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Problems of Authentication in Reference to
“The Handmaid’s Tale” and “Wide Sargasso Sea”

Saleem Sinai reveals in one of the important chapters of Salman Rushdie’s “Midnight’s Children” that reality is a matter of perspective. As extensively as that is touched upon in Rushdie’s famous novel, truth and the authenticity of personal rendition are an even more major concern for two other novels: “The Handmaid’s Tale” by Margaret Atwood and “Wide Sargasso Sea” by Jean Rhys. Juxtaposing them on the aspect of narrator credibility is especially propitious because they share enough similarities that would make exploring and discovering the differences meaningful.

“Wide Sargasso Sea” is a prequel to Charlotte Bronte’s acclaimed Victorian masterpiece “Jane Eyre” and sheds light on Mr. Rochester’s dark past in the West Indies by using two contrasting narratives – that of Rochester himself and that of his wife Antoinette who eventually goes mad and comes to be known as Bertha – “the mad woman in the attic”. Apart from being an important representative of post-colonial British literature, the novel is a subtle exploration of interpersonal power relationships, and also bears a feminist reading.

“The Handmaid’s Tale” is a futuristic dystopia describing an extremely rigid and strict totalitarian society dominated by religious patriarchal fanaticism. Women are accorded nominal respect, especially the fertile ones who can still bear children, but no real governing power. The story is presented from the point of view of one of those handmaids – Offred. As in “Wide Sargasso Sea” power domination/subjugation patterns are elaborated upon.

Both texts are postmodernist to the extent that they comment on the process of tale telling and memory reconstruction. They also belong to a similar genre – the female Gothic, which Karen Stein defines as the “narrative of a motherless young woman finding her way in an oppressive patriarchal society” (80). The female narrators in both novels face similar problems when trying to render credibility to their stories.

The most formidable problem they face as narrators is that the authenticity of their narratives is being questioned by a male authority – Rochester’s narrative in “Wide Sargasso Sea”, which takes up almost two-thirds of the novel, and Professor Pieixoto’s “Historical Notes” in the end of “The Handmaid’s Tale”. Whereas most literary critics agree that Rochester’s narrative is an ingenuous structural technique, which “prevents Rhys from directly justifying her heroine” (Sternlicht 118) and allows “the accused to convict himself on his own testimony”, there is controversy regarding the role of the “Historical Notes” and its effect on the authenticity of Offred’s narrative. Wilson and Howells assert that Pieixoto’s cold-hearted sardonic commentary “deconstruct[s] or unwind[s]” (Wilson 293) all the authority of Offred’s story and “obliterates [her] as a person” (Howells 146). Davidson, however, reads the “Historical Notes” as a further authentication of Offred’s story because it “duplicat[es] the suppression her society

inflicted upon her” (120). Coming from a different premise, Deer also believes that Pieixoto’s account substantiates the authority of Offred’s narrative because through it the historians are satirically exposed as “trivializers of history” (108).

The task of the narrators is complicated by the confines of language and the inability to fit reality in words and transmit memory satisfactorily. As Margaret Atwood shares in a radio interview, “truth is very, very large” and “everybody remembers it differently and selectively” (“Margaret Atwood Reads”), thus using reconstructions and approximations becomes inevitable. In a number of passages in her narrative Offred shares how difficult it is to tell the story from retrospect and keep it authentic: “This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction. It’s a reconstruction now, in my head, as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn’t have said, what I should or shouldn’t have done, how I should have played it” (HT 173). In “Wide Sargasso Sea” Rochester also acknowledges how difficult it is to remember: “As for my confused impressions they will never be written. There are blanks in my mind that cannot be filled up” (WSS 76).

Another important structural mechanism Jean Rhys uses to undermine her narrators’ credibility is undoubtedly the introduction of two narrators and opposing them to each other. This extricates her from the necessity to explicitly endorse any of the two and allows her to present impartially their cases. It can be argued that Rhys privileges Antoinette’s point of view, because she accords her the crucial first and last parts and inserts an extremely important 11-page episode, narrated by Antoinette, in the middle of Edward’s narrative which explains the motives behind her actions and exculpates her, while further compromising Rochester in the eyes of the reader. Moreover, “in a novel in

which naming is so important, Rochester's anonymity underscores the implied authority of his account (Wide Sargasso Sea: Themes...)" because this de-personification creates him as the focal image of the colonizer and makes it easier for the reader to condemn him on that more general level.

The same structural role is served in "The Handmaid's Tale" by the "Historical Notes" section. It reveals that Offred's story has been rearranged, restructured and transcribed by Professor Pieixoto's crew. By refusing to treat it as something more than a historical artifact and by inserting disparaging references to women, it shows that after Gilead future civilization has not progressed much on the issue of sex equality. Similar to Rochester, Offred also remains unnamed, a fact that further contributes to the historians' inability to connect to her story on a personal level.

The specific choices of female narrators are also a powerful instrument of de-authenticating their accounts. In "Wide Sargasso Sea" the story is told by a mad woman, in "The Handmaid's Tale" – by a voiceless "two-legged womb" deprived of all her freedoms and rights, most importantly the right to read and write. Both narrators are renamed by a male authority. Antoinette becomes Marionetta and Bertha – an act by which Rochester ultimately asserts his power; Offred, having been forced to use that name by the regime, keeps her real name to herself as a source of power to continue clinging to life but in the end remains known by the name that symbolizes her subjugation to men.

The content and style of narration are other important features that tell us more about the authenticity of narrative voice. It is interesting to explore them in Rochester's narrative. Although he narrates for more than a half of the book, the dialogue with

Antoinette is extensively reconstructed in his narrative and thus “expands the focus beyond [him]” (Staley 106). There are a number of occasions, starting from the very first scene where we see Antoinette and Rochester in the rain and his reluctance to accept shelter by a native, when Rochester “misreads” Antoinette. He fails or refuses to understand the relationships between colonizers and black people, Antoinette’s fondness of Christophine, or her skeptical remarks about England being unreal. In fact, as the part in the middle of Edward’s narrative, related by Antoinette, testifies, she is curious to see England. Thus, it is Rochester who is unable to accept his surroundings and is suspicious of everything – “the flowers [are] too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near” (WSS 70). The imagery, in fact, “almost tells another tale” (Staley 106) and leaves the reader wondering about a plausible rational source of Edward’s revulsion from the landscape.

The authority of Antoinette’s narrative is questioned from its very inception by the mere knowledge that she is a mad woman. Hadn’t the reader, however, been aware of the novel’s connection with “Jane Eyre”, Antoinette’s madness would have been less than clear to determine. The first part of the narrative presents a deeply understanding portrayal of the complicated colonial black-white relationships of simultaneous attraction and repulsion. An episode illustrating that notion is the moment when Tia, Antoinette’s sole black friend, throws a stone at her, and through the blood streaming from her forehead Antoinette sees the tears on Tia’s face and realizes that she is seeing herself as in a mirror. Antoinette’s second narrative cannot be hastily dismissed as insane either, because it is too coherent for a mad person and demonstrates clarity of perception. Antoinette is acutely aware of and constantly reevaluating the events that shape her life –

she is able to make the connection between the three parts of her dream and conclude why she has been brought to the attic and what she has to do. Even her somewhat comical refusal to accept that she is in England acquires the character of a revelation when we consider it in the context of how she has been treated by Rochester. The cold bleak room where she is forced to subsist can by no means be the England Edward had so fondly been speaking of.

The content and style of narration in “The Handmaid’s Tale” are also crucial for our perception of the authenticity of the narrative. The constant switching between past and present tense contributes to a substantial fragmentation of Offred’s narrative. On many occasions Offred imagines multiple realities and believes in all of them simultaneously. When she deliberates on her husband’s fate, she shares: “The things I believe can’t all be true, though one of them must be. But I believe in all of them, all three versions of Luke, at one and the same time. This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything” (HT 135).

The same phenomenon reappears in her account of her first visit in Nick’s room when she tells one version of what has happened, then denies it and introduces another. That is her only way of believing because that is her only way of rebelling against a regime that is “in love with either/or” (HT 10). She even contemplates the possibility of the life she thinks she is living being “a paranoid delusion” (HT 139), “some new kind of therapy” (HT 121). From the point of view of the reader, however, those episodes only substantiate Offred’s credibility because they exemplify the emotional attachment and true suffering that have made her create her “ultimate act of political engagement” (Stein 84), instead of remaining the passive speechless victim of torture.

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