

Who Ignores Women: Not Only Man

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Throughout the history, as it can be clearly understood from the word his-story,¹ women cannot have their own identity or social roles; rather they are forced to take on a lot of gender roles imposed upon them by the patriarchy and carry them as their identity. They have had two labels: either “angel in the house” or “mad women in nowhere”. Unfortunately, they cannot put a stop to this situation since they are not able to found a real, powerful sisterhood which would provide them with the world where they can realize their own selves. On the contrary, they make them fall into a bottomless hole as Charlotte Brontë does in her novel *Jane Eyre* by leading her character Jane ignore Bertha, “the mad creature in the attic” and call her “it,” meaning that she has lost all her humanity in the eyes of others who transformed her into mad, alienated and lonely “other”. The aim of this essay is to analyze how a woman’s existence is ignored while making another praised by comparing and contrasting *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* through the Feminist Approach, showing how this movement lacks the necessary support by women themselves.

Today and in previous centuries men have had the control of everyday life and women have searched the way of expressing their womanly needs and emotions in manly world. That is to say women’s gender issue is the product of patriarchal ideologies which give priority to the masculine over feminine in almost all societies. The war of power between man and woman gender have been one of the most important issue of literature:

This supposedly marginal curiosity called the “woman problem” had become one of the most earth-shaking debates in the Western world, fully explosive an issue as the class or national conflicts of the day. Here, after all, was the world’s largest oppressed “minority” threatening mutiny: something no man could ignore. And none did... The “woman problem” was argued about, shouted about, raved about, agonized about, endlessly, endlessly. By the final decades of the century, it permeated everything.²

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1. The word “history” refers to suppression of men by including the meaning “his-story”. Men realize history so women are “passive figures” of that manly-made history.
 2. M. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), p.21.

“Being woman” or “femininity” could be counted as equal term with an object which can be exploited or suppressed. Namely, women are very suitable tools used by men in every field they wanted “power.”³ It can be easily inferred from this quotation that women are victims of the owner of the power. In other words, men victimize women just for the sake of their individual needs and wishes. It can be likened to the master and slave relationship: “they have called you slave, you unhappy slave. Masters, they have exercised their right as master.”⁴

Women, like working class of the societies, are seen as ‘things which can be used in production process. In other words, women can be counted as a kind of means of production. They are exploited in the house just like workers in the factories. Men get the control of women, namely means of productions. They have to give birth, look after them, cook, work, in order to earn their life.

Virginia Woolf is another writer who expresses the situation of women clearly, explicitly and vividly as being a woman who lives all of these pains deeply and fights to find an antidote for the poison of men killing their soul day by day. Woolf explains this hard situation as:

Women have to sell their labour power, even their bodies just for the sakes of survive. Due to this dependence of women to men, they all have been used a test-board throughout the history. Manly power have satisfied their disgusting desire on women and used them as looking glass: Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.⁵

Woolf reflects clearly in the quotation above that women had no function except being servants of man and simple mirrors which appeal men’s egos by showing them bigger than they are. The only solution she offers is to write on their experiences without stopping and finding a space special to them. She states that: “In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century.”⁶

As Virginia Woolf emphasizes, women has only one solution to gain their individuality and autonomy: writing but it is not easy as so. In her essay *Professions for Women*, Virginia Woolf states that she had to kill “the Angel in the House” in order to write her novels and critical works:

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3. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1977), p.142.
 4. M. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.237.
 5. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p.41.
 6. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p.59.

Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women. Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.⁷

Woman who has two choices of life style one of which is to be an angel in her house, which sometimes brings serenity but never happiness and the other choice is being an outcast following her ambitions, which brings loneliness but happiness and real serenity in the soul at the end after breasting a lot of hassles. Feminist writers try to reflect these difficulties they live in the male-dominated society in which they are scorned and seen as inferior by men. Women find a solution for this problem with their own power: writing.

Charlotte Brontë is one of the most important writers who find solution for feminine problems in writing. She has enough courage to write her works by her own name which is very difficult for women in her time. Her characters are like herself who are able stand on their own foot, express their feelings and ideas, and brave enough to fight against the inequality of life conditions in the male dominated world. Her novel *Jane Eyre* is one of the most striking novels of Victorian period in that as Richard Chase states “Well, obviously *Jane Eyre* is a feminist tract, an argument for the social betterment of governess and equal rights for women.”⁸ In the novel the character Jane is an extraordinary one with her refusal to accept the forms, customs, traditions and the standards of the Victorian society and her anger resulting from repressed femininity and sexuality for her period. Her rejection against male dominance starts actively when her wicked cousin John Reed who is the symbol of tyranny and oppressive patriarchal system throws her the book she is reading. At this point Jane revolts against him and her voyage of self-determinism and autonomy against patriarchy starts.

My world had for some years been in Lowood: my experience had been of its rules and systems: now I remembered that the real world was wide, and that a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expanse to seek real knowledge of life amidst its peril.⁹

Jane is not content with what life provides her. She is a free-spirited curious young woman who determines her own fate and knows the world is not limited by her perception

7. Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1942), p.52.

8. M. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.338.

9. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Penguin, 1966), p.86.

or experience. She looks for more than what the life conditions offer to her. She becomes a teacher and goes to a place called Thornfield where she stresses her freedom and individuality. The master of Thornfield is called Rochester and is a product of patriarchal society. Although Jane feels some romantic feelings for him, she never allows him to command her by saying: “I don’t think, sir, you have right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience.”¹⁰

Jane is an individual and wants Rochester to recognize it. She sets her own rules and refuses to obey a man’s rules since he is a male. She wants to see that they live under equal conditions and most importantly wants him to understand that they are equal. She goes on correcting his patriarchal view that women should be angels:

I laughed at him as she said this. “I am not an angel,” I asserted; “and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself. Mr. Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me—for you will not get it, any more than I shall get it of you: which I do not at all anticipate.”¹¹

As it is understood from the quotation above, Jane never accepts being an innocent angel-like figure who sacrifices herself to the gender roles given her like a burden by the society. She wants him to accept her for what she is, not for an idealized woman. She is Jane Eyre no more or less than she is. Through the end of the novel the reader sees that Rochester starts to accept the powerful existence of Jane which she reflects by saying that “Reader I married him.”¹² This sentence shows that she has the power of choosing her husband and it is up to her to marry him or not to marry him.

Rochester lives such a situation before with another woman indeed. This woman’s real name is Antoinette Mason who is a Creole though Rochester gives her different names like Bertha. Jane sees this woman and describes her as:

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.¹³

In the novel the character Bertha is described as a beast-like creature that has lost her intelligence and lives in the attic on her own under poor conditions. Bertha is lost in

10. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.135.

11. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.258.

12. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.444.

13. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p.292.

her loneliness because of merciless people who made her other since she is a Creole and a woman. Jane calls her “it” which means that she is not given even a human identity. She is wild and strange, opposite of Jane. While Jane achieves sanity, Bertha fails but the reason of this situation is never questioned in the novel by the heroine Jane, which causes the reader to question her ideas, ideals and sincerity. The readers wondering the quest of Bertha find the answer in another novel called *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. In the novel the reader comes across a Creole girl who is torn from the people and nature they loved because of her marriage to a man from the materialistic world of England and how she is lost in this illusionary world.

Antoinette is a primitive girl who is very near to her soul and body and understands the meaning and the mystery of life. Suddenly a man enters her life and wants to marry her. From his cynical looks she understands his real nature and rejects marrying this white man: “You don’t wish to marry me?’ ‘No.’ She spoke in a very low voice. ‘But why?’ ‘I’m afraid of what may happen.’ ‘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?’”¹⁴

Antoinette is a transparent character so she represents what she thinks or feels as they are without hiding them with masks or lies; thus, she believes this man and accepts marrying him without knowing that her sentences are writing her bad fate. Her husband never becomes happy in Coulibri, loves those places or Antoinette. He marries her for her money and after getting her whole money his hatred for her gets bigger and bigger since he knows that this “odd creature” understands his real evil nature and his vain world. He can never solve the mystery of that place and this girl since he looks at them with his materialistic eyes not with his soul and spirit.

The man’s mind is preoccupied with only money but this Creole girl does not give importance to it, but she deals with humanly feelings. The only thing she needs is love of this man so he always feels inferior to her. After a while she starts to reflect his inferiority through her smiles and words. She understands that he is not true either to himself not to Antoinette. She feels as if she is caged and although the cage is her husband, she does not have any other solution accept the cage. The dialogue between her and her husband shows how helpless she is:

“You are always calling on God,” she said. “Do you believe in God?”

“Of course, of course I believe in the power and wisdom of my creator.”

She raised her eyebrows and the corners of her mouth turned down in a questioning mocking way.

... “And you,” I said. “Do you believe in God?”

14. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), p.66.

“It doesn’t matter,” she answered calmly, “what I believe or you believe, because we can do nothing about it, we are like these.” She flicked a dead moth off the table.”¹⁵

As a result of his growing hatred for Antoinette, he wants her to be totally helpless, and to do this he takes her to his illusionary and material world and leaves her alone among the walls of a cold house. He even takes her hatred for him by never seeing her which is another resource for her connecting her to the life. Her only way of communication, nature is taken by her and this causes her to cut her ties from life.

To conclude, Antoinette is called “mad” or she gets really mad since she is far away from the tricks of the “higher, superior white people”, true to herself, knows her body and soul and connect them and lives her real primitive character in the arms of nature and reflect all her wishes like sexuality, hatred, love, etc. without a curtain, which causes her to be criticized, judged by the society especially by woman and this situation of her is ignored even by the perfect character Jane who knows how to play the game according to its rules.

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15. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, pp.76-77.