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H Pacific Seminar 2

3 May 2010

The True Imperial Order

Imperialism as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary is “the policy, practice, or advocacy of extending the power and dominion of a nation”; this, however, does not define all of what should be the definition of imperialism. Jeffery Stone defines imperialism as “the control of the weak by the rich and powerful” (Stone 57). Stones’ definition is more adequate to describe how imperialism is seen in a negative context, at least by those who are not the “rich and powerful”. Caribbean-based texts reflect what we now know to be imperialism in the new world. Their accounts of the actions that took place and the thought processes of the people in the Caribbean during the

18th Century gives insights about the effects that imperialism had upon the different peoples of the time. Manners of racism, sexism and even isolation are described, though they were not yet named, and the authors whether by chance or purposefully reveal their own understanding of these in their works. In comparing and contrasting Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea,* the effects of imperialism upon all of the peoples involved is revealed, and the connections between imperialism, racism, and sexism are explored.

*Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe is representative of Britain’s imperialistic nature both in the events that happen to Crusoe as well as Crusoe’s own actions. The events that lead to Crusoe becoming stranded upon the island are because of Britain’s imperialism. From slavery to pirates, to becoming a cast away upon a deserted island Crusoe was subjected to some of the negative effects of imperialism. His misfortunes were due to his methods of seeking advancement. Participation in the slave trade, or in any sea trade, was what kept Britain able to function and run such a large empire. However, Crusoe’s own exploits into imperialism do not stop there. His own actions portray the imperialistic mind that was set into him from his culture.

Robinson Crusoe’s actions while stranded upon the island are a perfect example of the imperialistic mind set he had developed. Crusoe’s island, during the time of his isolation, slowly transformed becoming a miniature version of English culture. Crusoe implemented various aspects of his own culture when developing the island to make it more home-like as well as to appease his desire for companionship. He also went through various stages of development on his island. One of his first creations is his home, which, when he completes it is described in his personal log as his “castle” (Defoe 77). Crusoe continues to integrate his own technologies into his life on the island when he begins an agricultural adventure that includes taming goats, planting seeds, tending crops, and caring for a variety of different plants in a way to store them for later use. Crusoe also makes himself a second home purely for the pleasure and enjoyment of having a special retreat to visit. Probably the most profound way in which he imposes his own culture onto his island is the way in which he conducts himself to the other members that join him in his later years of isolation. The first person to stay upon the island with Crusoe is the Cannibal whom he named Friday. Crusoe immediately lords over Friday teaching him to call him “Master” (Defoe 273). This authoritative persona is broadcasted across to every person who comes to join his island, even when an English Captain is set upon the island by mutineers Crusoe is referred to as “Governor” of the island and maintains his view of absolute control over every life that enters his proclaimed territory (Defoe 355). Crusoe even reflects in the novel “I was king and lord of all this country, indefeasibly, and had a right of possession” (Defoe 131). Multiple times in the novel Crusoe calls himself king or lord and he even admits “it was a merry reflection, which I frequently made, how like a king I looked” (Defoe 319). Crusoe’s rule of his little island is in the same manner as the other colonies under Britain’s control. Crusoe’s actions and enjoyment of being considered a king of sorts reveal his desire for power. His actions are a small scale representation of Britain’s imperialism in the new world.

Defoe’s development of Crusoe revealed, whether purposefully or unintentionally, imperialism in the new world and even introduced some possible negative side effects it has. A second Caribbean text, however more directly confronts the issue. In Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea,* Rhys develops her main character Antoinette in order to reveal some notable aspects of imperialism. In the novel, Antoinette must spend her childhood separated from others around her due to her family’s financial situation, a fall from rich to poor, and because of the color of her skin. Living in Jamaica, Antoinette is forced to suffer the negative effect of imperialism from an early age by the ex-slaves which surround her. Earlier isolation was used to describe Crusoe in his entrapment upon the island, but more than physically, Antoinette is isolated socially and culturally even though she is physically surrounded by people.

The events that lead up to Antoinette’s eventual demise are in some way connected to imperialism. Antoinette was given into an arranged marriage to an Englishman from across the sea whom she had never met. Her marriage, though a common cultural practice for the British, was made possible by imperialism. Being born and raised in Jamaica, she was unaccustomed to many British traditions. Her forced marriage to this strange Englishman – whom we know to be Mr. Rochester from Jane Eyre – eventually led to her insanity and death. In her relationship with her husband we find an increasing separation and isolation. Being a traveled Englishman, he came to the new world to claim his prize, and its dowry, Rochester is symbolic of the imperialism that is ever present in her life. Although imperialism has given her a beautiful home in which to live in with her new husband, it has also taken everything away from her, as she tells Rochester after he has lain with another woman, “I loved this place and you have made it into a place I hate. I used to think that if everything else went out of my life I would still have this, and now you have spoiled it” (Rhys 147). The effects of her husband on her mind are devastating, Antoinette’s fiery “red dress”, symbolic of the passion of the Caribbean, contrasts violently with Rochester’s “colder, stronger” hatred that seals her away for good into her mind. Her final isolation is that of sexism. Sexism is a modern term for what was considered normal in her time, but the effects are still dire. Rochester’s control over Antoinette symbolizes sexism in a modern context. Even with only hate between them, Rochester controls her every move and isolates her from all others, eventually locking her away from the world to be forgotten except in her final act. Though not a component of imperialism directly, sexism was brought along with the British imperialism to the new world and was yet another aspect forced upon the peoples of the Caribbean.

May Lou Emery describes Antoinette’s position in the novel as being “exiled both culturally and sexually” (Emery 418). Emery limits her discussion, however, missing a larger meaning in Rhys’ writing; an imperialistic effect on these aspects. Emery describes Antoinette, and women like her, in the Caribbean as being one that is

Displaced from their native Caribbean, outsiders to women’s traditional domestic world and trespassers on masculine public territory, they walk the streets, not quite prostitutes, yet living on the edge of respectability, sanity, and dignity. (Emery 418)

Emery’s description matches directly with the character of Antoinette while under imperialisms grasp. She is forced to live a life exiled from all of the social groups around her. The men in her life treat her with contempt and force her into a position of servitude. The natives around her view her with contempt due to the position that her family held over them in the recent past and the racial prejudices that follow. The other white families view her and her family as beneath them due to their lack of money. These things insure that Antoinette is forced to grow up, shunned by all people around her; these are the things that are made possible by imperialism.

Both Antoinette and Crusoe experienced one major effect of imperialism: isolation. Isolation can be felt by all peoples, those who practice imperialism, like Crusoe, and those who are victims, like Antoinette. Isolation is seen in Antoinette and how she is separated from the people around her even though physically she is surrounded with people. Isolation is seen in how Robinson Crusoe is separated from everyone physically. Even when people join his island he separates himself through status; always keeping himself above everyone who comes to his island. The effect of isolation on a person’s mind has varying effects, but the worst possible effect is shown in Antoinette while the least severe mental effect is shown in Crusoe. Antoinette’s isolation causes her to literally lose her mind. Insanity found its way in where there should have been the comfort of communication and people around her. Crusoe on the other hand is able to overcome his isolation. Instead of insanity, Crusoe keeps his mind busy and creates comforts out of nothing to pass his time alone on the island. There is, however, one major difference in Crusoe and Antoinette. Antoinette is born into a society that has become separated by imperialism and is forced to live a life that she has absolutely no control over. She is a victim of imperialism. Crusoe on the other hand is a practitioner of imperialism. Being the imposing force, he does not experience the effects in the same way. Instead of feeling the insanity of isolation, Crusoe fills the void with a capitalistic mind set. Money and power replace what should be friendship and love; much like what Stone earlier suggested when describing imperialism: It is the powerful and rich which are controlling the weak and poor.

Crusoe’s example of imperialism’s effects on his mind is an example of a change in thinking rather than a complete break-down of his sanity. Crusoe exchanges love and friendship for money and power. Throughout the novel Crusoe never speaks romantically of any females, at the end of the novel his wife is merely a passing reference, and is not even mentioned in some editions of the novel. Instead of creating a modest life for himself as his father suggests in the beginning, Crusoe runs off to find his fortune. In doing this act of abandoning his family, Crusoe isolates himself from those who would love him. But because of his imperialistic mind set this means nothing to him. He is willing to trade family, friends and love for the prospects of wealth and power. His actions differ greatly from Antoinette’s. Not being part of the imperial mind set, her life alone is much different.

Antoinette is the ultimate example of the most painful effect that imperialism could have upon the mind. Her mind is taken over by insanity and she is unable to fill the void of love and friendship. As the novel progresses, she becomes more insistent upon needing love but sadly her mind slowly moves towards insanity as her husband and friends shun her. Eventually ending her life due to a leap from Rochester’s burning manor house, Antoinette shows how severe isolation can be. Unable to find love and friendship in the arms of her husband she is finally taken by insanity.

Another common element that both novels share is an insight into racism and racist thinking. Margaret Hunt comments on this subject describing how the slave trade and travel books from those who traveled the seas helped give rise to the popularization of racism towards Africans and natives. Hunts commentary describes how travel books of the time “reconfirm received stereotypes about the people” that they encounter (Hunt 336); “Travelers to Africa inevitable remarked on the nakedness and heathenish character of the Africans” (Hunt 340). She also defined what was thought of as the standard traveler for the traveling book remarking that “the typical traveler came increasingly to be a respectable private citizen … Defoe captures the expectation precisely that of the restlessly acquisitive figure of Robinson Crusoe” (Hunt 337). In this way we can analyze Crusoe’s commentary about the Cannibals he encountered and how this must have affected the way that the world viewed people from this region.

Crusoe made some of his own assumptions and remarks about the natives he encountered in the area that he was cast away at. In his first thoughts about them, in the novel Crusoe describes them as, “the worst of savages; for they are cannibals or man-eaters and fail not to murder and devour all the human bodies that fall into their hands” (Defoe 142). To this point in the novel, Crusoe had never encountered any savages and had no first-hand experience of their activities. Therefore, his accusations of the cannibal tribes in the region are completely hearsay and away of passing on exaggerated stereotypes of the natives. We find out later in the novel that they do in fact cannibalize humans but instead of devouring “all the human bodies that fall into their hands” (Defoe 142) as he claims, it is a form of a ritual sacrifice. According to Hunt, people like Crusoe writing some form of travelers’ book, “reconfirms” (Hunt 336) people’s fears about the natives.

Though dealing with different people, Crusoe’s and Antoinette’s racism experiences are parts of imperialism. Antoinette experiences racism throughout her life from the ex-slaves in Jamaica. The people of Jamaica call her a “white-cockroach” and tell her to “go away. Nobody wants you. Go away” (Rhys 23). This treatment from the ex-slaves of Jamaica is another of Antoinette’s isolations. The issue of racism is prevalent throughout the novel but more importantly it is also connected to the imperialism of the British. Britain’s thriving colony plantations were heavily influenced by the slave trade. While slavery was legal, the imperial minds controlling the colonies took full advantage of the cheap labor. The harsh cruel treatment experienced by the Jamaican slaves being shipped to the Caribbean, fueled their anger against the plantation owners who had bought them and is seen in the angry mob of Jamaicans who come and burn down Antoinette’s home as a child. The image of the parrot “all on fire”(Rhys 43) falling from the balcony is a symbol foreshadowing her inevitable future, jumping from her husband’s burning manor dreaming of “wings [that] might bear [her] up” (Rhys 190). Racism has also played a role in her death; as well as racism, sexism, and through them all; isolation.

The relationship between racism, sexism, isolation and imperialism is not simple. Imperialism, through its capitalistic nature gave rise to a fortune seeking mindset that is prevalent in the new world colonies. The immense trade industry crossing oceans and the forced oppression by the colonizing agents were catalysts to the view of African and Native American races as being second class. This racist view point was only aided by the fact that it “justify centuries of genocidal policies” (Hunt 345) in the Americas and Africa. Imperialism, in its ability to subjugate people under one dominant culture across great distances, allowed for sexism to continue and to spread to the new world. All of these things combined are what leads to isolation; Isolation from people separated by great distances and mentally due to race and sex. It is because of these things that people, such an Antoinette, lost their sanity, creating “violent order in disorder” (Emery 418) by escaping their fate of isolation through death.

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