



## **Bertha Mason- a Victim of Patriarchal Ideology**

**Dr.A.Narayanan**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, SRM TRP Engineering College, Trichy Campus  
kandannaara74@gmail.com*

### **Abstract**

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is introduced through the narrative of her husband, Edward Rochester, who describes her as a woman who embodies the worst fears and taboos of Victorian society. Rochester's initial portrayal of Bertha focuses on her "wildness," her "ferocity," and her apparent insanity. She is described in grotesque terms, her appearance "livid" and "demonic," a stark contrast to the virtuous, composed Jane Eyre. Bertha's madness, then, becomes a way of marking her as a deviation from the expectations placed on women of her time by the Victorian society. From the perspective of patriarchal ideology, Bertha represents an inversion of the ideal Victorian woman: she is not submissive, pious, or emotionally restrained, but uncontrollable, unruly, and, ultimately, a threat to the patriarchal order. She is marked as an "Other," and her otherness is aggravated by her status as a Creole, a racial and cultural outsider. In the racial and colonial discourse of the time, Bertha's identity was often associated with both the exotic and the monstrous, making her a complex figure that is not merely mad but racially and culturally "unfit" for the rigid structures of English society.

**Keywords:** Taboos of Victorian society, madness, Patriarchal order, Racial and cultural and rigid structures.

## Introduction

In Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic," occupies a crucial yet ambiguous role. She is the first wife of Edward Rochester, locked away in a remote section of Thornfield Hall, hidden from society. Despite her relatively small physical presence in the narrative, Bertha has an outsized influence on the plot and themes of the novel. Often viewed as a symbol of unrestrained sexuality, violence, and madness, Bertha has been the subject of much critical debate, particularly regarding the patriarchal structures that shape her fate.

This research paper aims to explore Bertha Mason as a victim of patriarchal ideology, examining how her circumstances, behavior, and ultimate fate are not merely personal but are deeply entwined with the broader gendered power dynamics of Victorian society. Bertha's confinement, the representation of her madness, and her eventual death are all products of a patriarchal system that subjugates women, especially those like Bertha, who are deemed to fall outside societal norms.

She is a notable character in the novel, because she alone resists the dominating temperament of the patriarchal society. She happens to be a neurotic patient. She is the

mad woman in the attic. She is a violent tropic beauty and ever vengeful and violent. Edward Rochester is fascinated by her brilliant appearance, rich disposition and fashionable dressing. Born to a mad mother, she is believed to have inherited the mental aberrations from her mother. She is uneducated, harsh and ever vociferous in temper. She is neither chaste nor sweet tempered. She tries to abort her husband's prospects of marriage and then the prospects of peaceful life with another woman. Due to her eccentric dramatic movements she tries to set fire the marriage dress as a sign of her hatred for her husband's union with another woman. Finally, she chars the dwellings of Rochester because of her burning animosity against her husband's peaceful existence with a marriage union. She hates to the core Rochester who hates her to the core. Hatred begets only hatred, resulting in her doom. Her character appears to be dubious. She bears an implicit jealousy on Jane as she happens to be her rival partner to her husband. She hates her husband for an obvious reason that he locks her up in the attic, restricting her free movement.

Bertha Rochester is called 'insane' because of her abnormal behaviour and lapses of morality (in a patriarchal sense).

But the root cause of her insanity is uncertain. According to Rochester, it is an inherent malady and he complains of her immoral behaviour which also attributes to her madness. Bertha hails from a Creole background in West Indies. She has the family history of madness because her mother also suffers from mental illness and promiscuity which is cited as a reason by Rochester for the plight of Bertha (Green and Jill 1996). The researcher is of the view that her solitary confinement and the imposition of Victorian cultural restrictions on her behaviour cause her to become a pitiable being. She is the victim of gender bias. Green and Jill further observe that the 'Cultural Otherness' of Bertha is an important factor. "Bertha Mason represents not only the eruption of the Imaginary into the Symbolic, the Otherness of femininity, but she also functions as a metonym for cultural Otherness, too." (Green and Jill, 1996).

Bertha's behaviour, at the end, proves to be revengeful on her husband Rochester. She burns his bed and finally sets ablaze the entire house causing him to lose his eye sight and one arm. Since it can be taken as the consequence of her vengeance, it may be construed as her strong counter attack against the biased male-centric ideology. It is argued that Bertha Mason is originally considered to be subjected to repression. Carolyn G. Heilbrun also regarded Bertha as an epitome of repression, but she shifted the focus of attention from sexual desire to mere anger and rebellion. As she contends, "Bertha now represents not sexual desire but anger, not the repressed element in the respectable woman, but the suppressed element in the un-emancipated woman" (qtd in Lerner, 275).

As a contrast to Jane, Bertha loses her virginity before marriage. Her deviation from social norms, in the patriarchal sense, poses a challenge to the societal norms framed by men. It is clear that Bertha's non-

compliance to the norms of the patriarchal society proves to be fatal to her. However, Rochester is also found to transgress the moral values of Victorian culture by opting to marry Jane when Bertha is alive, but he is not victimized by the same dominant ideology. Analyzing the pitiable plights of these women characters, this researcher believes that the perpetuation of this ideology even through literature is unhealthy and it stabilizes the gender-bias strongly worldwide. Of course, literature reflects the society and is a powerful instrument for recirculation and perpetuation of this ideology. Bertha Mason is totally a non-typological woman with all her individualized and womanly assertive characteristics that had unfortunately earned her the name of a 'mad woman'.

Showalter believes the key reason for the mental illness of women is their reproductive system. Their discharging of abnormal quantity and quality of blood, doctors opine, could cause damage to brain

which attributes to unusual behaviour finally resulting in madness (Elaine, 1985). Keeping this view in mind, it can be perceived that women at this condition need to be given a soothing treatment and pleasing environment. They also need to be left in good company of people and should not be left in isolation. But Rochester fails to give her that comfort and so, he can be declared a true cause for her mental agony. Both Bertha and Jane are found guilty of not adhering to the traditional roles women are expected to play as per the dictates of the patriarchal world. When they both refuse to abide by the norms, they face the same kind of punishment. Mrs. Reed does not like the way Jane behaves at Gateshead and Rochester is averse to Bertha's unrestricted and flirtatious way of life. Both Rochester and Mrs. Reed represent Victorian ideals of social morality.

The domineering practices of the male aristocrats have become moribund because of its scant disregard for people

belonging to economically downtrodden section of the society. Correspondingly, men like Brocklehurst use their wealth and position for exercising their power for the purpose of suppression. The patriarchal society adopts a strategy to keep the women's progress under check. Nevertheless, the Victorian world also shows how the middle-classes have slowly advanced to the extent of fighting male chauvinistic dominance. It is testified by the replacement of Brocklehurst by a committee in an attempt to break the existing practices and the timely caution Jane received from Mr Lloyd and Mr. Biggs to escape the illegal marriage with Rochester.

Patriarchal society dictates the norms and behaviour of women, any deviation from the adherence to this dominant ideology will land women in trouble. But the same Victorian society prescribed certain norms for men also. According to the Victorian norms, men should have certain

characteristics like loyalty, honesty, prudence, and morality. Only men possessing these traits would be chosen by women for a secured marriage life. The same ideology was reflected in fictions also. On the contrary, the male characters in Charlotte Bronte's works do not conform to these expectations of the societies. Charlotte Bronte was a rebellious by nature and her rebellious nature was reflected through her portrayal of male characters. She created male characters that seemingly had these characteristics but they would fail to meet the high standards. It is a known fact that Charlotte was against woman suppression and gender inequality. Hence, it is believed that she registered her protest against the women's suppression by creating male characters wanting in moral values and turning diabolic, anti cultural and anti social. By this way, women characters could emerge and supplant the male characters. From Master John, Brocklehurst, Rochester and St. John in *Jane Eyre* to Dr. John

Graham and Paul Emmanuel in *Villette*, we have male characters that are either greedy, prone to jealousy, dishonest, hypocritical, or some horrible combination of the above. These characteristics not only expose their typologies but also break with the Victorian ideal and give us more realistic heroes. This is how Charlotte Bronte tried to expose the cruel patriarchal ideology and destabilize it through her literature <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/bronte/cbronte/hesse1.html>>.

Thus, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* highlights the impact of the dominant ideology on women in the Victorian society. In order to overcome this situation, women need to empower themselves through education and through exercising self-esteem and self-will to stand on their own feet and be economically independent. Moreover, the epistemological reality of woman has also to be reconstructed after

deconstructing and stabilizing it against male monopoly.

One of the most glaring examples of how Bertha Mason is a victim of patriarchal ideology is her confinement in the attic of Thornfield Hall. Her isolation is not simply a private matter between husband and wife, but a reflection of broader societal attitudes toward women's autonomy. Bertha's confinement is rooted in the assumption that a woman's desires and emotions must be controlled for the sake of maintaining order and stability within the family and, by extension, within society.

Rochester's decision to imprison Bertha is a clear exercise of patriarchal power. Bertha's status as a "madwoman" in the attic aligns with the Victorian stereotype of the female as irrational, emotional, and prone to hysteria. The attic serves as both a literal and metaphorical space of repression, where Bertha is hidden away because her very existence disrupts the patriarchal order. Unlike Jane, who represents the virtuous, self-controlled woman, Bertha embodies the dangers of female sexuality and autonomy run amok.

Critics have noted that Bertha's confinement also speaks to the ways in

which women in the Victorian period were often confined to limited roles and spaces. Women who did not conform to the expected norms—whether through behavior, appearance, or circumstance—were often pathologized, made invisible, and institutionalized. Bertha's madness is in many ways a construct of the societal pressures placed on her, including the control of her sexuality by Rochester and the larger gender norms that limited her agency.

Madness in *Jane Eyre* is intricately linked to gender, particularly the gendered expectations placed on women. Bertha's madness can be interpreted as a reaction to these oppressive norms. As feminist critic Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the representation of female madness in literature often reflects a society's need to silence and control women who step outside the prescribed boundaries of femininity. For Bertha, her insanity is a direct consequence of the patriarchal forces that attempt to strip her of her autonomy and reduce her to a mere vessel for male desire and control.

Bertha's behavior—her supposed wildness and unpredictability—mirrors the way in which the Victorian era viewed female sexuality as a dangerous force. Her

madness, then, could be understood as a form of resistance to the rigid roles of femininity that were imposed on women like her. Bertha's refusal to conform to the docile, passive femininity expected of her ultimately leads to her being locked away. Her "insanity" is a way of containing and managing this threat to the patriarchal order.

Another layer to Bertha's victimization is her identity as a Creole woman from Jamaica. The intersection of race and gender in Bertha's characterization adds another dimension to her victimhood. In Victorian discourse, the Creole woman was often stereotyped as sexually promiscuous, volatile, and morally degenerate. These racial stereotypes combined with the Victorian ideal of white, middle-class femininity to make Bertha the ultimate "Other." Her colonial background and racial identity mark her as unsuitable for marriage with a respectable English gentleman like Rochester.

Rochester's marriage to Bertha was a strategic alliance, based more on the interests of his family than any emotional connection. Bertha's inheritance, however, is tainted by her perceived racial and cultural difference. In this context, her eventual descent into madness can be read

as a form of punishment for her failure to conform to both racial and gender norms. Her madness is tied to the colonial dynamics of racial control and subjugation, which, like the gendered oppression she faces, culminate in her isolation and eventual destruction.

Bertha Mason's tragic end—her death by suicide after setting fire to Thornfield Hall—can be interpreted as a final act of rebellion against the forces that sought to control her. Yet, her death also serves to reaffirm patriarchal values. By eliminating Bertha, the novel resolves the tension between Jane and Rochester and restores the social and moral order. Jane is able to marry Rochester, but only after the removal of the woman who symbolized his past sins and transgressions.

Bertha's death can be seen as an ultimate act of erasure, a way of silencing the disruptive force that she represents. It is only through Bertha's death that Rochester is freed from his entanglements with the "other" and is able to marry Jane, who represents a "proper" woman—someone who embodies the ideals of purity, self-control, and virtue. In this way, Bertha's death serves as a form of patriarchal redemption, reinforcing the notion that

women who do not conform to the established norms must be eliminated for order to be restored.

## Conclusion

Bertha Mason's character in *Jane Eyre* is a powerful commentary on the ways in which patriarchal and colonial ideologies intersect to control and punish women. Her madness, confinement, and eventual death are not simply personal tragedies but reflect the broader societal forces that seek to restrict women's autonomy and agency. Bertha is a victim of a patriarchal system that marginalizes women who refuse to conform to rigid gender roles and seeks to silence those who defy its boundaries. As such, Bertha's story serves as a critique of the oppressive social structures that govern women's lives, particularly those who exist on the margins of race, class, and sexuality. Through Bertha's fate, Brontë critiques the destructive consequences of a society that refuses to acknowledge the complexity and humanity of women who do not fit the prescribed norms.

## Works Cited

Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary*



*Imagination*, 2nd ed. London: Yale University Press, 2000. Print.

Green & Jill. *Critical Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.

Kettle, Arnold. *An Introduction to the English Novel*. Hutchinson, 1951. Print.

Lerner, Laurence. *Bertha and the Critics*. *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol.44, No.3 (December 1989): 273-300. Print.

Martin, Robert B. *Charlotte Bronte's Novels: The Accents of Persuasion*. New York: Norton, 1966. Print.

Showalter, Elaine. *The female malady: women, madness, and English culture, 1830–1980*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985. Print.

Web source

<<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/bronte/cbronte/hesse1.html>>.