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Honorable Mention

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Intersectionality has been a legal and socio-cultural term since 1998 thanks to Kimberlé Crenshaw who put a name to the particular phenomenon of oppression. Her naming of culminating and connected marginalizations also provides an approach to address them. Nevertheless, feminisms that neglect intersectionality persist. The individualist feminist who prioritizes personal choice as the ultimate act of autonomy rarely evaluates the intersections of identity, even their own. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* presents a protofeminist protagonist whose choices to advance her own freedom often contradict the freedom of those who live and labor outside of white and Western society. She is free to marry for love while participating in colonial discourses and aligning with the colonizing mission. Liberation for Jane means the freedom of choice enabled by inheritance and fails to account for the humanity and freedom of women who are not white and well-connected. Jane's Western protofeminism illustrates how individualist resistance to patriarchy replicates and perpetuates colonial dominance.

Striving for gender equality by aligning with the colonial system of oppression and exploitation complicates the history of Western feminism. While intersectional identities mean intersectional oppression, they also involve "the presence and complicity of Western women in the colonising mission" as McLeod problematizes in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, writing, "Western women's relationship with the dual workings of colonialism and patriarchy is often particularly complicated as members of the 'civilised' colonising nation, yet disempowered under a Western patriarchal rubric" (202). While intersectionality suggests "double colonization" exists, it also suggests that Western women occupy oppressive *and* oppressed positions within their intersecting identities. According to a Western individualist approach to feminism, freedom to choose includes freedom to choose "the colonising mission" over intersectional solidarity.

Focusing on individual oppression of disjointed identities fragments the interconnectedness of colonialism and patriarchy such that this iteration of gender equality accompanies complicity in colonization.

Jane embodies this as she interpersonally and individually resists patriarchy in her budding relationship with Mr. Rochester by insisting that she be considered a fully human and autonomous person equal to him. She responds to his calling her an angel divisively: “‘I am not an angel,’ I asserted; ‘and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself. Mr. Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me--for you will not get it, any more than I shall get it of you: which I do not at all anticipate’” (Brontë 264). Her full self is not “celestial” and angelic but flawed and complicated like Rochester, contradicting the Victorian conventions of the angel in the home who serves as a moral compass and domestic labor force for her husband. Jane offers a protofeminist representation of resisting the gender expectations of her time while cheekily asserting herself to a social superior from whom she expects no angelic behavior. Insisting on feminine humanity and refuting gendered stereotypes portrays Jane as an individual resister to patriarchy in her interpersonal relationships.

As Jane continues to choose Rochester, she becomes more implicated in his ties to colonialism and colonial discourses in contrast to intersectional liberation. While flirting with Rochester and sexualizing Eastern women as sex workers at his disposal, Jane jokes “‘I’ll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved—your harem inmates amongst the rest’” (Brontë 273). In jest she positions herself as preaching liberty to the “enslaved,” wherein she is enlightened with the truth of freedom while Rochester’s “harem” women live in ignorance. Rochester’s history of colonialism is almost as problematic as the Christian missionaries’ is, therefore it is fitting that he draws her into colonial discourses that

perpetuate orientalism. Her Western feminist approach privileges her individualist framework of freedom without considering the culture or humanity of the women she presumes to liberate. Her choice to pursue missionary work is an instance of individualist feminism trumping intersectionality and participating in colonial discourses at the expense of other women.

Jane's joking comes to fruition when St. John earnestly implores her to become his missionary wife before he leaves for India. After being heartbroken over her failed engagement, she ponders "Is it not, by its noble cares and sublime results, the one best calculated to fill the void left by uptorn affections and demolished hopes? I believe I must say, Yes--and yet I shudder" (Brontë 411). Jane continues to assume Western aptitude to enlighten Eastern people, believing this bed fellow of the colonizer, the missionary, to have "noble cares and sublime results." The intentions and results of colonizing missions were far from noble and sublime, and what is worse than her romanticization of herself as a liberator is her motivation. Her choice to pursue the colonizing mission is for the sake of self-actualization and distraction from her "uptorn affections and demolished hopes." Jane comprehends and exercises her ability to consent to marriage proposals, yet she does not question whether the missions of the English in India are consensual, desired, or necessary. Her practice of protofeminist freedom extends to her individual choices as a Western woman and overrides the consent of the colonized.

In her rejection of St. John's proposal, Jane's agency as an independent missionary rather than a missionary's wife is meant to demonstrate protofeminist freedom. She chooses not to marry St. John out of her devotion to romantic love and believes "I was with an equal—one with whom I might argue—one whom, if I saw good, I might resist" (Brontë 414). Her gender equality and free consent occur on the presupposition that she is equally qualified to colonize India from her position of paternal authority. While she critiques an economic and exploitative

marriage like the one St. John is proposing, Jane believes that he is also “good” despite his ambition and insistence on a loveless marriage which would provide him colonizing labor. Ironic that this patriarchal exploitation is unattractive to her, but the colonial exploitation of India is a noble and sublime endeavor. Her freedom to “resist” patriarchy resides in the choice to reject his proposal to pursue the colonizing mission unmarried, an individual protofeminist act which perpetuates colonial oppression. Her individual choice still intends to support colonization and disregards collective solidarity and action that would truly lead to liberation.

Jane considers resistance, even that of others, on an entirely individual scale rather than as movements. She considers her privilege among the oppressed people of the world, thinking, “Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in a silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political ferment in the masses of life which people earth” (Brontë 111). Those relegated to silently carry the burden of oppression, their “stiller doom,” do so concurrently to millions, apolitically and internally. In her imagination the results of structural patriarchy and colonialism are borne silently, secretly, and individually rather than addressed collectively or outwardly in “rebellion.” Unsung and unknown rebellion ferments as though it strengthens and sours over time while simultaneously decomposing. Her privilege to name and write about her oppression is not linked to the ways in which their struggle is silenced. Their “stiller doom” remains disconnected from genuine liberation that would address their lived experiences, material conditions, and embodied identities. The greater oppression of others is mentioned only in the context of individual and alienated experience without collective rebellious resolution.

The resolution for Jane involves the inheritance of her uncle from Madeira, allowing her to freely choose to marry Rochester. Finally seeing him again, she impresses upon him the

removal of any barrier by reminding him, “I told you I am an independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress” (Brontë 442). She is both financially “independent” in general and from Rochester who would otherwise have financed her in their first attempt at marriage. She is her own “mistress” because she is in the position of the employer and head of household rather than an employee, finally equal to Rochester. All of this protofeminist independence which lets her choose Rochester stems from her inherited riches. Her inheritance is tainted by the tentacles of the slave trade which encased the economy of islands such as Madeira. Her individual choice to marry for love as an independent woman in Victorian England is a protofeminist triumph enabled by the blood of enslaved people an ocean away. Such individualist feminist frameworks center the freedom of choice without considering the implications of who pays for Western freedom with their own.

Her equality with Rochester which permits their marriage comes from her newfound power as a rich heiress and beneficiary of slavery, meaning her freedom comes with a cost in blood. Jane achieves self-determination only on the condition of colonial exploitation. Jane believes herself to be a liberator, but her power comes from imitating patriarchal and colonial dominance in her participation in colonial discourses, paternal passion for the colonizing mission, and indulgence in the riches of slavery. She must upset the hierarchies of society rather than ascend them to be an intersectional accomplice in liberation. This protofeminism that centers Western women and their individual choices fails to critique the patriarchal and colonial systems that perpetuate a logic of dominance and necessitate collective liberation.

Works Cited

Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Penguin Group, 1997.

McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. 2nd ed., Manchester UP, 2010.