlike the unfortunate girl in Brontë’s and Rhys’ narrative whose journey away from her home country ends in disaster, the girl in Gordimer’s narrative, once free of the confining South African environment, embarks on a picaresque journey of self-invention. André Brink defines the picaresque as follows: “it provides us with the life-story of a person living on the margin of conventional society” (Brink 261). Unlike Antoinette, who is deprived of her identity when she is re-named by the Englishman, the female character in Gordimer’s novel deliberately creates a new perception of self when she assumes another name: “Somewhere along the journey the girl shed one name and emerged under the other” (Gordimer 9). Moreover, she displays a remarkable ability to adapt to changing circumstances, what Brink identifies as the ability to act the “chameleon, surviving through adapting perfectly to constantly changing circumstances” (Brink 270).

As we have seen, the female character in Brontë’s and Rhys’ narratives, because of her circumstances, lacks Hillela’s ability to adapt. Moreover, she is deprived of all perception of self when she is locked up in the attic of Thornfield Hall and renamed Bertha by the Englishman:

Names matter, like when he wouldn’t call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking glass. There’s no looking glass here and I don’t know what I am like now. … Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?” (Rhys 147)

Deracinated and marginalized, her doom is sealed when she taken from the West Indies to a cold and foreign England. To use Deanna Madden’s words, “she is totally estranged—exiled in a cold and foreign land, friendless, confined and abandoned by her husband, robbed of her name as well as her money and her freedom, stripped of her former identity” (Madden 171).

Jean Rhys’ narrative gives voice to the female who is kept silenced and locked away in Brontë’s narrative—the dehumanised madwoman in Rochester’s attic is thereby transformed into a human being and the betrayal that leads to her insanity is revealed. Bertha/Antoinette symbolically represents all those white Creole heiresses who shared their fate with her and who were victims of the way the Empire defined the Other.

As mentioned previously, Nadine Gordimer’s postcolonial depiction of the female Other resembles in many respects that of Rhys’ presentation of a deracinated female character. Gordimer’s character also leaves her familiar environment to embark on a journey into unknown territory. However,
unlike the Creole heiress who dies a victim of colonial prejudice and greed, for the female protagonist of Gordimer’s novel, rootlessness holds the key since it enables her adapt to a new order.

As early as 1959, Gordimer pondered the problem of the role of white people in an Africa after independence:

> For if we’re going to fit in at all in the new Africa, it’s going to be sideways, where-we-can, wherever-they’ll-shift-up-for-us. This will not be comfortable; indeed, it will be hardest of all for those of us (I am one myself) who want to belong in the new Africa as we never could in the old, where our skin-colour labelled us as oppressors to the blacks and our views labelled us as traitors to the whites. (Gordimer, *Essential Gesture* 32)

To conclude, Nadine Gordimer’s novel, unlike the two earlier novels, provides a more overt political message. The behaviour of the marginalised female character of the novel, although it is perceived as equally threatening and dangerous to her indigenous environment as that of the female character in Brontë’s and Rhys’ narratives, is transformed into a positive quality outside its traditional environment. The female Other is redefined and she becomes Gordimer’s creation of an idealised vision of the ‘new’ white person who will be committed to the cause of freedom in South Africa.

Thus, in Gordimer’s depiction, the female’s dangerous “Otherness,” although deeply threatening to a white South African consciousness, is positive outside the narrow context of a racist society. Once she leaves her country, her fate bears no resemblance to the depictions in Brontë’s and Rhys’ texts of the passive and silenced Other, incapable of representing itself. Otherness becomes a symbol of hope, and as a consequence of the woman’s commitment and willingness to adapt and participate in a new order, she truly is, in a positive sense, a departure from the parent stock or type—a spontaneous mutation; a new variety—who will be able to accept an Africa-centered identity.

Works Cited

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