

Contested Human Relations of Commodity Culture in *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Jane Eyre*

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Received: January 4, 2025 Revised: February 15, 2025 Accepted: May 7, 2025

Abstract

This paper examines the impact of commodity culture in human relations in the contexts of *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Jane Eyre*. The class differences as represented in the narratives cause the conflictual relations between the characters. The ownership of resources and exercise of power as the underlying motivations cause the divisions of society between the privileged and the underprivileged. In this context, I argue that commodity culture, the product of capitalism, shapes human relations in the selected narratives. The ideology of capitalism causes class differences as it promotes consumerism and converts human values and activities into commodities. The social identity, status and power relations of the characters are not free from the market driven cultures that value human activities as buying and selling products. Moreover, the class-based problems intersect with other social marginalization, like racism and gender practices. So, the study tries to address class contradictions along with the embedded issues of race and gender. To meet this goal, for theoretical applications, I draw insights from Marxism, feminism and Deconstruction. For the purpose of examining the differences in representations of commodity culture and class related issues, I explore the alternative texts, *A Tempest*, *Foe* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, of the above-mentioned texts. Therefore, the critical comparative approach is the method of study. This study is significant to foresee the alternative human relations that transcend the class binaries and critique the commodity culture. The key findings of this study are that in the selected mainstream narratives, human values, relations and labour are commodified as they are understood in the language of commerce. However, in the alternative narratives, such values and relations come under criticism for the better situations. Key words: commodity culture, representations, mainstream-margin, ideology, capitalism, contested and disparities.

Introduction

Human relations have connections with diverse forces of social organization. In the modern societies, due to the growing entrepreneurship and industrialization, the gap between the working class and the investors-class is growing wider. Consumerism and commodity culture under the influence of the ideology of capitalism are flourishing. So, money or the material possession defines human relations. In the literary representations, the influence of the ideology of capitalism remains no exception. In case of the mainstream narratives, *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Jane Eyre*, the problems of class relations are explicit. The clash between Prospero and Caliban in *The Tempest*, Rochester's authority over the servants at Thornfield in *Jane Eyre* are the consequences of class disparities and commodity culture. The master-servant binaries of these narratives have connections with class ideology as the dominant class subjugates the

underclass in the name of culture, tradition, religion, race, gender and others. In this context, the key questions to uncover the underlying reality of class contradictions in representations are: Why do class disparities get space in the mainstream narratives? What may be the ways to address the problem of class representations in literary narratives?

The constructive spirit of this paper lies in its attempt to explore the alternatives that defy the borders of classes and critique the ideology of capitalism that objectifies human relations. It reviews the alternative narratives to examine their points of departure from the mainstream narratives to transcend the hierarchies.

Since the class disparities intersect with the disparities of gender and race, collective approach is required to address them. For this purpose, I draw the ideas from feminism, Marxism and deconstruction. The study assumes that without addressing the ideology of capitalism, the efforts to bridge the class-based differences remain less effective.

Class Disparities and Efforts to Bridge Them

The ideology of class is one potential problem for study under representation. In the primary texts of this research, I intend to explore the connection between the authors the ways they represent classes in the narratives. I argue that ideology of class, like other ideologies, influences the authors. Therefore, they fail to rise above the class in representations. However, the ideology of class does not operate in isolation; it is associated with other ideologies, like imperialism and capitalism. So, it requires that interpretation of class relations is done in connection to them.

William Shakespeare (2012) in *The Tempest*, Daniel Defoe (2001) in *Robinson Crusoe* and Charlotte Bronte (1999) in *Jane Eyre* fail to critique the imperial capitalism. To critique these representations, Aime Cesaire (1991), JM Coetzee (2010) and Jean Rhys (1982) reconfigure these texts. However, despite their attempts, they face the limitations to rise above class politics. In the context of *The Tempest*, the author presents the relation between Prospero and Caliban in terms of class contradiction. In this narrative, the European master-class, Prospero and the non-European slave-class, Caliban speak about the author's ideological orientation. The author fails to rationalize this division between Prospero and Caliban. Shakespeare's role is crucial to make the decisions on the roles of these characters.

The Tempest is an example of representation that reflects the social division based on class contradiction. As in *Robinson Crusoe*, the master-slave division is explicit in *The Tempest*. The imperial economic structure shapes Prospero's views about wealth and ownership. His longing for the treasure of the alien territory is the reflection of the craze of the ruler to possess the resources of the peripheries. Prospero discloses that his brother, Antonio, conspired to possess the map of Prospero so that Antonio could locate treasure to own. This materialistic quest of these brothers is the product of the capitalistic economy that nurtures the dream to amass property to exercise power. This ambition is expressed in the actions of Prospero as he deals with Caliban. So, Prospero's role as a master in relation to Caliban is the growth of his ambition.

The master-slave relation between Prospero and Caliban rests on the division of labor. Prospero and his daughter rely on Caliban for their survival as he collects firewood, fetches water and manages logistic for them. However, Prospero claims that he is too good for Caliban, ". . . I have used thee, / Filth as thou art, with human care, and lodged thee / In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate / The honour of my child" (p.119). Prospero exploits Caliban as he does not recognize his contribution of labor. Moreover, he abuses him, "For this, be sure, tonight

thou shalt have cramps, / Side-stitches that shall pen thy breath up; urchins / Shall, for that vast of night that they may work, / All exercise on thee; thou shalt be pinched” (p.117). This brutality of Prospero upon Caliban illustrates the way the master-class treats the slave-class though the position of the master depends on the slave’s contribution. So, Caliban holds the right to question Prospero’s intrusion in his territory. More, his sovereignty is lost as he was independent to make the decisions about the uses of resources and the ways of living. Therefore, he sounds logical in his claim, “This island’s mine by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak’st from me . . .” (p.118). Caliban is a conscious slave who does not approve the foreign intervention. To safeguard his interests and nativity, he resists Prospero’s suppression.

Like the modern capitalists, Prospero aims to own the resources and control Caliban using both coercive and non-coercive strategies. In terms of Caliban’s exploitation, Rita Banerjee views, “Dramatizing a mode of colonization characterized by labour and temperance, it implicitly critiques the exploitation in Prospero’s colony” (p.293). He threatens Caliban to inflict torture for disobedience. Similarly, Prospero terrorizes him through Ariel with the magic power. Various noises trouble him. In this context, he is disillusioned about Prospero’s deception. He narrates how Prospero tricks him to take over the island. At the arrival to the island, he presents himself amicably but later turns out to be a foe. So, Caliban regrets for trusting this opportunist, “And then I loved thee / And showed thee all the qualities o’ the isle, / The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile- / Cursed be I that did so!” (p.118). This way, the imperial capitalist Prospero employs every means and tricks to rule the island.

A Tempest is an attempt to expose the class disparity and its impact on human relations. To critique *The Tempest*, Cesaire examines the limitations of Shakespeare’s narrative. Like in Defoe’s story, master-slave binary is explicit in *The Tempest*. The dichotomy between the ruler, Prospero and the ruled Caliban come under the scrutiny of Cesaire. Intentionally, Cesaire seems to uncover the impact of colonial economy on the colonized societies. Through Africanized Caliban and hybridized Ariel, the author expresses that the people of color suffer from injustice inflicted by the racialized economic relation. For instance, Prospero controls Caliban along with means and resources; he exploits his labor. The double oppression of race and class provokes a rebellious spirit in Caliban. So, he intends to take revenge against Prospero. He doubts Ariel’s soft approach for their liberation, “What do you believe in, then? In cowardice? In giving up? In kneeling and groveling? That’s it, someone strikes you on the right cheek and you offer the left . . . Well that’s not Caliban’s way . . .” (p. 22). To end the subjugation of the master, Caliban prefers the prompt, tit for tat approach, like Frantz Fanon’s strategy against the colonial violence. Though Caliban works as a slave, he is conscious about class-politics. He knows that Prospero relies on Ariel and Caliban himself for his survival. His awareness of social injustice perpetrated by Prospero motivates him to explore the possibilities for liberation. *Robinson Crusoe*, like *The Tempest*, represents the class disparity. As Bronte, Defoe constructs the narrative from the middle-class point of view. Therefore, Crusoe is the representative of middle-class, who under the motivation of materialistic gain, sets out from his English homeland. Crusoe’s socio-cultural background shapes his dream to become rich and maintain the upper-class position. Accordingly, he goes for a voyage to start his entrepreneurship. His materialistic quest is not limited within prosperity; it becomes the means to attain his political ambition. This ambition is reflected in his colonial role on the island. The author presents Crusoe as the lord of the island though Friday is the only human subject for him. The role devised for Crusoe as a master and Friday as a slave are significant because they expose the inherent structure of the British society that believes in class differences. It is the upper-class that controls the economic resources. So, Master-Crusoe is

positioned as a majestic figure who takes the ownership of resources. His role as a master is the manifestation of the impact of the ideology of imperial capitalism that nurtures the dream to be the master. Domesticated goats, agricultural products, like maize, guns and other tools are his property. Though Friday contributes with his labor, he holds no share for ownership rather should be grateful as a slave to Crusoe's resourcefulness and generosity. In terms of distribution of labor, Friday deserves ownership of his labor, but it is not recognized by Crusoe. Therefore, it is an exploitation of Friday. By presenting Friday as a dependent on Crusoe and latter's role as a savior, the author practices the biased politics of representation. To cite with examples how Defoe idealizes the role of Crusoe, Crusoe rescues Friday from the cannibals; he offers him food and shelter. He also teaches Friday how to shoot, cultivate crops, follow religion and do other things. Thus, it depends on the author how to shape the roles for characters. Crusoe and Friday are the illustrations.

Defoe creates the background of Crusoe from the economic perspective. Crusoe's plantation in Brazil, his attempts to bring the Negroes from Africa and his overseas-adventure for money are the instances that show the European interests for money. The quest for money causes the conflict between them and outsiders. So, the non-European societies have to pay the price both in economic and political sense. The European industrialists in the plantations exploit the African slaves. To supply the Negroes for plantations, Crusoe wants to involve himself in trade related to it. So, the economic enterprises and colonialism are interrelated as one supports the other.

To some extent, J.M. Coetzee, like Rhys, pays attention to the social division caused by the politics of class. He revises *Robinson Crusoe* from the perspective of addressing the problems of class differences. Coetzee foregrounds the intersected problems between race, gender, class and nationality. For this, he significantly modifies the role of Crusoe and Friday, and creates the additional character, Susan. So, he presents Crusoe with the weaker role who no longer acts like the imperial upper-class figure. Rather, his middle-class identity meets crisis as he does not hold the agency to maintain it. Neither he has entrepreneurship, like Defoe's Crusoe has, nor controls the means and resources. More important, he does not have an ambition to uphold colonial masterly position. Ideologically, Unlike Defoe's Crusoe, Crusoe's race and nationality almost remain unexpressed since he does not make efforts to justify his role on the basis of these ideologies. He stands simply as a symbolic figure of English society.

Despite the radical transformation in Crusoe's status, he still remains a master to Friday who serves him as a slave. However, Crusoe's futile work of making terraces without proper supporting tools shows that he is a master without meaningful project. He is like Sisyphus working in absurdity. Neither he owns guns nor possesses equipment. So, his position as a master is fragile that can collapse any time. Coetzee seems to question the master-slave relation by shedding light on the impact of colonization on marginal, like Africans, through Friday. He sketches Friday as a black slave without tongue. So, he is represented as a silenced figure who has lost the voice due to the colonial oppression and slavery.

In the context of Friday's exploitation, Jay Rajiva compares between *Foe* and *Robinson Crusoe* and uncovers that in both narratives, Friday's body is a site of exploitation under Christian-colonial project (p.3). Like Crusoe, he is a symbolic figure. Though he is free from the slavery, still dislocated from his homeland, Africa. Susan clarifies to the old man who asks about the status of Friday, "He is a slave whose master set him free on his deathbed" (p.107). She implies that Crusoe set him free as he died on the way to his homeland. Crusoe's death and Friday's liberation from slavery signal a political departure from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

because in Defoe's narrative Crusoe succeeds to return homeland, like a hero, who overcomes the challenges on the way of adventure. So, he is presented as an imperial hero who accomplishes his mission.

But Coetzee's *Cruso* dies on the way to home. His death symbolizes the downfall of the colonial master-class in the master-slave relation between him and Friday. Similarly, the author brings the two marginal figures, Susan and Friday, together as Susan needs to tackle gender and Friday has to do with race and class. They are the victims of sexist and racist politics respectively. As the ideologies of patriarchy and race collude, like in the case of Crusoe and Foe, the victims need the common approach to battle them. However, Susan and Friday differ in terms of the problems they face. The challenge for Susan is how to disrupt men's narrative legacy to shape women's narrative discourse. It means she has to fight the gendered role given to her. She is also sensitive to the impact of the ideologies of race and class on Friday. It makes her play the protective role to save him. Both are oppressed in one way or other. Probably, for this reason, the author places them together.

Jane Eyre is the production of the capitalistic society of the Victorian era in Britain. Like *The Tempest*, it fails to rise above the class politics in representation. It captures the 19th century rising industrial development in Britain and its impact on societies. For instance, Jane's struggle concentrates on how to earn money and become self-dependent. The author seems to connect Jane's success in life with her economic sustainability. Jane's middle-class background from her parental line fosters in her a dream to maintain that status as she loses that family status after her parents' demise. Along with the loss of her parents, she has to rely on others for survival. So, she falls under the care of Mrs. Reed, her aunt. Jane narrates the event, "my mother's brother – that he had taken me when a parentless infant to his house; and that in his last moments he had required a promise of Mrs. Reed that she would rear and maintain me as one of her own children" (p. 11). So, the author connects Jane's troubles with her economic dependency and guardianship on Reeds' family. Jane has to pay heavily for this dependency in terms of abuses she has to bear. Mrs. Reed abuses her verbally and her son assaults her physically also. She lives in trauma as she is locked in the Red Room where the ghost haunts. The aunt justifies such treatment for Jane's defiance of her guardianship and abnormal behavior. Mrs. Reed's concern for money seems to be the root cause of abuse of Jane by the Reeds. It illustrates that the author is under the influence of the ideology of capitalism that associates human relation with material gain and loss.

Class disparity is explicit in *Jane Eyre*. It reflects the middle-class perspective of the author. She seems to approve the social division based on the material ownership. She takes the master-servant structure under the capitalistic mode of production of 19th century as a normal phenomenon. For instance, in the story, Rochester owns several servants. His social prestige largely depends on the way he commands them within the periphery of Thornfield Hall. Moreover, the massive property of Thornfield that he owns defines him as a master in relation to his poor servants. His Thornfield site exists as a symbol of imperial capitalist-patriarch's oppressive domain where the woman, gendered subaltern, Bertha, has to pay the price. Therefore, Thornfield remains thorny for Bertha but for Rochester, it displays his pride. Similarly, he uses money to shut the mouth of Grace Poole who looks after Bertha in isolation so that outsiders would not know about secret abuse of Bertha. Using the economic privilege, Rochester roams to Italy, France and other countries to satisfy his desires. For example, he shares the memory of his heydays with Jane, "Provided with plenty of money and the passport of an old name, I could choose my own society: no circles were closed against me" (p.274). As a hedonist,

he hangs out with the foreign women. On the other side, property has a key role to diminish Bertha's position as a married woman. The property that she gets from her parents is one-sidedly owned by Rochester. She does not hold any property since she is tagged as a mad woman. So, the capitalists, like Rochester, use money to maintain upper class status and subject the underprivileged. Not only Rochester but also his family value money highly. For money, they accept Bertha for the marriage of their son despite her creole, Jamaican background. Rochester reveals that Mr. Mason "would give the letter of fortune of thirty thousand pounds: that sufficed. When I left college, I was sent out to Jamaica, to espouse a bride already courted for me" (p. 269). It shows what role money plays in the British society of 19th century.

Limitation with Bronte's presentation in *Jane Eyre* is that her middleclass perspective is reflected in the characterization of Jane and Rochester. She approves Rochester's views rather than writing from the marginal, Bertha's perspective. So, *Jane Eyre* complies with the main stream ideology. For instance, Rochester's master class position is the product of capitalist culture that promotes individualism and the domination of upper-class elitist over the underprivileged. The author fails to keep the account of the social forces that shape the Victorian society. Her narrative revolves around the middle-class man and woman mostly; she overlooks the class dialectics under the capitalistic mode of production. This lack of observation of social dynamism shows that the author constructs the narrative under the influence of dominant ideologies. In this sense, *Jane Eyre* fails to represent the voices of the under-class people of the British society. The romantic story of white middle-class lovers, Jane and Rochester, overshadow the socially pertinent issue of class disparity.

In *Jane Eyre*, the author portrays the human relations from the perspective of imperial Capitalism. The sketches of Mrs. Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst, Rochester and Jane show that the author is complicit with capitalistic values. For instance, though the author critiques the selfishness of Mr. Brocklehurst, she fails to critique him as the product of capitalistic society. He advocates for the reduction of material luxury to follow the path of salvation, but he does not renounce the luxury himself. He keeps the girl students in the missionary school; they have to remain underfed as he denies full meal to them. He argues that the contentment of food may lead them to luxury or they may deviate from the path of renouncement. Brocklehurst, a hypocrite, prescribes the rules of modesty for others but for his family, he approves the lavishness. Jane describes the appearance of the ladies of his family, "they were splendidly attired in velvet, silk and furs . . . the elder lady was enveloped in a costly velvet shawl, trimmed with ermine, and she wore a false front of French curls" (p.55). This evidences that Brocklehurst cannot give up capitalistic lifestyle. He uses the missionary project to consolidate his own power and luxury under the protection of religious ideology. Similarly, capitalism plays the role in shaping Jane's subjectivity. She struggles to maintain her middle-class background. Earning to become self-dependent gets attention in her narration. As the author focuses on the privileged class, she fails to represent the voices of the underclass servants. For example, Bessie works at Mrs. Reed's family. Likewise, Leah, Grace Poole and other servants that serve at Thornfield remain overlooked. The author takes their roles for granted; they are taken to serve the master-class. In the narrative, Jane's perspective dominates and these marginal characters remain under her shadow.

Though Jean Rhys critiques *Jane Eyre* on the issues of gender, race, nationality and others, she fails to address the class differences in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. For instance, Antoinette's middle-class background contradicts with her black servants' underclass positions. Christophine, the black servant, who supports Antoinette, remains in the underclass position throughout the

narrative. Though she speaks against the gender and racial suppression of the English man, it does not bring any meaningful change for her. But it does something for Antoinette. Due to Christophine's fearless expression and obeah practices, she is dragged into controversy. As an obeah woman, they want to arrest her. It is not obeah alone that determines her arrest rather her underclass position as a black servant does so. So, the intersected ideologies: gender, class and race are against her. Like Christophine, the author seems to take other black servants for granted for their roles.

With regard to the middle-class representation, both Bronte and Rhys belong to the same category as they focus on the interest of middle-class characters. Bronte promotes Jane and Rhys does to Antoinette. Both of these protagonists are from white racial middle-class background. Similarly, Rochester of *Jane Eyre* represents the middle-class so is the case with the unnamed man, husband of Antoinette, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It shows that Rhys also writes under the influence of the ideology of capitalism. To look at the further illustration from the narrative of Rhys, the monetary transaction determines the marriage between Antoinette and the English man. The man confesses, "I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks.... The thirty thousand pounds have been paid to me without question or condition. No provision made for her (that must be seen to)" (p.63). This testifies the bourgeoisie mindset of the man who undervalues the human relation under the influence of the ideology of capitalism. His immediate concern for the possession of money, but no care with other aspects, spoils the marital relation with Antoinette. Beside the capital, the ideology of race, gender and nationality influence the view of the man. Accordingly, he deals with them. Only Christophine can interrogate his imperial master-class perspective. No surprise that his expectations are as per the imperial legacy that tries to build the empire on the labor of marginal, like Christophine, Baptiste and others from the marginal societies.

The expectations of Antoinette's husband come in the line of European centralizing tendency. As they occupied the Caribbean and the African territories during the colonial era, it developed a colonial legacy that continues even after the colonization ends. The English man tries to uphold this legacy in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The subjected positions of the black servants in the narrative remind the division of labor during the colonial era since the Afro- Caribbean slaves contributed for the growth of the European economy. Even in the postcolonial society, as represented in the text, such exploitation still continues. *Wide Sargasso Sea* written in the context of 19th century captures the hostility between the White, former slave owners, like Antoinette's family, and the black people. Therefore, Antoinette's position differs from those who were once colonized. However, her present family status is no more like the mainstream, British white, as her husband, as she belongs to the creole family of Jamaica who have lost their power due to the Emancipation Act that empowers the colonized people. But from the perspective of class, Antoinette belongs to the middle-class as her husband, and the black servants represent the underclass who serve the interests of the former.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bronte depicts the class differences within the British society. The lower-class servants belong to the same nationality. With some overlapping, in case of gender and class, these servants' problems are different from the Caribbean servants of *Wide Sargasso Sea* because they have to bear the brunt of race, gender and others. Rhys's projection of the intersected problems illustrates that the colonized society has to face the additional problems than the colonial one.

Conclusion

The debate regarding the class representations in the mainstream narratives explores the possibilities to bridge the class differences. Comparatively, the alternative narratives, *A Tempest*, *Foe* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are more critical of hierarchal relations than the narratives of *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Jane Eyre*. Therefore, the alternative narratives give space to the voices of the marginalized, underclass women, slaves, people of color and non-European underprivileged characters. They can express their views against the suppressive social structures.

Despite the attempts by the alternative authors to be inclusive and subvert the hierarchal relations, they are not adequate to be ideal to meet the expectations of the marginal societies. However, the significant differences made in the revised versions regarding the dialogue between the disparities is commendable.

Written from the mainstream perspectives, the canonical narratives fail to rise above the ideology of capitalism. Binary of class differences between Crusoe and Friday, Prospero and Caliban, and Rochester and his servants uncover the influence of class ideology in these narratives. The excessive importance given to money and material possession by the leading characters of the narratives illustrate that commodity culture has impact on human relations.

The alternative narratives change some of the conditions and allow the marginal figures speak for justice and inclusion. Moreover, beside the class issues, they critique racism and gender by changing the identity of the characters and locations. The dialogue made possible between the master-slave/servant relations opens an avenue to negotiate between the differences. The narratives arouse hope to shape the alternative relations by bridging the gulf between the classes.

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Declaration

This paper is my original work. I have not sent it anywhere for the publication. If my statement contradicts with any evidence of doing so, I shall take the responsibility.

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