



# Redeeming The Feminine: A Decolonial Feminist Analysis Of *Jane Eyre* And *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the mechanisms behind the process of how Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* functions as a postcolonial and feminist counter narrative to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. It analyses the character of Bertha Mason, reimagined as Antoinette Cosway, through a postcolonial and feminist lens, offering a re-evaluation of her narrative and identity. While *Jane Eyre* depicts Bertha as a subjugated, grotesque "other", Rhys re-establishes Antoinette's narrative allowing her to reshape her own life story by portraying her as a subject of colonial violence, bearing the brunt of racialized oppression and rendered voiceless by patriarchal structures. Employing a multi-perspectival, intersectional approach informed by postcolonial and feminist theory, this paper asserts that *Wide Sargasso Sea* not only re-envision a classic Victorian novel but also undermines the foundational tenets of hegemony and androcracy. This research reveals how narratorial perspective, deterritorialization and cultural hybridity precipitate the transfiguration of the madwoman by decolonizing the self through a feminist lens, reclaiming agency and challenging hegemonic narratives.

**Introduction:** The figure of "madwoman in the attic" has become one of the most emblematic and contentious symbols in feminist criticism, especially in light of the seminal contribution of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). In Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Bertha Mason, the Creole wife of Edward Rochester, is depicted as a demented and savage woman confined to the garret of Thornfield Hall. She is an enigmatic, macabre figure whose erraticism juxtaposes Jane's stability. Bertha is a complex character who defies simple characterization. She is a subjugated character, the racialized subject as the marginalized "Other", and a metaphor for everything Victorian society attempted to stifle: feminine wrath, eroticism, colonial anxiety.

A century hence, Jean Rhys responded to this pejorative representation in her 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a reclamatory prequel that gives voice and identity to Bertha by bestowing upon her the name Antoinette Cosway and weaving a tapestry of trauma around for identity. Rhys's novel recontextualizes Bronte's story, from the periphery of imperial power, problematizing the intersectional impacts of coloniality that precipitated Antoinette's collapse. In this way, *Wide Sargasso Sea* dismantles the ideological tenets of *Jane Eyre*, through a process of de-stigmatization and empathic re-evaluation of the so-called madwoman and also

by critically analysing the socio-political architectures of patriarchy and imperialism that contributed to her marginalization.

This research paper delves into the ways in which Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* functions as an intertextual postcolonial feminist response to *Jane Eyre*. It explores the repercussions of female empowerment and investigates how the issue of race, gender and colonialism shape the representation of madness in both texts. This paper also seeks to elucidate the ways in which Rhys's narrative deconstructs established dualisms of sanity/madness, English/Other, and colonizer/colonized found in Bronte's Victorian framework.

By interrogating the character of Bertha/Antoinette through the intersecting perspectives of postcolonial theory and feminist critique, this paper asserts that Rhys excavates the symbolic, revealing its rich tapestry of psychological and historical context. By critically engaging with the theories of Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Gilbert and Gubar, this research examines how Antoinette's story delves into complex interplay of subalternity, racial identity and gendered trauma as manifested in the narrative. By doing so, the narrator not only subverts the established imperial perspective but also embraces the "madwoman" as a symbol postcolonial and feminist agency.

### **Theoretical Frameworks: Feminist and Postcolonial Approaches**

This research is underpinned by a comprehensive, multidisciplinary theoretical foundation that draws from both postcolonial theory and feminist literary criticism. These analytic perspectives unravel the intricacies of how Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* examines and rewrites the socially constructed scripts embedded in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Within this framework, the study endeavours to illustrate how Rhys reclaims the character of Bertha Mason now redefined as Antoinette Cosway, not simply as an emblem of patriarchal constraint but as a woman deeply embedded in the historical and cultural narrative shaped by the colonial legacies, racialized structures and patriarchal norms. The primary theorists used in this framework are Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

Spivak's pioneering essay, "*Can the Subaltern Speak*?" (1988) explores whether individuals facing multiple forms of oppression, particularly colonized women, can develop an independent voice within mainstream societal discourse. She contends that the "subaltern", a term for the most marginalized and voiceless individuals in colonial hierarchies, is frequently relegated to the periphery of intellectual discourse or selectively incorporated by dominant intellectual factions. For Spivak, even well-meaning attempts to "give voice" to the subaltern ultimately amplify their social vulnerability, as such voices are articulated through Western epistemological frameworks.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason embodies the concept of the female subaltern. She exists primarily in the narrative of others: Rochester, Grace Poole and Jane, but is never given her own voice. She is exoticized, dehumanized and locked away, both literally and narratively. Spivak offers a critical perspective on this representation, highlighting that Bertha functions simply as a plot device to foster Jane's moral compass and cultivate her romantic development.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys attempts to respond to Spivak's challenge by re-creating Bertha's voice as Antoinette Cosway. The novel illuminates her inner world showing how her erratic behaviour is not intrinsic but socioculturally driven. However, even in Rhys's narrative, Antoinette's voice is disjointed and wavering, reflecting internalized oppression. Spivak would likely assert that Rhys's Antoinette speaks, but never fully escapes the condition of her subaltern status. Her speech is subject to the constraints of patriarchal norms, particularly through Rochester's imposition of a new name and identity. Thus, Spivak's theoretical framework underscores the dual nature of literary endeavours aimed at amplifying marginalized voices, acknowledging both their crucial role in challenging dominant narratives and the inherent constraints that shape their expression.

While Spivak's focus is on the voicelessness of the colonized female subject. Said highlights how such subjects are visually and rhetorically constrained in the context of colonial discourse. Edward Said's *Orientalism* evaluates the way Western canon constructed the East or "Orient", as exotic, backward in order to justify colonization and maintain control. This depiction of the "Other" is rooted in a particular ideology based on individual feelings or biases rather than a neutral, verifiable fact. It is fancifully constructed, rooted in idealized notions and is a product of wishful thinking. Although Said's attention was directed towards the Middle East and North Africa, his theory has profoundly impacted colonial discourse more extensively, including representations of the Caribbean.

In *Jane Eyre*, the figure of Bertha Mason is inextricably linked to a colonial epistemology that constructs difference through the lens of otherness. She is characterized using feral and brutish imagery, portrayed as sexually deviant and racially ambiguous. Rochester, the imperial male, dominates her narrative in terms of contamination, derangement and precariousness. Her origins in Jamaica continue to exist in a state of unexamined complexity but serve merely to reinforce her "otherness".

Rhys's writing from the perspective of the formerly colonized, critically engages with Orientalist perspectives. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's world is intricate and politically charged. The Caribbean is not a wild, chaotic backdrop but a landscape of subjugation and resistance, carved by the chains of captivity, etched by the struggle for freedom and cultural hybridity. Rhys interrogates colonial discourse by reinterpreting the narrative to include the erased figure of Bertha. Said's theory elucidates how *Jane Eyre* adheres to colonial frameworks and how *Wide Sargasso Sea* challenges the psychological effects of being cast as the racial Other.

Where Said illuminates the West's framing of the Other, Homi Bhabha adds layers of complexity to this binary by inaugurating the concept of hybridity, emphasizing a more nuanced understanding of colonial identities than simply viewing them as fixed and monolithic.

Homi Bhabha theory in *The Location of Culture* (1994) provides profound insights for understanding colonial identity formation. He elucidates the concepts of hybridity, mimicry and ambivalence to emphasize the precarious nature of colonial power.

The term 'hybridity', refers to the cultural and racial amalgamation created by colonialism. Instead of being perceived as a weakness, Bhabha frames hybridity as a catalyst for alter ego, the madwoman who enacts what Jane must repress to survive in a male-dominated society.

While this psychoanalytical reading offered a framework for understanding madness as female protest or resistance against patriarchal constraints, it has also been critiqued for reducing her to a mere symbol rather than recognizing her as a woman with intersecting identities. Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be understood as a direct reaction to the constraint. She vehemently argues that the 'Madwoman' trope transcends a simplistic, singular interpretation as a symbol of white women's suffering but a real person who is a product of colonial structures.

Gilbert and Gubar illuminate the feminist perspective for this paper's argument: that madness is not biological but a socially-sanctioned deviance. Antoinette is not only a woman under patriarchy, but also a Creole under colonial subjugation. Thus, *Wide Sargasso Sea* reinterprets the madwoman archetype distancing it from a purely feminist symbol and reclaims her humanity as an individual shaped by the aftermath of colonialism.

**Discussion:** The figure of the "madwoman in the attic", has long been a subject of interest for literary intellectuals, symbolizing subaltern agency. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is characterized as a grotesque entity, immured in the garret and deprived of humanity through Rochester's narrative. Whereas, *Wide Sargasso Sea* reinterprets Bertha as Antoinette Cosway, a Creole woman wrestling with a fractured sense of self. This section delves into the structural and transformative dimensions of the madwoman figure, revealing how intersecting systems of oppression are interwoven through a postcolonial feminist theory.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is reduced to a racialized and animalistic caricature- "clothed hyena", "red eyes", "blackened face". By Rochester's articulation, her identity is defined not by who she is but by how she subverts the established discourse of English domesticity and patriarchal control. She is rendered voiceless, her story is told entirely through others, validating Spivak's claim that the "subaltern cannot speak". Bertha becomes a colonial subject doubly erased both as a woman and as a racially ambiguous Other.

Her madness is never questioned or explored. It is accepted as natural. This corroborates with Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, where the colonized are depicted as unreasonable and perilous to legitimize their domination. Bertha's presence in Thornfield possesses an agency that exceeds the constraints of the plot. Her presence is a symbolic act of colonial containment: hidden, restrained and ultimately destroyed.

Thus, *Jane Eyre*, in its articulation of Jane's feminist awakening, continues to participate in colonial erasure. Bertha must be sacrificed for Jane to emerge as the "ideal" English woman: sagacious, virtuous and self-reliant.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is an embodiment of literary retrieval. By lending Antoinette a tempestuous, fractured voice, Rhys erodes the foundations of Rochester's narrative and dismantles the colonial narrative embedded in Bronte's novel. Antoinette's crisis of belonging reflects Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and

mimicry. She lives in a state of liminality experiencing hybridity, where colonial identity is unstable and deeply ambivalent.

Rhys complicates the traditional victim narrative by presenting Antoinette as tenacious. Her madness is not innate but socially shaped and culturally mediated through treachery, estrangement and patriarchal subjugation. Her mother's deterioration of mental state, her loss of inheritance and Rochester's renaming and sexual repression, all precipitated her emotional unravelling. This reflects Spivak's assertion that colonial women's adversity is habitually exploited to advance Western narrative, often disregarding their autonomy.

Yet in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's voice is often mediated. Some scholars argue that this instability shows that even Rhys cannot fully restore the subaltern voice. Others interpret it as a stark testament to both pain and fortitude. Therefore, reclaiming the madwoman requires recognizing the erasure of female identity through the intersecting forces of colonialism and patriarchy and acknowledging the synergy of power imbalances and the confluence of oppressive systems.

The literary analysis surrounding *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been redefined through the lens of feminist and postcolonial criticism. Scholars have delved deeply into each novel through a gendered and post-imperial perspective yet scant number of studies have integrated both approaches to analyze the complex interplay of race, gender and madness in the construction of the madwoman figure.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) was heavily influenced by gender and ignored Bertha's racial and colonial identity. Bertha became a catalyst for collective wrath, not a historically grounded subject. Later scholars questioned this omission, highlighting how white feminist criticism often marginalized the racial and cultural specificity of non-western women.

While extensive academic inquiry has been conducted on *Jane Eyre* as a feminist text and *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a postcolonial response, a limited number of studies have integrated both approaches to explore the complex ways gender and colonialism intertwine in shaping the madwoman figure. Feminist readings commonly focus on Jane's empowerment while overlooking the marginalization and exclusion of Bertha and postcolonial readings of Rhys frequently presume that Antoinette's vocal agency is completely restored. Although Antoinette is granted agency yet her voice was subsumed by Rochester's narration. This research paper addresses this gap by arguing that the madwoman's broken voice can be read not as a narrative failure but as a conscious effort to dismantle existing power structures.

## CONCLUSION

This research has scrutinized the representation of the madwoman in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* through a decolonial feminist perspective, highlighting gendered disenfranchisement. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason functions not only as a symbol of suppressed frustration, as early feminist scholarship emphasized but also as a marginalized individual whose dehumanization facilitates the heroine's emancipation. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* tackles this portrayal by bestowing Antoinette a backstory, emotional depth and a



fragmented voice, thereby exposing the imperialist foundations of Bronte's narrative and re-evaluation of the meaning of feminist triumph.

Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Spivak, Said and Bhabha, this paper has demonstrated the interplay of identity, voice and agency within the framework of domination. Spivak's concept of subaltern demonstrates how Antoinette where resistance echoes in the void, while Bhabha's notions of mimicry and hybridity exhibits how imperial subjects are forced into unstable and ruptured identities. Edward Said's examination of narrative power and representation further highlight how Antoinette's story is illuminated through Rochester's rhetoric, questioning the efficacy of the reclamation.

This research posits that Antoinette's disjointed voice rather than representing a deterioration, represents a powerful form of resistance, one that refuses to conform to the coherent logic mandated by imperial and male-dominated discourse. Through a critical rereading of both *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* from an intersectional postcolonial feminist perspective, this paper advances our understanding of recognizing and reframing the marginalized voices which were excluded from the mainstream discourse.

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