



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Humour and Subversion: D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte* v/s Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract:

Humour is a philosophical topic that bares a direct relevance to the day to day lives social interactions of human beings. Koestler, one of the major theorists argues that humour is motivated by aggressive and/or apprehensive, self-defensive or assaulting impulses. The study of humour is significant and poignant in the fact that it is interdisciplinary in nature which draws insights from philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, film, and literature. One of the oldest and most developed theories of humour was adopted by Kant and refined by Schopenhauer which states that humour happens when there is an incongruity between what we expect and what actually happens. The incongruity theory states that humour is perceived at the moment of realization of incongruity between a concept involved in a certain situation and the real objects thought to be in some relation to the concept.

In literature, humour can often be perceived in the form of satire to ridicule particular people, themes, prejudiced conceptions or objects of focus in a particular text in order to point out inherent problems or to provide a deviant reality so as to instigate or bring about change. Subversion, parody or appropriation are forms of satire which take an original text and alters it to make a new meaning. Rather than simply repackaging the themes, issues or characters of the original texts they attempt to ridicule their accepted readings and canonical interpretations.

Wide Sargasso Sea, the magnum opus of Jean Rhys is designated as a subvertive reading which succeeds in breaking the master narrative, Jane Eyre. The work breaks open the fissures in the canonicity of Jane Eyre specifically and the British imperial project more generally by giving the suppressed Bertha Mason a voice, giving her a different name (Antoinette), relocating the action to the West Indies, and changing the frame of reference. Though a dismantling of the European canon, Rhys's text itself has now been amounted the status of a canon often endorsed as the highly sophisticated example of postcolonial subversion.

This paper is an attempt to liberate the circle of criticism from the clutches of canonising paradigm, be it imperial, colonial or postcolonial. With a view to maim and to undermine the universal acquiescence enjoyed by Wide Sargasso Sea, the work purports to focus on a meagrely mentioned rewriting of Jane Eyre, Charlotte penned by D. M. Thomas who gives a subtitle The final journey of Jane Eyre to his text evidently conferring it the status of a sequel.

This paper studies how D.M. Thomas uses the basic elements of Jane Eyre, as antithetical to Wide Sargasso Sea, to tease the tangle of Victorian melodrama into a new form. By focusing on his transporting the action to modern day Martinique, the paper examines changing patterns of slavery and colonialism. An attempt will also be made to investigate how he has pursued the unforgettable characters of Jane and Rochester through time, starkly and unflinchingly exposing their sexual and moral actions for the modern reader. The paper highlights the touch of humour manifest in the way the author has freed the Victorianist text from the constraints of Victorian modesty and subservience, attiring the modern "Jane Eyre" as sexually and politically enlightened. Humour is also involved in the alternative reading of what happened after the 'happily ever afters' in Jane Eyre as well as in the intertextual affiliations the text holds with its literary rival Wide Sargasso Sea. Hence, the inherent, congenital humour in the text is analysed as an extension of the deconstructive project to explore the gaps and silences of the original canonical text, Jane Eyre and to augment the chasm and reticence of the canonical subvertive text, Wide Sargasso Sea.

Keywords: *Incongruity Theory, Subversion, Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Victorianist Text, Intertextuality*

Humour is a philosophical topic that bares a direct relevance to the day to day lives and social interactions of human beings. Koestler, one of the major theorists argues that humour is motivated by aggressive and/or apprehensive, self-defensive or assaulting impulses. The study of humour is significant and poignant in the fact that it is interdisciplinary in nature which draws insights from philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, film, and literature.

Theories of humour are traditionally divided in three branches: theories of incongruity, or inconsistency, or contradiction, or bisociation; theories of superiority, or disparagement, or criticism, or hostility and theories of release, or relief, or relaxation, also known as psychoanalytic. Since humour in its totality is too huge and multiform a phenomenon it is quite impossible to incorporate it into a single integrated theory. Rather all the three branches contribute towards analysing a given issue from different angles.

In literature, humour can often be perceived in the form of satire to ridicule particular people, themes, prejudiced conceptions or objects of focus in a particular text in order to point out inherent problems or to provide a deviant reality so as to instigate or bring about change. Subversion, parody or appropriation are forms of satire which take an original text and alters it to make a new meaning. Rather than simply repackaging the themes, issues or characters of the original texts, they attempt to ridicule their accepted readings and canonical interpretations.

Post colonial literature is a prime area where the humour of subversion is most poignantly utilised. The post colonial theory affirms the notion that the post colonial text stands in direct opposition to the canonical European text, and thus acts as a kind of counter-discourse. 'The Empire writes back to the centre' forms the maxim of the post colonial texts and they often resort to the strategy of subversion through inversion, thereby telling the 'other side of the story'. They also seek to address the ways in which the western literary tradition has marginalised, misrepresented and silenced its others by providing a platform for these dissenting voices. J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Marina Warner's *Indigo or Mapping the Waters* and Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest* are some of the texts which have utilised the strategy of subversion to 'speak back' to their Western canonical source texts.

The paper purports to unveil the humour present in reading *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the magnum opus of Jean Rhys, as a subversion of *Jane Eyre*. The work was written to break open the fissures in the canonicity of *Jane Eyre* by giving the suppressed Bertha Mason a voice, giving her a different name (Antoinette), relocating the action to the West Indies, and changing the frame of reference. Rhys endeavours to give the protagonists in her text a chance to carve out an identity they were previously denied. In Western literature, the characters that were considered 'Other' were given little authentic representation. Hence, the creole wife of Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre* is bestowed the title of a 'mad woman in the attic'. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys offers the 'other' a fortune in authoring her own text who writes 'her story' (not his story) for herself. The strategies adopted by Rhys like subversion and revision of the Western canonical text, the usurpation of power through writing and the determination to reveal the ethnic experience have proved to be fruitful as is evident in the high esteem the text has gained in the literary arena.

The humour lies in the fact that the text which had been designed to subvert the canon has itself become a canon of post colonial literature. *Wide Sargasso Sea* was employed to annihilate the canonicity of the Western classic, *Jane Eyre*. Though a dismantling of the European canon, Rhys's text itself has now been amounted the status of a canon often endorsed as the highly sophisticated example of post colonial subversion. The presence of *Wide Sargasso Sea* has often veiled a wide range of subversions and appropriations of *Jane Eyre* which would have helped to expose the myriad fissures of the western classic. Emma Tennant's *Adèle*, Debbie Shewell's *More Than One Antoinette*, the stage adaptation of *Jane Eyre* by Phyllis Birket, Daphné Du Maurier's *Rebecca* and D. M. Thomas' *Charlotte* are some of the examples of subversions, appropriations and parodies of *Jane Eyre*. These texts have often been sidelined by the mainstream rereading of *Jane Eyre*, namely *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and hence thrown into the abyss of negligence.

This paper is an attempt to liberate the circle of criticism from the clutches of canonising paradigm, be it imperial, colonial or post colonial. With a view to maim and to undermine the universal acquiescence enjoyed by *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the work purports to focus on a meagrely mentioned rewriting of *Jane Eyre*, *Charlotte* penned by D. M. Thomas who gives a subtitle *The final journey of Jane Eyre* to his text evidently conferring it the status of a sequel.

Among the theories of humour, Incongruity is considered to be the central feature, a concept developed by Immanuel Kant who sees humour as arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing. He identifies humour with frustrated expectation, and believes that humour consists in the violent dissolution of an emotional attitude. Herbert Spencer also explains humour as descending incongruity. Alexander Bain, a theorist who advocates superiority theory of humour explains incongruity as always involving a contrast between something exalted, or dignified, and something trivial or disreputable. Spencer agrees with Bain, but he thinks that it is the incongruity, and not the descent or degradation, that is the important feature.

D. H. Monro, in his *Writing and Reading across the Curriculum* has explicated the meaning of humour through the essay "Theories of Humour" thus:

Humour, according to incongruity theories, may be said to consist in the finding of "the inappropriate within the appropriate." It is not merely that unexpected connections are found between apparently dissimilar things: our notions of propriety are also involved. In any community certain attitudes are felt to be appropriate to some things but not to others; and there develop "stereotypes" of such figures as the typical politician, or poet, or maiden aunt, "the hundred per cent American," and so on. The humorist drags into light the inconvenient facts which shatter these attitudes and puncture these stereotypes. (352)

Such a humour is manifest in *Charlotte* in which the author contributes profusely in puncturing the stereotypes. D. M Thomas shatters the Victorian narrative of *Jane Eyre* thoroughly by extending the tale of the marital life of Jane Eyre and Rochester. In the Victorian narrative, the reunion of the couples through marriage had been conferred the drapery of a pure romance. The stereotypical ending of the novel 'And they lived happily ever after' is given a drastic twist in the post modern novel penned by D. M Thomas who gives an alternative ending to the Victorian fiction, thus conferring a sequel to the Eyre story.

Humour is evoked in the readers of *Charlotte*, when the narrative takes them to an unexpected terrain of confession:

Reader, this is a very different picture of my marriage from that which you were presented with in what I would call my 'romantic' version. Reality, however, does not often coincide with romance. I will remind you: 'When his firstborn was put into his arms, he could see that the boy had inherited his own eyes, as they once were – large, brilliant, and black . . .' Well. Events did not quite happen like that. (Thomas 44)

It is Jane Eyre, the protagonist who is confessing her marital union with Mr. Rochester as a failure. Mr. Rochester is painted a Mills and Boon hero in the Victorian *Jane Eyre*, a stereotypical manly figure of all masculine vigour. He is delineated as a genuine hero who wins the heart of Jane, and as leading a perfect familial life, though invalidated in the accident.

Thomas gives a humorous strain to the narrative by picturing Mr. Rochester as unmanly and impotent on his wedding bed. A man lacking virility, he fails to take his marital life to consummation. His wife, Jane remains a virgin forever and her desire to bear a child proves fruitless. "Each passing month I had hoped for the first signs of pregnancy; yet I was still a virgin" (Thomas 44).

The humour is made intense when the post modern author deconstructs and subverts *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the canonical subversion of *Jane Eyre*. Countering the post colonial perspective of Jean Rhys, Thomas rewrites the marital story of the couple in a different facet. Though his masculinity and virility are kept in dark shadows, like the colonial narrative, Mr. Rochester is given a sanctified figure who loves his first wife ardently till she breathes her last.

Bertha had told her [Grace Poole], several times, during sensible interludes, that her husband had always treated her kindly – as he continued to do at Thornfield Hall: never beaten her, never got drunk in those early days, never left her on her own for long, never been unfaithful. She had strayed often, from the first, stealing out at night to meet someone. Because she simply could not stand being tied down, imprisoned, in marriage. She had been 'a bad wife', she told Grace. Far from beating her, she had sometimes struck him, and found him peculiarly responsive to her savagery. (Thomas 169)

Thomas's narrative confers a far superior position to the creole wife, Bertha in winning the heart of Rochester. Only Bertha could make him obsessed with love and passion and could arouse him sexually. She was the ideal woman for him, and hence he could not love any other woman, not even Jane Eyre.

According to Grace, my father [Rochester] continued to have occasional relations with my mother, right up to her death. But he became fond of Jane Eyre; he hated his obsession, longed for a normal life. He hoped Jane would provide it. But his ideal – his passionate – image, Bertha, my mother, stood in the way. (Thomas 168)

Incongruity theory points out that the humour may be at the expense of the person who is unable to live up to the conventional requirements. Societal conventions see marriage as an institution that demands fidelity in the man and his wife. In the case of *Charlotte*, humour is aroused at the expense of Bertha who defiantly deviates from the conventional norms and familial expectations. She is an islander who is not ready to imprison her life in the confines of marriage. She resorts to be free and celebrates extra marital relations with many a men. "Because she simply could not stand being tied down, imprisoned, in marriage" (Thomas 169). This destroys the wedlock and paves way for the gruesome events in the life of Bertha and Rochester.

It is the promiscuity of the islander wife that has contrived a rift in the otherwise happy life of Rochester/Berth union. Neither the man nor the wife is pictured guilty; rather both of them are given ample justifications for the horrendous events that haunt their lives. The blame is put solely on the spirit and vigour of the island that engross each inhabitant in its demonic clutches of debauchery.

According to Alexander Bain, all humour involves the degradation of something. It "need not be a person that is derided: it may be an idea, a political institution, or, indeed, anything at all that makes a claim to dignity or respect" (Monro 351). D. M. Thomas strikes humour by deriding the puritan concept of the Victorian era. Throughout the novel, he frees his characters from the constraints of Victorian modesty and subservience. Rather he makes them sexually and politically enlightened, often depicting the sordid pictures of the Victorian colonialism in clear terms.

The puritan urges of the Victorian novels had restrained the authors and the readers to associate with the intimacies of marital relations. This is being satirised in the novel of Thomas as his Victorian protagonist shows no qualms in divulging her marital secrets.

Reader, you will expect me to draw a veil over the intimacies which transpire between a man and his wife. I am sorry to disappoint and offend you. I will tell you that everything seemed blissful to me; it was bliss to lie down side by side with Edward; to feel his passionate embrace and kisses; to feel my entire soul and being given up to him . . . (Thomas 15)

Victorian modesty is again risked when she critiques the novelists of the age:

It is well known that in novels – for example, the novels of Miss Austen the pen falters just at the point where, perhaps, the most interesting narrative begins: after the wedding ceremony. With the consequence that not only is the rituals of the marriage-chamber avoided but the ordinary, humdrum details of the start of a married life. (Thomas 17)

These critiques offer humour to the readers, but at the same time give them an impetus to meditate on the pangs of novel writing. Charlotte Bronte, the author of the seminal text, *Jane Eyre* too is critiqued in severe terms: “CHARLOTTE BRONTE was an extraordinary liar” (118). In the novel, a study about the life of Bronte is made; propositions, generalisations and hypothesis are achieved about her becoming a liar:

A woman brought up in the narrow world of a vicarage, in the remote corner of northern England, in a taboo-ridden society, with a fairly remote father; and only two sisters and a brother for companionship, would inevitably forced into a life of deceit, of feelings and thoughts withheld – even from her own self. In puberty especially, she would have believed that she alone had wicked thoughts and feelings; she alone, perhaps, in the whole world of decent, respectable – if not angelic – creatures. So began her lying, her pretence . . . (Thomas 118)

The Victorian characters are criticised as the pretensions of the author, who succumb to the etiquettes and presumptions of the society. It is only the 'mad woman in the attic' who helps her vent her hidden, yet true emotions. The social norms always kept her vital self submerged like Grace Poole who forcefully kept Bertha confined. “Grace kept Charlotte's unruly id closely confined; she symbolises all that decorum and conventionality which cut off her breathing like a Victorian corset” (119). Yet impersonating herself as Bertha, Charlotte lashes out her hatred to the button-down traditional social order.

But Grace had the saving grace of getting drunk now and then; so allowing the “mad woman in the attic” to escape for a while – allowing Charlotte, more importantly, to slash men, rip up wedding apparel, and set fire to beds! It is in the tension of enforced restraint and wild bursting-out that Charlotte Bronte made her indelible mark. . . (120)

Thus Victorian modesty is shattered and female subservience deconstructed to arouse the readers to understand the voids and gaps that speak volumes about the inherent meanings of fiction.

The post modern novel again strikes the chords of humour when it critiques its own authenticity. The make-belief author of the novel-within-the-novel is Miranda Stevenson who endeavours to pen an alternate ending to the Eyre story. It is this story which tells the tale of the impotent Rochester and the promiscuous Bertha. Though the new saga confers a novel angle to the Bronte's and Rhys's accounts, it is being critiqued in the novel itself. “Of course it's now evidently pastiche Bronte, not the absolute crystal-clear authenticity of the original; but still . . .” (Thomas 155)

The study thus analyses the inherent, congenital humour in the post modern text, Charlotte as an extension of the deconstructive project to explore the gaps and silences of the original canonical text, *Jane Eyre* and to augment the chasm and reticence of the canonical subvertive text, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Blurring the distinction between fact and fiction, and illustrating the major traits of end-of-the-century rewritings, D.M Thomas's *Charlotte* bemuses the present day readers.

As Armelle Parey comments: “Utterly deprived of nostalgia for the Victorian era it depicts, the novel challenges not only the source-text and its ideology but also its own reader, taken in a dizzying narrative spiral” (7). Acknowledging *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an intertext to its own particular rewriting of *Jane Eyre*, *Charlotte* revolutionises the retro-Victorian novels and marks a critique of the ideological dimensions of the hypotext and the hypertexts. The new pastiche thus benumbs the present day readers as the original classic, *Jane Eyre* shocked the Victorian contemporaries; as the seminal subversion, *Wide Sargasso Sea* astounded the post colonial intelligentsia.

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