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**“The Seductive Reduction” of India: Colonial, Missionary, and  
Educative Pursuits in *Jane Eyre***

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with  
A Major in English at  
The University of North Carolina at Asheville  
Fall 2016

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Although the nineteenth-century novel *Jane Eyre*<sup>1</sup> is almost entirely situated in the domestic space of England, the book repeatedly uses British colonial and imperialist practices from India to interpret legal, economic, and gendered hegemony in country. Typically, scholars have read *Jane Eyre* through a feminist lens, lending to an abundance of feminist-influenced scholarship related to the text. But recently critics have begun examining Charlotte Brontë's linguistic and novelistic artistry and situating her work within the social, political, and religious context of her time. The centrality of colonial and imperial presence in *Jane Eyre* is now, consequently, well-established among scholars, as Gayatri Spivak's "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" and Susan Meyer's *Imperialism at Home*, among others, have demonstrated the complexity of colonialism and engagement of intersectionalities between gender and colonized subjects abroad.

This paper participates in this larger trend, but I redress a crucial gap in recent post-colonial readings of *Jane Eyre*, which primarily approach the matter through a consideration of Bertha Mason or Rochester's years in the West Indies.<sup>2</sup> By examining Britain's engagement with colonial and imperialist issues in India, I interrogate Jane's willingness to perform educative work in India and its implicit association to British colonial and imperial pursuits. In doing so I consider the primary methods of British colonization; the impacts of Britain's colonization, particularly Britain's colonial project in nineteenth-century India; and the overlaps between theology and colonialist policy. These issues frame Jane and St. John's choices to stay in England or go to India, respectively. In dramatizing this dilemma, *Jane Eyre* demonstrates its

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<sup>1</sup> Brontë, Charlotte et al. *Jane Eyre*. 1st ed., New York, Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003. Hereafter, all references to the book are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Scholars include, but are not limited to, Laura E. Ciolkowski's "Navigating the Wide Sargasso Sea: Colonial History, English Fiction, and British Empire," Lori Pollock's "(An)Other Politics of Reading *Jane Eyre*," and Julia Sun-Joo Lee's "The (Slave) Narrative of *Jane Eyre*."

concern with the inconsistencies of religious discourse and practice in its relations to imperialist projects of various kinds.

At the time of *Jane Eyre*'s publication, England was well-established as a colonial and imperial nation, and as such, it is necessary to define the terms "imperialism" and "colonialism." According to M. Daphne Kutzer,<sup>3</sup> "imperialism" includes the "advocacy and glorification of military [and economic] forces to both expand and maintain the empire; the promotion of racial superiority of white Europeans, [specifically] Englishmen [and] the civilizing of the spiritually and morally "dark" areas of the world" (Kutzer 18). Imperialism, in short, informed Europeans' perception of their racial, cultural, and spiritual superiority and allowed the Western empire to construct Eastern cultures as inferior or alien. Edward Said<sup>4</sup> defines this 'othering' as the classification of an individual or group so as to establish an identity through opposition to and vilification of another community. In doing so, Western cultures were not only able to judge, study, depict, discipline, and illustrate the orient but also to "colonize," or implant settlements, on these distant territories. In all of these contexts, dominating systems contained and wrongly represented Eastern cultures.

This dynamic of imperial 'othering' emerges in *Jane Eyre* most notably through St. John's and Jane's possible roles as missionaries. Missionaries entered a world that was as steeped in superficial generalizations *about* Europeans as Europeans had created *of* Indians. In the eyes of the natives of India, Europeans were "crude, drink-prone, fornicat[ors], [...] materialistic [...] and] slave[s] to machinery" (Bellenoit 78). Meanwhile, Eastern populations were often compared by Europeans to animals or considered sexually deviant. The colonizer

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<sup>3</sup> Kutzer's *Empire's Children: Empire and Imperialism in Classic British Children's Books* places classic British children's fictional texts into the cultural context of imperial Britain from 1895 to about 1945.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said is considered a founder of the academic field of postcolonial studies, his seminal text being *Orientalism*.

proclaimed them as “indolent, dull, treacherous, and childish” (Alatas 112). They had a position similar to livestock, valued only for their efficiency in labor. St. John and Jane navigate this prevailing ideology of colonialism and imperialism, which underpinned Britain’s display of empire (Cannadine 122). Jane would have and St. John does ultimately benefit from the cultural, spiritual, and racial hierarchy present in English-occupied India, which David Cannadine explores in *Ornamentalism*<sup>5</sup>, adapting Said’s “orientalism” to work *within* the British culture of Brontë’s day. He posits that an imperialist empire and Britain were brought together by Britain’s commitment to reproducing the hierarchical society that existed in England at the time of *Jane Eyre*’s publication. However, Said counters this, implying that many of the British themselves were actually resistant to this project, refusing to be molded into hierarchical, approved imperialistic shapes (Said). “Orientalism” and *Ornamentalism* help situate Western culture’s interpretations of and interactions with the Orient, of which India is a part. Jane and St. John begin to navigate both these imperial interactions and rejections, with Said’s claims giving credence to both St. John’s understanding of his mission in India and Jane’s later notions of rebellion. Retroactively applying any of these claims too flippantly to Brontë’s novel, however, does a disservice to the ambiguities and complexities of colonialism and imperialism in which Brontë engages. But these concepts help clarify the cultural and political forces at work in the novel.

It is not difficult to ascertain whether Brontë was actively engaged, both intellectually and imaginatively, with these imperialist and colonialist concerns. Brontë’s large body of juvenile writings reveal that she found “immense narrative energy precisely through British

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<sup>5</sup> David Cannadine’s *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* studies the history of the British empire and the history of Britain itself (from about 1850 to 1950) as an inseparable, seamless whole.

imperialism” (Meyer 29). Charlotte Brontë played in the early imaginative world of ‘Angria,’ which she located in Africa, its capital being the “Babylon of Africa, the Tower of All Nations” (Alexander 18). The early heroes that pervaded Charlotte’s childhood texts were based on then current political and military figures (most notably, the Duke of Wellington), who were shaped in the rise and fall of empires. A direct and evolutionary relationship between Charlotte’s early and later writings have been “largely speculative” (Alexander 5). Even more uncertainty is raised as so few of her early writings have been published and read. However, as Christine Alexander reasserts, compared to her later writings, Brontë’s earlier writings indicate an ideological development within the author. Her “naïve and crude” apprenticeship writings concern themselves with celebratory conquests over non-white races, whereas *Jane Eyre* presents a more complex and ambiguous narrative engagement<sup>6</sup> with Empire.

However, to ascertain historical connection in Brontë’s later novel to nineteenth-century English colonial and imperial rule, Sue Thomas suggests that readers must map Rochester’s life onto the history of England. According to Thomas’s dating, Bertha Mason and Rochester would have married in 1819, during the peak of England’s colonial and imperial engagement in the West Indies (Thomas 59).<sup>7</sup> But by the time *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847, British parliament had, in July 1833, abolished slavery in “Britain’s crown and chartered colonies.” The Victorian reader of *Jane Eyre* would have been aware of the institution of and associations with the

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<sup>6</sup> For further information concerning Brontë’s juvenilia, see Christine Alexander’s *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* and Earl A. Knies’s *The Art of Charlotte Brontë*.

<sup>7</sup> More fully, Thomas suggests that Brontë indicates the dating of the novel by way of “this new edition of *Marimon*” (59). Jane refers to the poem not as new but as a new *publication*, which St. John gives Jane on Guy Fawkes Day (5 November). According to Thomas, both of these details suggest that Brontë is referencing the “publication of *Marimon* in Robert Cadell’s twelve-volume *Poetical Works of Walter Scott*,” which was issued in 1833. This indicates that her engagement to Rochester and teaching at Morton also take place in 1833. Therefore, Jane arrives at Thornfield at aged eighteen in October 1832, returning to Rochester in June 1834. Bertha would have died in the autumn of 1833, placing her marriage to Rochester in 1819.

colonial project. However, Brontë chooses instead to ground her interrogations of the imperial projects in the timelier religious and economic colonization of India.

England's colonizing history with India began in the early 1600s by way of the East India Company, a joint-stock company that pursued trade in the India subcontinent and China starting in the early 1600s (Cox). By the time Brontë wrote *Jane Eyre*, India had been under Company Rule, or Company *Raj*,<sup>8</sup> for nearly a century. During this rule, the trading of women, alongside spices and livestock, was common practice. Mid-nineteenth century Britain understood the exchange "for harem attendants," as integral "to practices of domestic slavery." These domestic slaves were understood to be "employed only in the house itself" and were, therefore, excluded from the populace of England's general repugnance of slavery (Thomas 67). The India Charter Act of 1833 refused to interfere with "the practice of 'domestic slavery' in the 'harems of the Mahommedans and the zenanahs of the natives'" (Thomas 9). England's convenient necessity to observe and respect the rights and laws of India's domestic space cloaked and prevented the redress of England's own colonial and imperial crimes, which perhaps accounts for Brontë's delicate examination thereof within *Jane Eyre*.

From its opening scene, when an adult Jane retrospectively narrates her development from an orphaned child to the governess at the estate of Edward Rochester, the 1847 novel begins to negotiate the complicated relationship between gender, race, and empire. Jane describes herself as a rebellious and independent child who is different from her aunt and cousins, the Reeds, a "discord in Gateshead [...] a noxious thing," a nobody who financially depends on a family who does not love her (11). John Reed bullies and abuses Jane, Georgiana and Eliza Reed enable John, and Mrs. Reed ignores John's abuse and psychologically and emotionally rebukes Jane. Though Jane opposes her extended family in "temperament, in

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<sup>8</sup> *Raj* means "rule" in Hindi.

capacity, [and] propensities,” she is not pained intensely at her character’s dissimilarity (11). Rather, Brontë juxtaposes Jane to her privileged aunt and cousins by making “metaphorical use of race relations,” as Susan Meyer explains in *Imperialism at Home* (Meyer 61). In having Jane resist John Reed’s tyranny (“You are like a murderer – you are like a slave driver – you are like the Roman emperors!” [5]), Meyer posits that Brontë has comparatively situated Jane to a slave (63). Brontë furthers the allusion to include Turks (“I sat crossed-legged, like a Turk [2]). This equivalence, which links the experience of unjust oppression to non-white racial identity, suggests that nineteenth-century author and readers were aware of and able to navigate the link between race and oppression that Brontë introduces. Simultaneously, this allows Jane to begin to navigate and understand links among economic, gendered, and legal oppressions present in her own life.

Though Brontë more broadly identifies Jane as a slave through the race-relation-metaphor that Meyer elucidates, Jane’s identification as such is perhaps more important when contextualized through Charlotte Brontë’s letters. In an 1839 letter to her sister Emily, Charlotte writes that she “see[s] now more clearly than I have ever done before, that a private governess has not existence, is not considered as a living rational being, except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfill” (Brontë, *Selected*). Charlotte found some improvement in a new situation in 1841 but nevertheless could not avoid the inherent oppressiveness of her position. She wrote to her friend Ellen Nussey that “no one but [her]self can tell how hard a governess’ work is” (Brontë, *Selected*). When put into the context of fictive Jane’s future educative work, which Rochester considers as “governessing slavery,” the comparison becomes interesting (314). In creating a character who relied upon self-respect to provide fulfillment through this “governessing slavery,” Brontë reminds her readers that governesses are *not* a

burden to society. She appropriates situations in which she herself experienced oppression as a vehicle, as means, to liberate fictive others. It could be understood then that Brontë furthermore comments upon education's agency in social reproduction. Education is immensely important in the formation of attitudes, references, and experiences. Yet, consciously or unconsciously, those who educate produce or convey morals and values to their audience. In the colonial and imperial setting, education then becomes one of the most powerful tools in enforcing acculturation, or the adaptation of cultural traits or patterns from a foreign community. As Ngugi Wa' Thiong'o argues, an empire occupies the minds of the people over whom it intends to rule, just as powerfully as it occupies the land.<sup>9</sup> The educative mission-work in which Jane would and St. John does participate then reflects the cultural aims of England's imperial policy, which seeks to re-educate native individuals. This assimilation, important to colonial education, forces those being colonized to conform to the cultures and traditions of the colonizers.

Thiong'o's exploration of colonial education's impact on once-colonized nations is one of many conversations within postcolonial scholarship. Though not often critiqued for its participation in colonial re-education, *Jane Eyre's* specific postcolonial scholarship and readings *have* often highlighted the historical obscuring of West Indian slavery. Specifically, in the novel's allusions to practices of slavery in the West Indies, Plasa argues:

Despite the pivotal and determinate role of the West Indies in *Jane Eyre* in terms of narrative and economic fortunes of its major characters, Brontë's text nowhere explicitly refers to the institution of British slavery of the colonial project with which, for the early

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<sup>9</sup> For further discussion on theories of re-education and 'othering,' see Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, and Kelley and Altbach's *Education and the Colonial Experience*.



Victorian reader, the West Indies would still, in 1847, be strongly associated and against whose distant horizon Jane conducts her metropolitan life” (qtd. in Thomas 58).

It is true that *Jane Eyre* does not explicitly allude to the state of slavery being practiced in the West Indies during Brontë’s time. This is not, however, amnesia to the slavery itself; rather, Brontë’s lack of explicit allusion to slavery is an interpretation of the novel’s internal chronology, its fictive timeline. She does not allude blatantly to slavery in West India because, at the novel’s inception, it had already been abolished. Brontë could be making the case that, because slavery has already been abolished, it might not concern her audience.

The significance of this omission is worth noting because it *does* concern Brontë. In a letter she wrote to her publisher in late October 1852, Brontë describes her reticence to take up contemporary political issues in her writing due to a sense of her own lack of expertise:

I cannot write books handling the topics of the day; it is of no use trying. Nor can I write a book for its moral. Nor can I take up a philanthropic scheme, though I honour philanthropy; and voluntarily and sincerely veil my face before such almighty subject as that handled in Mrs. Beecher Stowe’s work, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. To manage these great matters rightly, they must be long and practically studied – their bearing known intimately, and their evils felt genuinely; they must not be taken up as a business matter, and a trading speculation (Gaskell 364-65).

Here Brontë highlights her method of composition as well as her deeply felt opposition and familiarity to slavery, which suggest that her omission of explicit allusions may well be a conscious and significant authorial choice. Interestingly and perhaps subconsciously, she returns to the abolitionist movement’s rhetoric when creating her tale of the “plain, Quakerish governess” (300). Even those three words associate Jane with a group steadfastly in support of

emancipation. Jane asserts this description of herself when Rochester envisions himself “put[ting] the diamond chain round [Jane’s] neck, and the circlet on [her] forehead [and] the bracelets on these fine wrists and load these fairy-like fingers with rings” (300). Jane rejects Rochester’s pedestal he is creating for her, which involves its own glittering chains. She is not a beauty, not “delicate and aerial.” She is “puny and insignificant” (300). In an ironic turn, she humbly rejects his attempts to glorify her and place her on a pedestal. In recalling and accepting her plainness, she reclaims the selfhood Rochester has denied her, and in resisting any infringement of her own autonomy and liberty, Jane engages the issue of master-slave relations.

Though Brontë’s allusions to slavery in the West Indies and religious and economic colonization in India are neither many nor explicit, Penny Boumelha recognizes ten explicit references to *forms* of slavery, which allude to “slavery in Ancient Rome and in the seraglio, to the slaveries of paid work as a governess and of dependence as a mistress” (qtd. in Thomas 57). These allusions and the novel’s tensions between slavery and Christianity often take color from political thought of Brontë’s day. Nineteenth-century, anti-slavery activist Thomas Fowell Buxton<sup>10</sup> motions that the “state of slavery is repugnant to the principles of the British Constitution, and of the Christian religion; and that it ought to be gradually abolished throughout the British colonies, with as much expedition as may be found consistent with the due regard to the well-being of the parties concerned” (Great Britain, *Parliamentary Debates*, n.s., 9, 274-5). Some countered that there was no special denunciation of slavery in Christian theology, favoring longer-term preparation of slaves for freedom through the influence of Christian

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<sup>10</sup> A British philanthropist and politician during Brontë’s time, who led the campaign in England’s House of Commons for the abolition of slavery in the British colonies, Buxton is partly responsible for the Abolition Act referenced.

evangelicalism<sup>11</sup>. The public discourse and debates emphasize the compatibility –or rather *incompatibility*—of Christianity and various forms of slavery that are present in *Jane Eyre*. Nonetheless, Brontë’s general allusions help readers frame the novelist’s understanding and feelings towards slavery and the tensions between slavery and Christianity.

It is worth recalling that Charlotte Brontë, born in 1816, grew up during increasing “fragmentation and dissention among and between Wesleyan Methodists, Primitive Methodists, Calvinists, Arminians, and various ‘high’ and ‘low’ Tractarian and Evangelical Anglicans” (Franklin 459). The Christian attitudes toward race, empire, and education were hardly monolithic, and as divergent spiritual discourses prevailed in Brontë’s life, so it does in her novel. Mr. Brocklehurst, Helen Burns, St. John Rivers, and Jane herself represent differing spiritualities in *Jane Eyre*, though the primary spiritual discourse is, of course, Christianity. J. Jeffrey Franklin suggests that there has been a problematic tendency to flatten all spiritual discourse in the novel into that of Christianity. Brontë might have even encouraged this, in her “Author’s Preface” to the second edition of the novel. She defends the Christian rectitude of the text, saying, “Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee, is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns” (xlvi). Charlotte’s defense responded to early criticisms of Jane’s (and to an extent Charlotte’s) piety. What these early reviews and criticisms recognize is that there *are* contesting spiritual discourses in *Jane Eyre*, that there is *not* a vacuum of spirituality outside of Mr. Brocklehurst, Helen Burns, St. John Rivers, and Jane’s characters. Rather, “*Jane Eyre* is quite representative of its time in showing a multiplicity of competing

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<sup>11</sup> George Canning, Foreign Secretary, countered Buxton’s anti-slavery proclamations, favoring the “widening diffusion of light and liberality through Christian discourse.”

spiritual discourse *within* Christianity [and] spiritual discourses from *outside* orthodox doctrines” (Franklin 460).

Though Mr. Brocklehurst, Helen Burns, and Jane’s characters bring richness and complexity to *Jane Eyre*’s religious discourse, I am most interested in examining St. John’s particular theological camp. St. John is an Evangelical minister, proselytizing doctrines in which “there was a strange bitterness; an absence of consolatory gentleness; stern allusions to Calvinistic doctrines” (409). As his sermons demonstrate, St. John represents duty, suppression, and obedience. He rigidly adheres to Christian discourse and becomes a tool in the service of a “supra-personal set of values” (Benvenuto 629). He “would force Jane to seek acceptance in the terms of the religious law he serves, with no more room for compromise than he has given himself” (Benvenuto 632). For Jane, there is no meeting St. John’s demands halfway: she must either go to India as his lawful wife or not go at all.

In the rejection of Rochester’s gifts, affianced Jane identifies herself as the missionary St. John imagines her to be, saying, “I’ll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved – your harem inmates among the rest. I’ll get admitted there, and I’ll stir up mutiny” (313). Interestingly, Jane states that she will preach liberty, not explicitly the Christian discourse St. John embodies. Though the proximity of “missionary,” “preach,” and “liberty” suggests that the three are inextricably linked, it is important to note that Jane says she will preach precisely and only “liberty.”

The actions Jane imagines herself taking are in the same vein of contemporary missionaries. Traditionally, missionaries were instructed to address the spiritual, *not* the civil or temporal, conditions of the enslaved. Yet Jane rejects this. Considering Cannadine’s suggestion that many British were themselves resistant to being molded into hierarchical, approved

imperialistic shapes, Jane's hinting at a possible rebellion gains considerable importance, especially when "viewed in the contexts of the Demerera slave rebellion of 1823<sup>12</sup> and the Jamaican slave rebellion of 1831,<sup>13</sup> in which non-Conformist missionaries were accused of inciting mutiny" (Thomas 61). Similarly, Brontë's father writes in a letter to the *Leeds Intelligencer* that abolition is "a reasonable and scriptural" demand, a "responsibility to God and a duty to England of a Christian and enlightened people." The rebellions at which Jane hints historically exacerbated planter suspicion of missionaries, that "almost every planter looks upon a missionary as one who aims at nothing less than the entire subversion of the colony" (qtd. in Thomas 61). Colonizers in the West Indies blamed rebellions and unrest in large part on slaves' widening awareness of their limited temporal conditions, which missionaries were supposed to have aggravated. The newspapers of Brontë's time, which Thomas suggests were "focused overwhelmingly on the charges against missionaries," similarly asserted that rebellions in the colonies were organized by recent Christian converts, who took inspiration from the Bible and claimed missionaries as their allies (61).

Later in the same pre-marital scene in which Jane suggests a slave rebellion of sorts, she alludes to the suttee – or harem—saying, "I had as good a right to die when my time came as he had; but I should bide that time, and not be hurried away in a suttee" (517). Maryanne C. Ward suggests that this conversation rhetorically and thematically bridges West Indian and Eastern

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<sup>12</sup> Under the belief that their masters were concealing news of slaves' emancipation, the Demerera slave rebellion of 1823 began. A young British protestant minister who led the local chapel was blamed for the slave revolt. He was arrested and sentenced to death. He died from pneumonia in his prison, his pardon by the King George IV having arrived too late ("The Abolition Project")

<sup>13</sup> The Jamaican slave rebellion started with the enslaved refusing to work. Meant to be peaceful, the protest soon escalated. The restoration of British order resulted in death of nearly 200 Africans and fourteen British overseers. Over 750 enslaved were convicted of rebelling, nearly 140 were sentenced to death. The revolt, and fears of another major rebellion, shocked the British and was an impetus for ending British slavery ("The Abolition Project").

oppressive elements of the novel. Thus, Jane contrasts the liberation those in the West Indies experienced to the suttee and the seraglio<sup>14</sup>, both of which Jane understands as physical and emotional enslavement for women and girls in India. (Ward 21). In connecting these experiences, Jane limits her missionary activity to institutions and customs that were constructed on presumptions of gendered inequality, not just racial inequality, and interestingly highlights her fluency in other cultural forms of gendered inequality.

This interaction with issues of gender was as much of a by-product of the missionary enterprise in India as it was of Jane's imaginings. Educationists' memoirs and interactions "demonstrate that gender and imperial identity were not always bed-fellows" (Bellenoit 81). Educators in India challenged prevalent gender stereotypes of the 'colonial masculinity.' Bellenoit defines this as a belief that "a degree of manliness was bound up with 'good learning'" (81). This meant that India male students were exposed to dominant and ideal forms of European manliness, which were often venerations of aggressiveness. Though this belief was reproduced in India, it was never absolute. Numerous missionary educationists contested the detrimental propagation of aggressive virtues that were often contradictory to the Hindu students' "humility, forgiveness, and gentility" (Bellenoit 83).

St. John embodies both the gender stereotypes of colonial masculinity as well as the Hindu students' virtues of "humility, forgiveness, and gentility." Classic feminist readings of St. John portray the aptly-named parishioner as a rigid and gloomy prototype of the English patriarchy. Gilbert and Gubar further this one-dimensional reading of the character. St. John, they say, "has an almost blatantly patriarchal name, one which recalls of St. John the Baptist" (Gilbert and Gubar 365). St. John is – in the vein of Brocklehurst – a patriarchal pillar, a "cold

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<sup>14</sup> Suttee (or sati) refers to the obsolete Hindu practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Seraglio is the living quarters used by wives or concubines in an ottoman household. The term 'harem' is more common.

cumbrous column” (457). Jane affirms this appraisal, understanding that though he was a good man, “he was hard and cold [...] as an iceberg” (456, 517).

Yet these descriptions of St. John are indeed one-dimensional and do a disservice to arguably one of the most complex characters of *Jane Eyre*, second only to Jane herself. Though St. John is “self-aggrandizing, manipulative, inflexible, and legalistic,” Maria LaMonaca suggests that these traits are presented as blemishes of an otherwise sterling character” (LaMonaca 250). His fault is that he is *too* good – he buckles under the weight of his own Christian perfection. His faculties, Jane muses, are not meant for the domestic sphere. Rather, “the Himalayan ridge, or caffre bush – even the plague-cursed Guinea coast swamp – would suit him better.” It would be “in scene of strife and danger – where courage is proved, and energy exercised, and fortitude taxed—” that St. John would speak and move (457). Indeed, Jane’s belief in St. John and his causes are illustrated in her willingness to spread the Gospel in India, despite certain privations.

In contrast to being a cold, cumbrous column, St. John is also describe as being: untiringly active. Great and exalted deeds are what he lives to perform [...] He talks very little, sire; what he does say is ever to the point. His brain is first rate [...] St. John is an accomplished and profound scholar [... His manners] are polished, calm, and gentlemanlike [...] St. John dresses well. He is a handsome man; tall, fair, with blue eyes, and a Grecian profile” (513).

St. John’s abundance of beauty is then linked to the gallantry of the missionary’s endeavor. He assumes the role of hero, embarking on labors that perpetuated the grandeur of God and the glory of heaven. St. John’s presence and labors in India construct the English colonizers’ image to be that of the superior savior in what Thiong’o coins as the “deification of the colonizer”

(Thiong'o). Often a greater romanticism occurred *within* the missionary himself – as opposed to external validations of cultural superiority – whose imaginings of the Indian reality were far from the actual reality. As cited by Gibson, one missionary in nineteenth-century England writes, “there [in England] my heart expanded with hope and joy at the prospect of the speedy conversion of the heathen! but here, the sight of apparent impossibility requires a strong faith to support the spirits” (425). Of *internal* romanticism, St. John can be excused, but it is important to note that Brontë does imbue physical characteristics to St. John that model this heroism.

Interestingly, whereas St. John's beauty is suited for India, Jane's *lack thereof* makes her suitable for India. St. John remarks that “God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife. It is not personal but mental endowments they have given you” (468). St. John imagines marriage as “the perfect combination of his vocation mated to Jane's physical services” (Gibson 434). Instead of flirting with the “Angel in the House”<sup>15</sup> ideal – represented in *Jane Eyre* through the rose of the English soil, Rosamund Oliver – he calls upon Jane's utility. He asks of Jane the martyrdom of housekeeping in India. He recognizes in Jane “a soul that reveled in the flame and excitement of sacrifice” (469). If his attempt to convert Jane to his endeavors is any indication of his outlook in India, he will surely fail; for he fails to convert Jane, his first prospect (Gibson 435).

Jane, ironically, has already – successfully, mind you—participated in the conversion of “heathens,” once at Thornfield and another instance at Morton. At Thornfield, Jane is set upon to correct Adele's faults, talking “great pains with [the illegitimate offspring of a French opera girl] (157, 166). Adele has in her a “superficiality of character, inherited probably from her mother, hardly congenial to an English mind” (167). Jane's efforts of civilizing the young French girl are

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<sup>15</sup> Coming from the title of Coventry Patmore's poem, the ideal woman was to be sympathetic, self-sacrificial, pious and moral. I further discuss this later in my paper.



successful due to a “sound English education” that Adele receives later from a boarding school (524). Likewise, in Morton, Jane successfully civilizes her scholars, “poor girls – cottagers’ children – at the best, farmers’ daughters.” As “the season of general holiday approached” As Morton’s “season of general holiday approached,” Jane exchanges farewells with her pupils, remarking that “some half dozen of [Jane’s] best scholars, as decent, respectable, modest, and well-informed young women as could be found in the ranks of the British peasantry” (452). As Jane succeeds in converting Adele to a proper Englishwoman, her labors in Morton also succeed due to the native virtues of the English farm girls.

In the proposal scene, during which St. John both asks for Jane’s hand in marriage and demands that she accompany him to India, Jane takes “a seat: St. John stood near me. He looked up the pass and down the hollow; his glance wandered away with the stream, and returned” (466). Like a conqueror and explorer of Brontë’s earlier writings, St. John surveys his surroundings, of which Jane is a part. He stands over Jane’s sitting form, claiming:

‘It is right to stir missionaries up – to urge and exhort them to effort – to show them what their gifts are, and why they were given [...]’ ‘If they are really qualified for the task, will not their own hearts be the first to inform them of it’ [...] ‘What does *your* heart say?’ demanded St. John. ‘My heart is mute, -- my heart is mute,’ I answered, struck and thrilled.’ ‘Then I must speak for it,’ continued the deep, relentless voice. ‘Jane, come with me to India: come as my helpmeet and my fellow labourer’ (467).

An examination of St. John’s speech reveals that he appropriates the rhetoric of colonization and slavery in his proposal to Jane. He removes Jane’s agency by speaking for her, pronouncing authority on knowing when one has been called into mission-work and saying it is his duty to

show what he believes and perceives. Similar to the intellectual then bodily occupation of India, St. John claims Jane's selfhood after claiming her voice and mind, saying:

'God and nature intended [Jane] for a missionary's wife. It is not personal, but mental endowments they have given you: you are formed for labour, not for love. A missionary's wife you must – shall be. You shall be mine. I claim you—not for my pleasure, but for my sovereign's service' (468).

In this moment, Jane becomes a vessel, worthy to be claimed and to work but not worthy to love. Though at first, it does seem as though St. John proposes “a life of principle [...] and a marriage of spirituality,” Jane would in actuality “replace love for labor” in a new servitude (Gilbert and Gubar 365). She increasingly realizes that to marry St. John and accompany him to India would be to “abandon half [her]self” (470). As his wife, Jane would

toil under eastern suns [...] accommodate quietly to his masterhood [...] should suffer often, no doubt, attached to him [...] my body would be under rather a stringent yoke [...] but as his wife, at his side always, and always restrained, and always checked, forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low [...] though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital (474).

In marrying St. John, Jane would be enslaved, imprisoned in the “iron shroud of principle,” and Jane would “enter into a union even more unequal than that proposed by Rochester” (Gilbert and Gubar 366).

As Jane draws sustenance and maintenance where she can, and performing educative mission-work in India would most certainly suited her. And though mission-work was a male action, a male sphere of service, Jane would have nonetheless crucially contributed to the mission-field. In areas such as India, “where wealthy and high-status families practiced female

seclusion and sexual segregation, male missionaries depended on Christian women to bring the Gospel to girls and women” (Midgley 339). Missionary wives were seen to provide proper feminine moral and domestic modeling for women of India. Because European women possessed a “tenderness of feeling, a depth of compassion, a quickness of perception, and a forgetfulness of self,” they were no less an instrument for God than their male missionary counterparts. This sentiment echoes the popular Victorian image of wife and woman, the “Angel in the House.” Coming from the title of Coventry Patmore’s poem, the ideal woman was to be sympathetic, self-sacrificial, pious and moral. Female mission-work interestingly blended the public and private sphere in combination of evangelical ardor and domestic relations. The vision of female agency within the mission-field was elevated in comparison to “heathen” women but still subordinate to male missionaries (Midgley 348). The vision of female agency in mission-work was limited; women often operated at the margins of society. That Charlotte Brontë did not choose to ascribe Jane Eyre independent agency, or a near-equal partner in the missionary enterprise, must then be a conscious, significant authorial choice. As the daughter of an Anglican minister, Brontë would not have disapproved nor dismissed the work of missionaries. Rather, her refusal is a statement of fear and a rational appraisal of harsh conditions, not of India but of St. John.

This can be seen in Jane’s understanding of St. John’s proposal, which she carries in terms of sacrificial death (Pell). Jane says, “If I go to India, I go to premature death [...] for the grave” (470). If she does accompany St. John, if she does make the sacrifice he urges, she will “make it absolutely; [...] throw all on the altar – heart, vitals, the entire victim” (470). *Unmarried* to St. John, the missionary endeavor would not grieve Jane. But she cannot “receive from him the bridal ring [and] endure all the forms of love [that are] quite absent” (471). St. John’s plan for

Jane to manage missionary schools in India is, again, an iron shroud contracting around her (469). As Jane asserted her autonomy in denying Rochester's attempts to bedeck her in jewels and place her on an unwelcomed pedestal, so she reaffirms her selfhood in refusing St. John.

As Spivak states, "it is not possible to read [Jane Eyre] without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English" (Spivak 243). In the practice of missionary pursuits, Jane is both, at once, a rebel against the imperial establishment as well as its apologist. Under certain pressures, she agrees to participate in educative mission-work in India. Yet Jane recognizes that St. John's labors are that of cold and harsh domination, not of love or liberation. In opposition to St. John's calling towards mission-work, Jane articulates an understanding of *her own* mission. She returns to Rochester, hearing the voice that "did not seem in the room – nor in the house – nor in the garden; it did not come out of the air – nor from under the earth – nor from overhead" (488). Jane's description and pursuit of the disembodied, "Rochester" voice makes clear that Jane's calling is *not* in India. Her calling, quite literally, is Rochester.

When Jane finds Rochester, she says, "I will be your neighbor, your nurse, your housekeep. I find you lonely; I will be your companion – to read to you, to walk with you, to sit with you, to wait on you, to be eyes and hands to you" (506). Rochester believes Jane endures these actions because she "delight[s] in sacrifice," which hearkens back to St. John's proposal when he says, "I recognized a soul that reveled in the flame and excitement of sacrifice" (518, 469). Yet the only sacrifice Jane's soul finds excitable is "to press [her] lips to what [she] loves" (518). It was not Jane's goal to "quell the 'tempo and energy of the universe,' but simply to strengthen herself, to make herself an equal of the world Rochester represents" (368). Unlike other colonizers, Jane does not wish to dominate or exploit; rather, she seeks to explore the hope

of an egalitarian relationship between herself and Rochester. She returns to Ferndean to simply perform what Rochester calls “Jane’s soft ministry” (519). In her “soft ministry,” Jane operates as a missionary *within* the realm of womanhood and domesticity. She re-appropriates the male noun, action, and sphere of service and subverts this ideology by acting as a missionary to a male, to Rochester. Yet, much like a liberated slave and much like the female missionaries of Brontë’s day, Jane operates within a narrow sphere of freedom. She recognizes her and Rochester’s equality, and yet she still calls him “my dear master” (505).

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