



VOICES OF THE SUBALTERN: A COMPARATIVE READING OF *WIDE SARGASSO SEA* AND *JANE EYRE*

¹Sakthivinayagam. C and ²Dr.Saridha.A

¹Phd Research Scholar, Department of English, Govt.Arts College for Men, Periyar University, Krishnagiri.

²Associate Prof & research supervisor, Department of English, Govt.Arts College for Men, Periyar University, Krishnagiri.

Abstract

This research article examines the textual representation of subaltern identity in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, with particular attention to the relationship between colonial discourse, patriarchy and the construction of the Other. It explores the dominant discourses operating within the two novels and examines how hegemonic Western ideology establishes systems of value that position colonised people as subaltern subjects. Both texts reveal how language participates in the construction of hierarchical power relations while also creating possibilities for resistance. Mr Rochester, in particular, represents an authoritarian masculine voice shaped by the intersecting legacies of patriarchy and imperialism. In *Jane Eyre*, the dominant narrative denies Bertha Mason an individual identity and subjective voice. She is represented primarily through Rochester's discourse and remains excluded from the possibility of narrating her own experience. In contrast, *Wide Sargasso Sea* re-inscribes *Jane Eyre* by providing Antoinette Cosway, later called Bertha Mason, with a voice through which she struggles to articulate her identity. Her subjectivity is not simply absent but is continuously constrained and reshaped by hegemonic colonial and patriarchal structures. Rhys's novel therefore exposes the ideological contradictions underlying the social relations and identities established in Brontë's novel.

Keywords: Subaltern, Female Psyche, Colonial Discourse, Postcolonialism, Bertha Mason

INTRODUCTION

Racism and imperialism frequently provided an ideological justification for the political dominance and economic exploitation of non-European societies. The idea of white racial superiority is based on a 'Manichean allegory' that establishes binary relations between the coloniser and the colonised, the self and the Other, the modern and the primitive, and the rational and the emotional (Mohamed 63). Within imperial and colonial narratives, such binaries enabled European societies to construct their own cultural values as superior while representing non-European peoples as inferior. The expansion of European capitalism further strengthened these relations through the movement of markets, labour and resources towards the colonial periphery, where systems of exploitation, control and subjection produced unequal relations between colonised populations and colonial powers (Mohamed 60–61).

The ideological justification of imperialism was frequently expressed through concepts such as education, civilisation, progress and humanitarianism. These ideas were closely connected with the political, social, cultural and economic structures of colonialism and patriarchy. Colonial discourse transformed racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference, thereby establishing a hierarchy between the coloniser and the colonised (Mohamed 61). Such discourse also reduced colonised people to objects of knowledge and representation rather than recognising them as autonomous subjects.

The dominant Western narrative similarly marginalised women, colonised people and non-white communities by representing them through categories such as emotional, primitive, irrational and inferior. Ania Loomba demonstrates how colonial discourse connects the visible and invisible, the dominant and the subaltern, and how power operates through language, literature, culture and social institutions. Within such structures, racism, colonialism, imperialism and patriarchy suppress the voices of marginalised subjects and place them in subordinate positions. The subaltern condition therefore



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emerges not simply from social exclusion but also from the ways in which dominant discourse determines who can speak, how they can be represented and whether their experiences can be recognised as legitimate.

The difficulty of representing the subaltern is further highlighted by the complicity of Western discourse in the production of knowledge about other cultures. Maggio argues that the “complicit nature” of Western discourse becomes evident in its engagement with different cultures, literature and intellectual structures that may present themselves as politically neutral while participating in systems of oppression (420). Gyan Prakash similarly observes that subalternity emerges “in the interstices of language, in its silences and obscurities, in its overdetermined proclamations” (1482). The subaltern is therefore produced through both speech and silence: while dominant discourse speaks about marginalised subjects, it simultaneously restricts their capacity to speak for themselves.

The fragmentation of subaltern groups also contributes to their political marginalisation. As Buttigieg argues, the “lack of unity and structure” among subaltern groups makes them “politically powerless” and prevents them from articulating a unified representation of their desires and needs (36). These processes are maintained through what Louis Althusser terms the ‘ideological state apparatus’, referring to the institutional and cultural mechanisms through which dominant ideological structures are reproduced and maintained.

These theoretical concerns are particularly relevant to *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In the figure of Mr Rochester, both novels engage with questions of Eurocentrism, civilisation, selfhood, racial hierarchy, knowledge and power. Rochester’s language and perceptions reveal the colonial assumptions through which he interprets Bertha Mason and the West Indies. His representation of Jamaica constructs it as an exotic and threatening space and positions its people within a discourse of Otherness. His recollection of the “fiery West Indian nite” and his contrast between the Caribbean and “a wind fresh from Europe” (Brontë 271–272) reveal the cultural opposition through which Europe is associated with order and the West Indies with disorder. Edward Said’s discussion of Orientalism is useful in understanding this process, particularly his analysis of the construction of the Other through Western projection and European expansion (95, 97). Rochester’s representation of Bertha and the West Indies can therefore be read within a broader Orientalist and imperial framework.

Bertha Mason and the Silencing of the Subaltern

The representation of Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* illustrates the relationship between colonial discourse and the denial of subjective identity. Bertha is presented through the narrative and language of others rather than through her own voice. Her identity is largely determined by Rochester, who describes her according to his own perceptions and establishes her as an irrational, dangerous and exotic Other. Rochester bitterly describes her in relation to her family and Creole identity: “Her family wished to secure me, because she was rich, and all the men of the family had gout and madness. Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard!” (Brontë 338). His description reduces Bertha to her family history, racial identity and supposed hereditary madness, denying her an independent subjectivity. Consequently, Bertha remains excluded from the narrative authority possessed by Jane and Rochester. Her silence is therefore not merely a narrative absence but a consequence of the power structures that determine who is permitted to speak and whose identity can be recognised.

Rochester’s description of Bertha and the West Indies reflects his own colonial perspective rather than an objective representation of either. His discourse constructs the Caribbean as a space of difference and disorder and associates Bertha with this imagined Otherness. Bertha consequently becomes a figure through whom racial, cultural and gendered assumptions are reinforced. Jane’s encounter with her further demonstrates this process of dehumanisation. Jane describes Bertha as “a figure, tall and large, with thick and dark hair, hanging down her back. I knew her by the red glare of her eyes” (Brontë 342). Her identity is thus reduced to an alarming physical presence rather than presented as that of a speaking



subject. Her representation as a strange and threatening figure reinforces the distance between Bertha and the English social world of Thornfield.

Jane's position in *Jane Eyre* provides an important contrast. Although Jane herself experiences social and gendered marginalisation, she gradually acquires a narrative voice through which she articulates her desires, conflicts and claims to autonomy. Bertha, by contrast, is denied a comparable opportunity. The distinction between the two women demonstrates how race, colonial identity and gender intersect in the construction of subjectivity. Jane's movement towards social recognition occurs within the English social order, whereas Bertha's Creole identity places her outside the boundaries of the dominant cultural identity represented in the novel.

The contrast is also evident in the treatment of female independence. Jane's desire for freedom is explicitly expressed in her statement, "I wanted liberty", yet this desire eventually becomes associated with a "new servitude" when she accepts the social and patriarchal structures surrounding her (Brontë 73). Bertha, however, is represented as violating these structures and is consequently constructed as mad and threatening. The distinction suggests that female identity is shaped not only by gender but also by racial and colonial hierarchies.

Antoinette Cosway and the Re-inscription of Bertha Mason

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* responds to this silence by reconstructing the figure of Bertha Mason as Antoinette Cosway. Rather than accepting the identity imposed upon her in *Jane Eyre*, Rhys provides Antoinette with a narrative voice through which she expresses her memories, fears, relationships and struggle for self-definition. Rhys herself recalled, "I thought I'd try to write her a life. Bertha is very much neglected in *Jane Eyre*." Her statement indicates the central purpose of *Wide Sargasso Sea*: to imagine the life and experiences that remain largely absent from Brontë's novel.

Rhys's reconstruction of Antoinette reveals that her identity is shaped by competing colonial, racial and patriarchal forces. She is repeatedly defined by others, including Rochester, Daniel Cosway and members of the Caribbean community. Her position is consequently unstable, as she occupies a marginal space between different racial, cultural and social identities. The name 'Bertha Mason', imposed by Rochester, becomes an important symbol of this loss of identity because it replaces the name and subjectivity through which she understands herself.

Antoinette directly resists this imposed identity: "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too" (Rhys 94). Her rejection of the name demonstrates that naming functions as a form of power through which Rochester attempts to control her identity. As Spivak notes, "the un-naming of Antoinette is the most important act of epistemic violence in the text" (Spivak 250). By renaming Antoinette, Rochester attempts to replace her self-defined identity with one that conforms to his perception of her.

The second part of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is particularly significant because Antoinette's voice appears alongside Rochester's perspective. The two narrative positions expose the difference between self-representation and representation by another. Rochester attempts to interpret and define Antoinette according to his own assumptions, while Antoinette struggles to preserve a sense of self against those definitions. Her voice therefore becomes a form of resistance to the discourse that has previously silenced her.

Rhys also complicates the question of Antoinette's madness. Rather than presenting madness as an inherent characteristic, the novel invites consideration of the social and cultural conditions through which Antoinette is gradually alienated from herself. Her displacement, unstable cultural identity, patriarchal marriage and loss of autonomy contribute to the fragmentation of her sense of self. The question is therefore not simply whether Bertha is 'mad', but how the dominant structures surrounding her participate in producing the identity of the 'madwoman'.



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In this respect, *Wide Sargasso Sea* exposes what is absent from *Jane Eyre*. Brontë's novel provides Rochester with the authority to define Bertha, whereas Rhys challenges that authority by allowing Antoinette to narrate her own experience. The two novels consequently reveal different relationships between voice, identity and power. Bertha's silence in *Jane Eyre* illustrates the operation of dominant colonial and patriarchal discourse, while Antoinette's narration in *Wide Sargasso Sea* demonstrates the struggle of a marginalised subject to reclaim identity from those structures.

Bertha Mason, Jane Eyre, and the Construction of the Subaltern

Jane's attitude towards Rochester demonstrates her gradual accommodation to patriarchal authority. Her eventual self-fulfilment, self-mastery, self-legitimation and agency are achieved only after Bertha's death in the fire. In this sense, Bertha's continued subordination becomes a condition of Jane's successful marriage and personal fulfilment. Jane's happiness is secured at the cost of Bertha's humanity and, ultimately, her life. Unlike Jane's identity, Bertha's subordinate identity is shaped by what Spivak calls "the axiomatics of imperialism" (Spivak, "Three Women's" 247). This is reflected in the various dichotomies established between British and Jamaican, good and evil, light and darkness, human and animal, reason and madness, legal and illegal, and self and Other. The representation of Bertha as a subjugated Other consequently reinforces Jane's self-realisation within the Western narrative.

Spivak argues that imperialist self-construction historically produces subaltern identities as Others from whom no culturally prescribed position outside the dominant structure is possible. The application of the category of subalternity to human subjects exposes the mechanisms of imperialism that deny the other recognition as part of the self and thereby perpetuate inequality, oppression, subjection and degradation. Bertha is consequently dehumanised and demoralised through multiple forms of Otherness, while her agency and personal desires receive no social or humanitarian recognition capable of challenging the hierarchies surrounding her.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar read *Jane Eyre* as a work of "moral gothic" (338) and a narrative of "enclosure and escape" (339). They interpret Jane's "fury" and "veiled defiance" as expressions of her struggle to move from the confinement of childhood towards adult liberation, identifying subjugation at Gateshead, deprivation at Lowood, insanity at Thornfield, and emotional detachment at Marsh End as stages in this process (339). Their interpretation, however, treats Bertha primarily as Jane's psychological counterpart. They describe Bertha as "the embodiment of fury" and argue that "Bertha not only performs for Jane; she also behaves like Jane" (Gilbert and Gubar 361). Such an interpretation risks reducing Bertha to a symbolic extension of Jane and overlooking the historical conditions of her Creole identity, racial marginalisation and confinement at Thornfield Hall.

This limitation can be understood through the critique of Western liberal feminism. As Gandhi argues, the "principles of imperialism are purported to recur in every feminist attempt to essentialise or prescriptively define the otherness/difference of indigenous female Others" (88–89). Bertha's representation in *Jane Eyre* demonstrates this tension. Even Jane participates in the dominant representation of Bertha when she encounters her after Rochester reveals the existence of his first wife. Bertha is stripped of ordinary human subjectivity; her presence is conveyed largely through sinister laughter, screams and physical violence. Her representation as a primitive or animal-like figure places her outside the sphere of human self-actualisation that Rochester associates with Jane.

Bertha's marginalisation is further connected to the racial and class structures produced through colonial discourse. Loomba observes that class differences are shaped by the ideological construction of race (109). At Thornfield Hall, Jane gradually becomes familiar with the household and develops positive relationships with its inhabitants, yet mysterious events repeatedly disturb her. She rescues Rochester from a fire in his bedroom and later awakens to find a "dark figure" tearing her wedding veil. The following day, the wedding is interrupted when Mr Mason reveals that Rochester is already married. Rochester then acknowledges that Bertha Mason, his wife, has been confined in the room above Jane's quarters. These events expose the representational framework through which Bertha is marginalised and silenced. She occupies the



position of the gendered subaltern whose identity is produced through the discourse of others rather than through her own speech.

Bertha's condition corresponds to Spivak's description of the subaltern as an individual who "vanishes, not into a pure void, but into a tumultuous oscillation that represents the dislocated image of the 'third-world woman' trapped between tradition and modernity" (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern" 280). Her displacement and marginalisation are historically produced through structures of power that privilege Eurocentric systems of knowledge, political economy and social authority. Within this structure, Bertha's voice, self-expression, self-awareness and liberation are obstructed, while Rochester embodies the authority of a Eurocentric worldview.

Brontë also subtly reveals the economic consequences of colonialism for the British elite. Rochester's wealth is connected to the plantations in Jamaica that he acquires through his marriage to Bertha, the daughter of a planter. Bertha is subsequently transported to England and confined in the attic, becoming an embodiment of the colonial Other within the English domestic space. Rochester explains his marriage to Jane through a narrative that presents Bertha and her family as morally and culturally inferior. He describes her as possessing "odious revelations," a "petty, limited" intellect and "excessive and immoral" behaviour (Brontë 270). His language repeatedly associates Bertha with negative characteristics and denies the complexity of her identity, cultural origins and personal history.

Rochester's marriage to Bertha provides him with substantial wealth, while Jane later receives an inheritance from her uncle John Eyre, a wine trader from Madeira. The economic well-being of the characters is therefore connected, directly or indirectly, to colonial networks. St John Rivers is similarly associated with British missionary activity in India. These connections reveal the broader presence of colonialism, racism and imperialism within the social world of *Jane Eyre*. Said identifies concepts such as "inferior," "subject races," "subordinate peoples," "dependency," "expansion" and "authority" as part of the ideological constructs associated with domination (*Culture* 9).

Jane is presented as an English woman and consequently occupies a very different racial and cultural position from Bertha. She resists several forms of patriarchal domination and refuses to accept St John's attempt to determine the course of her life. Nevertheless, her eventual union with Rochester takes place within a social order whose material privileges remain connected to colonial structures. Bertha, by contrast, becomes the figure through whom the boundaries of English identity are secured. Jane's description of her as a "figure" whose nature she cannot determine as "beast or human" (Brontë 258) illustrates the dehumanising effect of this discourse.

Rochester's account of his marriage further constructs Jamaica as an exotic and threatening space. He recalls a "fiery West Indian nite" and describes his inability to rest in bed because of the atmosphere surrounding him (Brontë 271–272). Jamaica is represented as an almost infernal environment, while Bertha is associated with its supposed violence, heat, instability and excess. Rochester claims that what saves him is "a wind fresh from Europe" (Brontë 272). The opposition between Europe and the Caribbean establishes the colonial distinction between civilisation and disorder. Since the representation of Bertha and the Creole world in *Jane Eyre* is largely mediated through Rochester's account, Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* becomes significant precisely because it challenges this one-sided representation.

Antoinette Cosway and the Re-inscription of Bertha Mason

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Bertha becomes the central consciousness of the narrative through her identity as Antoinette Cosway. Rhys provides the voice that Brontë withholds and thereby questions the colonial and patriarchal discourses through which Bertha is represented in *Jane Eyre*. The novel re-reads the subaltern figure presented in *Jane Eyre* and reconstructs her as a subject with desires, memories, fears and a distinct cultural identity.



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Antoinette seeks freedom from the authority of her husband, family, social environment and the cultural structures that surround her. She desires autonomy, love and equality, but her position as a white Jamaican Creole places her between competing racial and cultural communities. She is called a “white cockroach” and is told, “Nobody wants you here. Depart” (Rhys 20), while the expression “white nigger” similarly reveals the racial hostility directed towards her. Antoinette therefore occupies an unstable position: she is neither accepted by the Black Caribbean community nor fully recognised by the white European world. Her Creole identity becomes a source of continual displacement and uncertainty.

Rochester is attracted to Antoinette’s wealth but remains alienated from her cultural identity. His attempt to rename her “Bertha” represents another form of control over her identity. Naming becomes an act of authority through which he seeks to replace Antoinette’s self-definition with a name that suits his own perception of her. His treatment of her recalls the wider colonial practice of defining the Other from a position of power. He gradually transforms Antoinette from a woman with her own history and identity into an object within his narrative.

Antoinette’s narrative, however, contests Rochester’s interpretation of events. The unusual Caribbean environment that Rochester perceives as threatening is closely connected to Antoinette’s sense of self and belonging. She is culturally rooted in the Caribbean, whereas Rochester remains an outsider who does not understand its traditions, people or social tensions. His uneasiness towards Christophine and Sandi, and his willingness to believe Daniel Cosway’s accusations concerning the Cosway family, reveal the limitations of his understanding.

Antoinette experiences childhood insecurity, racial and gender discrimination, isolation, displacement, marital domination and a persistent crisis of identity. Her position as a Creole woman intensifies her marginalisation because she is located between cultural and racial categories. As her relationship with Rochester deteriorates, he describes her as a “pallid, mute being” and fails to recognise her as a subject with thoughts and feelings comparable to his own (Rhys 85). His inability to recognise her subjectivity becomes one of the central causes of their alienation. Antoinette herself recognises the impossibility of escaping the structures that control her:

No. And what do I care if he does? He hates me now. I hear him every nite walking up and down the veranda [. . .] Going away to Martinique or England or anywhere else, that is the lie. He would never give me my money to go away and he would be furious if I asked him. There would be scandal if I left him and he hates scandal. Even I got away (and how?) he would force me back. So would Richard. So would everybody else” (Rhys 102–03).

This passage reveals the extent to which Antoinette’s movement and choices are controlled by patriarchal and social authority. Unlike Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, whose thoughts remain inaccessible, Antoinette articulates the conditions of her confinement and recognises the structures that prevent her escape. Her speech therefore challenges Rochester’s representation of her as irrational and incapable of self-awareness.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is largely represented as a violent and irrational figure, confined to a dark room and deprived of a recognisable voice. Her expression is reduced to laughter, screams and physical actions, while Rochester and Jane provide the dominant accounts of her identity. Rhys reverses this structure by presenting Antoinette as a Creole woman whose experiences of racial and gender discrimination shape her struggle for identity. Her marginalisation is therefore both racial and gendered. Rochester repeatedly seeks to establish his authority over her through oppositions such as white/black, master/slave, coloniser/colonised, dominant/dominated and light/dark. These binaries reproduce the ideological structures through which the Other is constructed as inferior.

Antoinette’s perceived madness can consequently be read in relation to the social and discursive conditions imposed upon her. She is repeatedly defined by others, forced to inhabit identities that do not originate from her own sense of self and ultimately confined by the man who claims authority over her. Her destruction of Thornfield Hall can therefore be



understood as a final act of resistance against the structures that have denied her autonomy. Rather than representing madness as an inherent characteristic, Rhys foregrounds the conditions through which Antoinette is rendered mad, marginal and voiceless. Her final act becomes an attempt to break through the epistemic and patriarchal structures that have repeatedly suppressed her identity.

Rendering Narrative Authority and Voice to the Subaltern

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is the silent subaltern, who never speaks directly to her readers from the beginning to the end. She is ventriloquised by Rochester and Jane, who construct her identity through their own perceptions. Rhys, on the other hand, makes the subaltern speak. She disrupts this silence by giving Antoinette first-person narration, which is lyrical, fragmented and often dream-like: “There is always the other side, always” (Rhys 61). The statement reflects the novel’s attempt to present an alternative perspective to the one established in Brontë’s text.

The final intertextual balance and bridge between the novels is Antoinette’s dream of fire: “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do... I shielded it with my hand and it blazed up again to light me along the dark passage” (Rhys 123). This anticipates her climactic act in *Jane Eyre*, where she sets Thornfield ablaze and dies in the flames. The fire therefore connects the two narratives while also transforming the meaning of Bertha’s final act. In *Jane Eyre*, the destruction of Thornfield is presented through the established image of the madwoman, whereas *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides the suppressed consciousness behind that figure. Rhys thus reworks Brontë’s narrative by transforming the silent Bertha into the speaking Antoinette and by foregrounding her struggle for identity and agency.

Conclusion

The comparative reading of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* demonstrates how colonial and patriarchal discourses participate in the construction of subaltern identity. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is largely represented through the voices of Rochester and Jane and is associated with darkness, savagery, madness, and otherness. Her racial and cultural identity as a Creole woman is subordinated to the dominant English narrative. Her confinement and eventual death enable the resolution of Jane’s narrative and contribute to Jane’s achievement of personal fulfilment.

Wide Sargasso Sea challenges this representation by restoring Bertha’s identity as Antoinette Cosway and providing her with a narrative voice. Rhys exposes the colonial, racial, and patriarchal structures that contribute to Antoinette’s marginalisation and questions the assumption that her madness is simply an inherent personal condition. The two novels consequently reveal different dimensions of the same representational problem: the subaltern is repeatedly defined by dominant discourses while being denied the authority to define herself. Antoinette’s attempt to reclaim identity and agency remains constrained by the structures of imperialism and patriarchy, but her narrative voice disrupts the silence imposed upon Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. The comparative study therefore shows that subalternity is produced not only through material domination but also through the control of language, representation, identity, and narrative authority.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest

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