
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea: Identity in postcolonial analyses and literature

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ABSTRACT

Colonial literature established lopsided cultural hierarchies by portraying the West as civilized, rational, and morally superior to the colonized who were represented as violent, irrational, and culturally inferior to the former. Rigid dividing lines created by such hegemonic discourse made essential the construction of identities amidst racial and gendered power structures. Dominant western narratives reinforced exclusion and power imbalances by silencing, stereotyping, and relegating minorities to marginal roles. This study draws on Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subaltern silencing (1988) to examine how hegemonic discourse operates in Charlotte Bronte representation of Bertha Mason as a racialized and violent Other in her 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*. It also analyzes how the narrative authority is manipulated to construct an imperial reading of Bertha as an irrational and uncivilized character. Further, the study explores how Jean Rhys reconfigures this representation by restoring historical, racial, and gendered context to Bertha reimagined as Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). It examines the role of narrative revision and postcolonial feminist critique in the novel to expose the play of race and gender in the formation of fractured identities shaped by colonial history. The study concludes with a critical reflection on the possibilities and limitations of postcolonial resistance, questioning whether narrative rewriting can fully dismantle hegemonic discourse or whether it remains structurally linked to the canon it seeks to challenge.

KEYWORDS

Postcolonial Identity, Hegemonic Discourse, Colonial Binary Opposition, Narrative Rewriting, Intersection of Race and Gender, Subaltern Silencing

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1. Introduction

Identity which is an important construct in the definition of the individual and society is neither innate nor fixed in the context of colonialism and postcolonialism, it is rather manipulated by power and domination. Colonial ideology also affects the way cultures are appreciated, categorized, and divided by hierarchically juxtaposing one group against the other. Consequently, identity comes to be closely linked with political power and cultural governance (Shcherbak, 2019). Hegemonic discourse is the set of prevailing notions and opinions that define social reality. In colonial history, hegemonic discourse is the barest in depiction of westerners as civilized, rational, morally superior against the colonized as primitive, violent, and uncivilized. Such a dichotomy between the West and the Other creates nominal and essentialized identities. These divisions break down complex cultures into simple ones and reduce people to negative stereotypes (Rana, 2021).

According to postcolonial theorists, these representations are not accidental but are a means to justify colonialism. As an illustration, Said in *Orientalism* expounds how the West constructs the image of non-West as weak to assert its dominance. Likewise, Spivak stresses that silencing of the marginalized groups predominantly occurs in the domain of the majoritarian systems of knowledge. Such views demonstrate how literary representation shapes identity while discourse controls it (Al-shamiri, 2016). It is in literature that such power structures are repeated and strengthened. Literary works of the West cast characters from colonized

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or minority groups in colonial stereotypes. Such texts usually disenfranchise and disempower these characters through characterization and narrative control. Thus, literary analysis can expose how the hegemonic ideology functions in cultural production (Hamadi, 2014).

Meanwhile, postcolonial authors oppose and counter these representations. They seek to recreate identities by re-telling stories and re-evaluating the marginal characters to give a voice to the oppressed. This opposition places great value in voice, agency, and self-representation in redefinition of cultural identity. Postcolonial literature can therefore be used as an instrument to challenge fixed and watertight categories in characterization (Connell, 2003). Colonial identity and postcolonial resistance have been central themes in literary discourse where colonial power structures shape and define identities. Western discourse tends to portray colonized people as less human which postcolonial writers refute. Breaking down these binaries, *Wide Sargasso Sea* catalogs the rising of a marginalized character against the hegemonic forces (Azam, 2017). Racial and cultural stereotypes shape identities through hierarchical binaries and voice suppression. Postcolonial analysis in *Jane Eyre* bares these dichotomies in identity construction, while postcolonial literature such as *Wide Sargasso Sea* reclaims suppressed voices and addresses core problems such as manufactured identity, voice, silence, and binary opposition.

This research aims to discuss how *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* portray colonial identity and postcolonial resistance respectively. It examines how colonial power structures affected racial and gender identity, creating set stereotypes of the Other. The study focuses on the revision of narratives and challenges colonial binaries. Through the characters of Bertha Mason and Antoinette Cosway, the study brings out different aspects of racial and gender oppression in the colonial and postcolonial discourse to understand the role of literature in shaping identity and power.

2. Hegemonic Discourse and its Representation in Western Literature

Postcolonial theorists examined the depiction of non-Western identities in Western literature and their hegemonic position in cultural production which operated through language, narrative and representation in addition to political and economic control. Western literature promoted and sustained colonial ideology to build and reinforce hierarchical divisions between the uncivilized Other and civilized West. It also assisted in normalizing colonial oppression and alienation of identities of the colonized. These depictions deeply impacted readers while legitimizing the unequal distribution of powers in hegemonic discourse of the West that projected the West as rational and civilized at the expense of the colonial Other. Based on Said's Orientalism, the study demonstrates that colonial literary representation reinforces imperial stereotypes and justifies concentration of power. The idea of subaltern silencing proposed by Spivak also describes deprivation of the marginalized subjects through control of the narrative voice and denial of the right to define themselves. Bertha Mason as the Other in *Jane Eyre* is racialized and gendered, a prisoner physically as well as discursively. Her personality denotes the interplay of race and patriarchy as the sources of colonial identity. The totality of hegemonic identities of such characters necessitates breaking of the rigid binaries and reclaiming of the repressed identities by postcolonial critique.

- **Said's Theory of Orientalism**

Said's *Orientalism* can offer background knowledge on how the West created the East as the Other through diverse forms of cultural production: literature, art, and scholarship, among others, in the context of colonialism and postcolonialism. Said has suggested that the idea of Orientalism was not merely a subject matter of study, but it was a discourse that systematically demonstrated the inferiority, irrationality, and violence of an exotic East. This construction helped create an easy dichotomy between the West that was rational, progressive and morally better versus the East that was chaotic, backward, and direly in need of western civilizing influence.

The binary oppositions that such representations formed were firmly embedded in the texts of that time. These were not objective and neutral texts, but texts that served to strengthen the colonial rule through justification of domination of non-Western societies. Projection of the East as violent and uncivilized in colonial discourse gave the West the mission to bring order, discipline, and progress to the Other. This structure caused the non-Western identities to be inherently inferior and aligned them as the opposite of the Western which was an ideal (Rais, 2025).

These representations are manifested in literature in colonized characters and space where colonial stereotypes are reproduced and the identities of the colonized are confined to inflexible, dehumanized categories. This colonial viewpoint lies prominently at the forefront in *Jane Eyre* in Bertha's representation as a violent, irrational person deserving of confinement in the attic, an essentialized stereotype of the Other whose marginalization is justified in the narrative. Such representations, as Said states, are not only literary devices, but also the means of sustaining colonial hierarchies and power structures with long-term effects on the image of colonized peoples both in literature and in the discourses of society at large (Salih, 2017).

- **Spivak's "Silencing the Other"**

Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* examines the muting of the oppressed by colonial agency and more specifically, the colonized women. Subaltern-ism is a notion of the marginalized in the power structures. Spivak states that the subaltern does not possess the right of speaking in the dominant western discourse. And when they do speak, their voices are distorted by those in positions of power even who distort their experiences to relegate them to the realm of the inconsequential.

The emerging dynamic contributes to imaginary colonial binaries in which the West is placed in the authoritative role of the speaking subject while the colonized people are silent and objectified. Spivak points out that there is no such thing as a neutral representation and it is a kind of epistemic violence which governs knowledge production. The colonial muting of the colonized, then, not only produces skewed identities but also strengthens the hegemony of the Western discourse. This keeps the hierarchies of the colonizers in place and shuns the voices of the really oppressed to redefine themselves (Ilie, 2025).

- **Case Study: *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte**

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is one of the main examples of hegemonic discourse in Western literature, she is a Creole wife of Mr. Rochester. Bertha comes across as a mentally unbalanced and violent character, whose behaviors are often described in animal-themed words, a possessor of unmanageable fury and havoc, one fit to be locked up in the attic. In the course of the novel, Bertha is not introduced as a complicated character but as an embodiment of the moral and social disturbance which is subtly indicated as being symptomatic of the colonized (Akman, 2019). Such a depiction can be traced to the colonial stereotype of the madwoman in the attic, the character that is commonly associated with racial and cultural otherness, a figure that supports the picture of the colonized as irrational and dangerous.

The Creole identity of Bertha is another aspect that associates her with colonial spaces which means that the character is foreign and belongs to the racialized Other. This is the location that links Bertha with the Caribbean colonies, a place viewed by the Western colonial mindset as disorderly and barbarous. She is a stark contrast to Jane Eyre, a person who possesses the English principles of rationality, morality, and self-discipline, as well as the ideals of Western civilization. By so doing, the character of Jane ends up being a representation of order, whereas Bertha is the supposed chaos of the colonized world. This dichotomy between Jane and Bertha represents the larger colonial distrust of the Others and is used by them to justify imperialism. Representing Bertha as a perilous Other strengthens the colonial myth of Western civilization as being stable while the colonies are projected as wild, dangerous, and requiring taming (Mardorossian, 2006).

- **Bertha Mason as the 'Other' and the Construction of Binary Identities**

Bertha represents a perfect contrast of civilization and savagery and is a clear example of the colonial Other. Whereas Jane Eyre is presented as stifled, upright, and sensible, Bertha is presented as luxurious, sensual, and disorderly, which supports a chain of command with the Western identity being portrayed as stable and in charge. The juxtaposition between Jane and Bertha makes the former a desirable, civilized woman and the latter a disorderly, hysterical Other that cannot be contained within the limits of the Western standards.

The depiction of Bertha as violently irrational is carried out without an attempt to examine social, cultural or historical forces that could be behind her actions. Her isolation in the attic figuratively reflects her social marginalization, the alienation and subjugation of the colonial Other, an element that has the potential to upset the desirable status quo of Western culture (Mrenmoi, 2022).

Further, Bertha's lack of a narrative voice further emphasizes her role as a marginalized figure, in typical 'subaltern' fashion. She does not narrate herself; rather her deeds and personality are viewed through other people's standpoint, mainly of Mr. Rochester and Jane. This silence adds to her objectification and silencing thus making her representative of oppressed subjects in the discourse of colonization. The methods of narration used in her representation end up becoming the means of enforcing stabilized, dehumanizing classifications of identity so that the colonial Other could be reduced to a subordinate, helpless state (Su, 2023).

- **Implications for Gender and Race**

Race and gender intersect in colonial discourse, and this contributes immensely to the characterization of Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. Being a Creole woman, Bertha has a peripheral role that is characterized by racial disparity as well as dominance of the male society. The fact that her racial identity is Creole implies that Bertha is beyond the scope of what was considered civilized under Western ideology. Her gender inferiority is augmented by her race whereby being a woman and Creole in a Western, patriarchal community automatically implies her dependence. Her subordination is fully achieved by the second marriage of Mr. Rochester which deprives her of identity and status as a wife, laying the foundation of her marginalization in the hierarchy of races as well as sexes.

The racial identity of Bertha is reflected as the main factor of perceived inferiority and insanity. Her Creole belonging connects Bertha to colonial countries, which makes her foreign and a potent threat to the English society. Violent outburst and instability are usually associated with the racialized identity, supporting the stereotype of colonized subjects as disorderly and irresponsible. This racialization continues to increase marginalization and is a crucial factor in the characterization of an unstable and dangerous figure (Pearsall, 2020).

Also, gender further complicates Bertha's oppression. Not only her race, her gender is an equal limitation in a society where women anyway have little freedom. The use of the attic as the setting represents the larger oppression of the women that fail to meet the ideals of femininity. Bertha classically represents functioning of the hegemonic discourse on racial and gender grounds to create fixed, hierarchical, and exclusionary identities. Bertha's character shows how colonialism and patriarchy come together and form the identity of colonized women. Failure to fit into racial and gendered roles reinforces Bertha's status as a foreigner. This intersectional oppression highlights the discrimination by hegemonic discourse not only on the basis of race but also accentuates oppression based on gender, producing complex systems of marginalization of people like Bertha (Seshagiri, 2006).

3. Resistance to the Hegemonic Discourse: *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) was a significant incursion into the colonial literary discourse. Since the novel is a prequel of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, Rhys took up the hidden figure of Bertha in the novel again and presented her as a Creole woman in the Caribbean who was already a victim of the horrors of slavery, racial strife as well as oppression by men. In so doing in this rewriting, Rhys revealed the hegemonic Western discourse that had made Bertha irrational, savage, and voiceless. The novel was not merely an addition to the Victorian text, but also a direct contention of its colonial suppositions.

- **Rewriting Colonial Narratives**

One of the main resistance acts of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is that it recreates the character of Bertha portrayed in *Jane Eyre*. In Bronte's novel, Bertha is a seemingly meaningless, monstrous character who lives in the attic, whose description is fragmented and dehumanized as it is put together with the help of metaphors. The character is depicted as a marker of anarchy and insanity and is just a racialized Other who interferes with the social order. Bertha has little back story and little psychological depth and is a facet of the plot which underlines colonial stereotypes. However, *Wide Sargasso Sea* changes the setting to the Caribbean and introduces the childhood of Antoinette Cosway, her family history, and the mental disruption that occurred throughout her life. Rhys criticizes the reductionist portrayal of Bertha by offering this backdrop. Antoinette is unstable not by nature but is depicted to be so as a result of racial hatred, displacement, economic hustles, and betrayal. Far from being irrational and unexplainable, these are complicated factors that lead to her mental deterioration (Maurel, 2002).

Rhys's revision reveals the objectification of people in *Jane Eyre* as Bertha is turned into a colonial icon. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a criticism of the racist and imperialistic conceptualization of *Jane Eyre*, demonstrating that identity is a product of historical and social environments, and not the selective colonial discourse. Rhys reclaims the story and dismantles the authority of the Western canonical narrative, offering a more nuanced, complex understanding of identity (Geetha, 2013).

- **Constructing Agency for Bertha**

Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is given a narrative voice unlike Bertha in *Jane Eyre*. Moreover, by using more than one viewpoint, the former gives the readers a chance to get first-hand access to Antoinette's thoughts, fears, and desires. This transformation brought back subjectivity to a character that was turned into an object of fear.

Even though Antoinette was finally restricted, her voice was a form of resistance in the entire novel. She doubted the powers of Rochester, criticized his renaming of her to be called Bertha, and was conscious of her cultural displacement. The naming procedure was symbolic in terms of colonial domination since Rochester was trying to re-invent her identity along English standards by the act of naming her. The force of totalitarianism of patriarchal and colonial dominance was shattered because the voice of Antoinette, though fragmented, went against the system (Mzeil, 2013).

- **Intersection of Race and Gender**

Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* explores identity as it is shaped by the interplay of gender and racial systems in a colonial society. Antoinette, a white Creole female of the post-liberation Jamaica stands in a precarious racial pool amidst the colonial order. White Creole identity does not guarantee complete acceptance of the Black Caribbean communities or even acknowledgment by the English metropolitan class. This racial ambiguity generates a social displacement and cultural isolation that set the Creole identity in a liminal zone between colonizer and colonized. Gendered colonialism, economic possession, sexual domination, and psychological authority reinforce lack of autonomy and opportunities for definition of self. Marginalization is a dual phenomenon whereby culture is produced as inferior due to race and marginalization. Moreover, dependency due to legal and marital

subordination are enforced by colonial ideology and patriarchy respectively. Rhys divulges the coinciding functioning of these systems that amplify exclusion and fragmentation of identities. Racial unrest in the colonial system and patriarchal inhibition interplay to create mental displacement and disenfranchisement. The novel hence reveals how colonialism intersects with patriarchy in the formation of fractured identities in postimperial society (Taib & Dizayi, 2023).

- **Postcolonial Feminist Perspective**

Wide Sargasso Sea has been extensively understood in postcolonial feminist framework since it challenges the imperial ideology as well as patriarchal rule. Rhys breaks colonial dichotomy between 'civilized' England and 'exotic' Caribbean. Nor is the Caribbean introduced as a primitive, savage space, but as a culturally stratified, historically traumatized, and emotionally charged territory. Its unstable topography turns into a metaphor of hybridity of cultures, displacement, and psychological traumas of slavery and colonial rule. Rhys's Caribbean is not just a geographical location but a dynamic terrain of memory, war, and identity construction which is conditioned by violence of an imperial past (Azmat, 2018).

Simultaneously, Rhys also applies criticism to some elements of feminist discourse that focus on the liberation of European women and overlook the issue of race and colonial oppression. By re-creating the life and character of Bertha as Antoinette, Rhys challenges the triumphant story of women's independence in Jane. The ethical power and individuality of Jane are presented as victories in English society. Rhys, however, exposes that this liberation narrative is woven within the imperial structures of power that oppress and suppress the colonial women. The empowerment of a woman in the imperial center cannot be separated from the erasure of a Creole woman in the colonial periphery. This re-conceptualization reveals the contact between race, gender, and imperialism. Rhys proves that it is impossible to consider the issue of gender oppression without references to racial hierarchy and colonial dominance. Most feminist discourses that focus on autonomy, rationality and self-realization portray European subjects and do not address historical circumstances of women in the colonized world. The novel thus challenges the universal arguments of feminist liberation by pre-empting the disjointed identity of Antoinette, economic destitution, and inauthentic cultural identity. The concepts of independence and autonomy, in this context, seem to be intertwined with the privilege of the empire, and not universal ideals. It is through these strata critique that *Wide Sargasso Sea* makes its mark as a postcolonial feminist intervention whose narrative voice includes colonial discourse as well as the exclusionary feminist traditions (Gao, 2013).

- **Critical Reflection: Limits and Possibilities of Resistance**

The power of *Wide Sargasso Sea* lies in its clash with Western hegemonic ideology, but the novel is also caught in its literary form. Its relationship with *Jane Eyre* gives the narrative a certain meaning, both as a response and a revision. The text illustrates that it is challenging to completely break free of the ideological confines of the English canon because the plot line ends up returning to the canonical resolution, which is the confinement and destruction of Antoinette. Postcolonial rewriting is thus not completely extrinsic but rather lies inside the inherited structures, showing its limitations and possibilities. These structural constraints do not mean that the novel fails to substantially change the meaning of the previous piece. The colonial oppositions of civilized and savage, rational and mad, and English and Creole are uprooted and revealed by Rhys to be ideological constructions and not natural differences. Identity formation is not an unchanging phenomenon, but a historical process modulated by violence, displacement, and unequal power relations. Rhys disrupts the power of the imperial discourse and undermines the apparent impartiality of canonical accounts by challenging such strict oppositions determined not by eradication of the original story but by changing its meaning. It reallocates interpretative power through narrative re-centering, reestablishment of suppressed views, and focusing on the interplay between race and gender. The relations of power centers and peripheries, colonizer and colonized, speech and silence are reconstituted in critical ways by Rhys to prove that though literature alone may not be able to tear down imperial regimes, it is capable of exposing their mechanics and opening spaces where Other identity approaches can be adopted. This is where *Wide Sargasso Sea* is an exemplification of the rich limitation and resistance that typify most postcolonial writing (Vaishali & Sharma, 2025).

4. Discussion

This study explores how Western hegemonic discourses construct identity based on binary oppositions, specifically in *Jane Eyre* where Bertha Mason is portrayed as a violent, irrational Other. This description aligns with Said's (1993) theory of *Orientalism* which illustrates how colonial literature treats the East as inferior to ensure and safeguard Western dominance. The picturization of Bertha is from a colonialist's eyeglass, it diminishes her to a racialized being and justifies her marginalization. On the contrary, *Wide Sargasso Sea* defies this depiction by giving Antoinette who is a reinvention of Bertha, a narrative voice which is representative of both racial and gender reinventions. Brontë's Bertha symbolizes Spivak's (1988) silenced Other, "a marginalized person fit to be kept outside dominant discourse. Rhys criticizes colonialism and preempts the intersectionality of the identity of Antoinette. These possibilities have been peripherally explored in Mardorossian (2006). However, while discussing *Jane Eyre* as a dichotomy between civilization and savagery, the author did not expand on the role of gender. Nevertheless, the current study has shown how Rhys deals with this gap in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by dismantling these dichotomies with a more complex description of identity at a

confluence of colonial stereotypes of race and gender. Thus, Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* portrays effective postcolonial resistance to hegemonic discourse revealing the complexities of identity shaped by both race and gender.

5. Conclusion

The construction of colonized identities through racial and gender binaries in *Jane Eyre*, where Bertha Mason is portrayed as irrational, violent, and voiceless, and Jane is an epitome of all that is good, civilized, and western is examined in this study. These forms reinforce the colonial structures and patriarchal domination, breaking down complex identities into essentialized colonial stereotypes. These depictions persistently support colonial claims to power and their dehumanization of marginalized characters indicative of the global mechanisms that inform the view of the Other in Western discourse. The paper has illuminated the ways in which postcolonial writers, especially Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, disrupt these structures by giving narrative authority to Antoinette, reestablishing her historical and cultural background. In the process of narrative revision, Rhys disrupted the canon of the Victorian era and exposed the processes by which fractured identities were generated by colonial and patriarchal powers. Nevertheless, the study also concludes that even revisionary writings are somehow bound to the form that they choose to criticize, thus restricting the extent of literary opposition.

6. Recommendations

Future studies should focus on postcolonial rewritings in other literary backgrounds like African, South Asian, and Caribbean literature to identify common strategies of resistance. Whether or not literary resistance spills over into large-scale cultural or societal transformation can be uncovered in interdisciplinary investigations and analyses of modern-day reception of literary works.

7. Limitations

This research was limited in its scope as it examined only two canonical texts. Moreover, it did not include sociological and reader-response analyses which could add a unique dimension to it.

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