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MR. ROCHESTER'S PERSPECTIVE: RE-READING JANE EYRE

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Since its publication, *Jane Eyre* has become a staple of British literature. The novel continues to spur the imagination of readers even today. It has inspired several films, as well as numerous literary sequels and prequels (the most famous of which is Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which describes Mr. Rochester's courtship and marriage to Bertha Mason). The novel has also been transformed into a musical, a ballet, and an opera.

The novel is an autobiography of a fictitious character, Jane Eyre. The word 'Autobiography' suggests that all the characters and events acquire their significance from their role in Jane's life. Jane is not only the central character but also the narrator of the novel. Commenting on Jane's centrality to the novel, Cathleen Tillotson observes: "All is seen from the vantage-ground of the single experience of the central character, with which experience the author has imaginatively identified herself, and invited the engagement, again even to the point of imaginative identification, of every reader" (26).

The early literary critic's viewed Jane as a feminist claiming and struggling for equality with her male counterparts. She goes against the expectations of others and follows her own principles. She protests against the inequality of sexes in Victorian society.

During 1960s, the sympathy of readers and literary critics shifted from Jane to Bertha Mason, Mr. Rochester's mad wife. As Elane Showalter points out "Feminist critics have a sympathy for Bertha Mason that, ironically, Charlotte Bronte does not seem to share" (68-9). In 1966 Jean Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a prequel to Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre*. The novel narrates the story of Bertha Antoinette Mason's life in Jamaica, before she marries Rochester and moves to England. The novel depicts the events preceding Bertha's marriage to Mr. Rochester, and her subsequent imprisonment in the attic. In 1978 Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar published *The Madwoman in the Attic*, a landmark of early feminist literary criticism. Their title is based on the character of Bertha Mason, a madwoman secretly imprisoned in her husband's attic in Bronte's novel *Jane Eyre*, who burns down Thornfield Hall and destroys Mr. Rochester's authority. Bertha Mason and her madness became a symbol of women's rebellion against patriarchal authority. However, Elizabeth J. Donaldson in *The Corpus of the Madwoman: Toward a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Embodiment and Mental Illness*, proposes a new Disabilities Studies reading of Bertha's madness not as a form of rebellion, but as mental illness. (99)

But when we look at the action of the novel from the point of view of Mr. Rochester, it is a long story of suffering, and a gradual loss of power, and increasing dependence on Jane. His dependence culminates when Jane marries him after his going blind and being crippled. A new reading of the novel informed by Disability studies is essential to redefine Jane and Mr. Rochester's relationship, and study the impact of Mr. Rochester's blindness on it. It will also shed light on impact of Mr. Rochester's blindness on his life and life of others, and their attitude to blindness in general and Mr. Rochester's blindness in particular.

Mr. Rochester has lost both his parents and has been tricked into marrying a mad woman. He tries to find solace in mistresses but they too deceive him. Jane works as a governess for Adel, Mr. Rochester's ward. Their relationship is that of master and servant. Gradually they fall in love and decide to marry. Their

relationship occupies almost half the novel. Commenting on the significance of Jane and Mr. Rochester relationship to the plot of the novel, David Cecil in Early Victorian Novelists comments "The first quarter of Jane Eyre is about Jane's life as a child; the next half is devoted to her relation with Rochester: in the last quarter of the book, St John Rivers appears, and the rest of the book, except for the final chapters, is concerned with her relation to him" (87-114). Jane's relationship to Mr. Rochester undergoes a significant change from Thornfield Hall to Ferndean estate, where Mr. Rochester goes to live in seclusion after going blind.

At Thornfield Hall, Mr. Rochester is in a commanding position. Everyone including Jane has to obey him. He wants everything to be done according to his instructions. When Mr. Rochester calls for Jane for the first time, he does not even seem to take notice of her. After a while he makes detailed enquiry about her past, and when Jane reveals that she can play piano, he commands her to play: Of course: that is the established answer. Go into the libraryI mean, if you please.(Excuse my tone of command; I am used to say 'Do this', and it is done: I cannot alter my customary habits for one new inmate." (Bronte 120)

Jane meekly follows all his commands. She sees no other alternative than to obey him. After dinner he asks to pull her chair further so that he can see her easily. And contrary to her wish, she obeys him promptly. "I did as I was bid, though I would much rather have remained somewhat in the shade: but Mr. Rochester had such a direct way of giving orders, it seemed a matter of course to obey him promptly" (Bronte 126). In his state of proud independence, he does not want to play any other part except that of "giver and protector" (449). Even when he proposes marriage to Jane, it is in a commanding tone: "You, Jane. I must have you for my ownentirely my own. Will you be mine? Say yes, quickly" (253). At Thornfield Hall, Jane is a dependent and Mr. Rochester is the provider. Their union is not the union of equals. But Jane is against this disparity and would not marry for anything but love.

But given the powerful position of Mr. Rochester in a male dominant society, Jane's cry for equality goes unheard. She remains powerless and marginal. Peter J. Bellis in *In the Window Seat: Vision and power in Jane Eyre* views Jane and Rochester relationship as a power struggle. He offers a Psychoanalytic reading of the novel based on the concept of 'The Gaze' of Jacques Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. He considers vision as social and sexual power: "In Jane Eyre, sexual and social power is visual power. The struggle between Jane and Rochester is embodied in a conflict between two different modes of vision: a penetrating male gaze that fixes and defines the woman as its object, and a marginal female perception that would conceal or withhold itself from the male" (639).

Jane also regards vision as power. While looking at the surroundings from the roof of Thornfield Hall she says "I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit,. . ." (Bronte 104). But it is Mr. Rochester, who exercises his visual power by scrutinizing Jane's appearance and her sketches. Mr. Rochester's vision empowers him to exercise unlimited authority over Jane. Peter Bellis argues ". . . In turning looks into visible, legible words, Rochester is forcing Jane to 'take his word,' to accept her subordination to his verbal and visual power. It is a coercive desire of which Jane is very much aware . . .." (643). under such circumstances, Jane's desire for male female equality cannot be fulfilled. In order to empower the female the author has restricted and curtailed Mr. Rochester's masculine power by depriving him of vision, which constitutes his social and sexual power.

Mr. Rochester loses his eye-sight and right hand in fire, started by his mad wife Bertha. After starting the fire Bertha commits suicide and Thornfield Hall burns down. Mr. Rochester retreats to Ferndean Estate to live in seclusion with his servant John. His desperate cry reaches Jane and she is compelled to return to Thornfield. When she looks at the ruins of Thornfield, she imagines herself to be a male lover trying to get a glimpse of his sleeping beloved, but finds her dead. Peter Bellis calls Jane's fantasy as a gender role reversal, "The gender reversal at once foreshadows and represses Jane's later, ambivalent response to the blinding of Rochester" (647). Jane Kromm in her article *Visual Culture and*

Scopic Custom agrees with Bellis' argument, she comments "When he (Mr. Rochester) becomes dependent on her vision, the usual gender relations of scopic custom are reversed for Jane and Rochester." Jane's fantasy is fulfilled when she goes to Ferndean and watches blinded Mr. Rochester fumble his way. She can watch Rochester, at the same time she remains unseen by Mr. Rochester" (373).

Rochester's blindness empowers Jane. She returns to Rochester as a woman of independent means, while Rochester is blind and penniless and has nothing to offer her. She assumes all responsibilities, while Rochester becomes a passive recipient of her favours. When Mr. Rochester proposes marriage, it seems as if he is begging for a favour: "Jane, will you marry me?' 'Yes, sir.' 'A poor blind man, whom you will have to lead about by the hand,?' 'A crippled man, twenty years older than you, whom you will have to wait on?" (Bronte 449). This is in contrast to his earlier marriage proposal, when Rochester had his eye-sight and Thornfield Hall. Mr. Rochester's blindness has put him in a disadvantageous position from where he cannot claim Jane's love as a matter of right.

The opening of the last section of the novel also indicates that Mr. Rochester no longer retains the position of the superior male. Jane opens the concluding section of the novel with the declaration of her victory: "Reader, I married him." (454). until this point in the text, Jane has always maintained a subservient position to Mr. Rochester. However, with the inheritance from her uncle, Jane is now an independent woman and can take charge of her own destiny. Moreover, with the loss of Mr. Rochester's eyesight, he becomes vulnerable and dependent on Jane; he can no longer maintain his former position as the superior male. Mr. Rochester's loss of eye-sight is equated to loss of power and authority, and consiquently masculinity. Jane is also happier and comfortable with blinded Rochester, since she finds herself in a commanding position, Jane: "I love you better now, when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and protector". (449). Jane also considers Rochester's powerlessness and dependence on her as the reason for their happy marriage: "Mr. Rochester continued blind the first two years of our union: perhaps it was that circumstance that drew us so very nearthat knit us so very close! For I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand." (Bronte 455)

Mr. Rochester's blindness alters Jane and Rochester relationship. Georgina Kleage in *Sight Unseen* remarks, "Blindness inverts, perverts, or thwarts all human relationships" (70). Commenting on the changed relationship of Jane and Rochester, Eric Solomon in the Article *Jane Eyre: Fire and Water* remarks ". . . again she escapes, but this time back to Rochester at Ferndean, a chastened, symbolically emasculated Rochester, to whom she pretends to submit (in the guise of a servant) but whom she actually has conquered" (216). Jane also seems to be enjoying her new found power over her former master and assures him of full protection and care: "Certainly. I will be your neighbour, your nurse, your housekeeper. I find you lonely. I will be your companionto read to you, to walk with you, to sit with you, to wait on you, to be eyes and hands to you. Cease to look so melancholy, my dear master. You shall not be left desolate, so long as I live" (440). It is obvious that Rochester's blindness has empowered Jane to such an extent that their roles as master and servant and male and female are reversed. Earlier Mr. Rochester was "Giver and protector", (449) but now Jane has assumed the role of giver and protector and Rochester has been dislodged from his former position. Advantages accruing to Jane from Mr. Rochester are likely to be overlooked as Jane is represented as an altruistic servant to Mr. Rochester. David Bolt in *Symbiosis and Subjectivity* argues that, this relationship is more beneficial for Jane than it is for Rochester, because her conception of dependency does not accommodate his subjectivity. Symbiosis results from a relationship in which the dependant is a provider and the provider a dependant, but here Jane does not recognize Rochester as a provider. The dependency is only reciprocal in so far as Jane receives pleasure and power in the act of giving, meaning that Rochester is effectively removed from the equation.

Mr. Rochester is blinded in an attempt to rescue his wife Bertha and his servants from the fire at Thornfield Hall started by his mad wife Bertha, but Mr. Rochester and other characters in the novel regard Mr. Rochester's blindness as a divine retribution for Mr. Rochester's past misdeeds, especially His Past Amours or Improper Sexual Relationships with Women and the dissolute life which he has led in the past. He has also managed to keep the existence of his mad wife, Bertha, who is living in his house, a complete secret from everybody, even from Jane. By concealing the fact that he is an already married man with a living wife, he has betrayed Jane's trust in him. As a result, blindness (which is regarded by common man as worse than death) is considered a suitable punishment for Mr. Rochester. Informing Jane about Rochester's plight the inn keeper says "Some say it was a just judgment on him for keeping his first marriage secret, and wanting to take another wife while he had one living: but I pity him, for my part. He is alive; but many think he had better be dead" (430). Mr. Rochester also regards himself as a sinner and guilty of violating moral and divine code of conduct and his disabilities as a fitting punishment and divine justice: "I did wrong: I would have sullied my innocent flowerbreathed guilt on its purity: the Omnipotent snatched it from me. I, in my stiff-necked rebellion, almost cursed the dispensation: instead of bending to the decree, I defied it. Divine justice pursued its course; disasters came thick on me: …" (Bronte 450)

Mr. Rochester pledges to lead "a purer life henceforth", (Bronte 452), and expiate for his "numerous sins" (452), on Roman Catholic principles. Since most of Mr. Rochester's sins are of sexual nature, hence Richard Chase critiques Rochester's blinding as symbolic castration or at least an attempt to curb his rampant sexuality. Arnold Shapiro in the article *In Defense of Jane Eyre* quoting Chase and other critics writes:

> The injuries that Rochester incurs during the destruction of Thornfield are, according to Chase and other critics, "a symbolic castration. The faculty of vision . . . is often identified in the unconscious with the energy of sex.. (681)

Paul Pickrel in *Jane Eyre: The Apocalypse of The Body* also agrees with Chase, Shapiro and other critics who support a psychoanalytic reading of the novel and regard blindness as symbolic castration. He observes: "Ever since Richard Chase inaugurated the psychoanalytic reading of the novel nearly forty years ago the received view has been that Mr. Rochester's injuries constitute a 'symbolic castration,' because Charlotte Bronte's spinsterish sensibilities were such that his rampant sexuality had to be tamed before he could become a suitable husband for a nice early-Victorian heroine like Jane Eyre" (169).

It is evident that the characters in the novel and most of the critics regard Mr. Rochester's blindness as symbolic castration. Such a view is reminiscent of the Greek tragedies, especially Oedipus the King, who blinds himself after he discovers the truth that unknowingly, he has committed incest. Sigmund Freud was the first to interpret the blinding of Oedipus as symbolic castration:

> Das Studium der Träume, der Phantasien und Nythen hat uns denn gelehrt, daß die Angst um die Augen, die Angst zu erblinden, häufig genug ein Ersatz für die Kastrations-angst ist. Auch die Selbstblendung des mysthischen Verbrechers Öedipus ist nur einer Ermäßigung für die Strafe der Kastration. (qtd. in Geldrich-Leffman 672)
>
> [A study of dreams, phantasies and myths has taught us that anxiety about one's eyes, the fear of going blind [as used as a central theme in The Sandmann], is often enough a substitute for the dread of being castrated. The self-blinding of the mythical criminal, Oedipus, was simply a mitigated form of the punishment of castration the only punishment that was adequate for him by the lex talionis.]

Association of blindness with castration defies logic, but the prejudice is deep rooted in popular mind owing to excessive importance given to visual faculty in sexual arousal and gratification. In Mr. Rochester's case, the castration is interpreted only as symbolic, but at any rate his blindness is represented as loss of power, authority and masculinity. Such a representation of blindness or any disability is

unhealthy and prejudicial to the interests of persons with disabilities.

Along with symbolic castration, blindness in the novel is also associated with helplessness and Worthlessness. After going blind, the mighty man Mr. Rochester is pitied even by innkeeper. He describes Rochester as "Stone blind" (Bronte 430). Informing Jane of Rochester's plight the innkeeper says, ". . . . But I pity him, for my part. He is alive; but many think he had better be dead" (430). When Jane meets Rochester at Ferndean, and listens to the horrifying tale from him, she bursts out "I pity youI do earnestly pity you" (306). Jane's description of Mr. Rochester's deformities also encourages reader to pity him: "It is a pity to see it; and a pity to see your eyes-and the scar of fire on your forehead: and the worst of it is, one is in danger of loving you too well for all this; and making too much of you" (417).

Earlier when she sees blinded Mr. Rochester for the first time, she makes many comparisons which imply bondage and vulnerability: "….But in his countenance, I saw a change: that looked desperate and broodingthat reminded me of some wronged and fettered wild beast or bird, dangerous to approach in his sullen woe. The caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished, might look as looked that sightless Samson" (435). She also compares him to an extinguished lamp unable to rekindle itself. Jane thinks: "His countenance reminded one of a lamp quenched, waiting to be relitand alas! It was not himself that could now kindle the lustre of animated expression: he was dependent on another for that office! I had meant to be gay and careless, but the powerlessness of the strong man touched my heart to the quick . . ." (443). Later Jane compares Rochester to a "Chained Royal Eagle" (443), entreating a sparrow to become its purveyor. All these comparisons imply Mr. Rochester's Ineffectiveness, weakness, incompetence and helplessness on account of his blindness.

It is worth noting that not only Jane and other characters, but also Mr. Rochester considers himself as worthless and powerless after going blind. While talking to Jane he refers to himself as "poor blind man and a Crippled man" (449). For Rochester, loss of eye-sight and right hand means loss of power and self esteem. He considers himself no better than "the old lightning-struck chestnut-tree in Thornfield orchard" (448), and therefore unfit to marry Jane. After the loss of his eye-sight, he makes no attempt to reestablish himself in the world and submits to his fate. In this context Paul Pickrel in *Jane Eyre: The Apocalypse of The Body* comments, "the move to a house deep in the woods in back of Thornfield signifies for Mr. Rochester a move back into the depths of the self, such as his blindness requires, a surrender of that auto-voyeurism that went with the false facade while the great house stood" (171).

It is evident that the author has deprived Mr. Rochester of eye-sight to empower Jane. But in doing so she has represented blindness in a negative light. Rochester's blindness makes him helpless and powerless. It is also linked to reversal of fortune. Along with his eye-sight Rochester also loses his fortune and status in society. Here blindness is represented as pathetic and wretched, it is thought worse than death. Blindness alters Mr. Rochester's personality beyond recognition. Moreover, blindness makes him jealous, weak, childish and completely dependent on Jane. Blinded Mr. Rochester is hardly a shadow of his former self.

Mr. Rochester's blindness is also linked with sexual transgression, which is reminiscent of the story of King Oedipus. Jane compares Rochester to "sightless Samson", (435) who was blinded as a result of sexual transgression. Samson in Milton's poem Samson Agonistes compares himself to "Castrated Ram" (Line 538), Linking blindness to loss of power and sexuality. Rochester's masculine vitality is curtailed by his blindness. It is for this reason that critics like Richard Chase regard Rochester's blindness as "symbolic castration".

Mr. Rochester has disregarded the code of morality, which society prescribes for its members, while Jane wishes to conform to that code and to lead a principled and disciplined life. The novelist has deprived Rochester of eye-sight and right hand to bring him back to the path of morality and thus redress the imbalance between Jane and Mr. Rochester. However, Rochester regains partial sight in one of his eyes

and is able to move on his own. Perhaps it is the result of Rochester's repentance of his past misdeeds, but it may also be a strategy to satisfy the reader and relieve the strain created by Rochester's suffering and provide a happy ending to the novel. Georgina Kliege in *Sight Unseen* argues, "It's a reversal of fortune that readers find satisfying, in part because Rochester's blindness lasts only about three years. Permanent blindness would be too harsh a punishment for a Christian God who is supposed to temper justice with mercy" (69).

The literary representation of blindness in the novel seems to be designed to illustrate a moral point that sinful life results in harsh punishment like blindness, and repentance on the part of the sinful may reduce the severity of such punishment. The story of Mr. Rochester's sinful life leading to blindness and partial restoration of his eye-sight after atonement of his past misdeeds may please the religious reader and enlist their sympathy for Jane, but it reflects and reinforces the stereotypes and prejudices regarding blindness and blind persons prevalent in the society. In an attempt to demonstrate Jane's moral superiority to Mr. Rochester, Charlotte Bronte is carried away by popular misconceptions prevalent since antiquity. She has also used blindness in particular and disability in general as a symbol for inadequacy, weakness and uselessness. This is evident from Rochester's comparison to "the old lightning-struck chestnut-tree in Thornfield orchard", (448) which has lost its vitality and is no better than dead. From a wide range of contemporary evidence it is apparent that authorial perspective reoccurring fascination with its popular misconceptions seems to be illogical, rationally unacceptable and stereotyped.

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