

# **Narrative of Subversion: Postcolonial Rewriting and Re-imagination in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea***

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Anup Kumar Das  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Pandu College, Guwahati-12  
[dasannup@gmail.com](mailto:dasannup@gmail.com)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6154-4979>

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**Abstract:** The idea of the literary canon is always embedded in latent mechanisms of power structures and therefore, authenticity and inclusivity of representation have remained suspect. This idea fuelled the practice of rewriting and retelling of canonical texts in postcolonial literature. The ideological project of the empire's justification of its existence and relevance relied heavily on propagating ideas of racial hierarchy. The overt or hidden representation of these ideas is reflected in several works of fiction and non-fiction. The postcolonial reading of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) unearthed a similar reading. Dominican writer Jean Rhys's retelling of Bronte's cult text, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), addresses latent themes of Eurocentric racial bias along with the economic exploitation of the colonies by the British empire. The present paper is an attempt to interpret both texts in the context of postcolonial rewriting and subversion of the literary canon. The paper will also examine how women of colour have been subject to sexualization and dehumanization, and represented as the 'other'.

**Keywords:** postcolonial, rewriting, canon, other, empire

Writing back from a postcolonial perspective has emerged as a strategic approach to establishing and demanding the space that was previously denied to colonized people. Through postcolonial reworking/rewriting and reinterpretation of texts,

a discursive space is created around canonical English language texts and the colonial ideologies they uphold. These reinterpretations, whether fictional or non-fictional, offer readings that shed fresh new light on the colonial project while also voicing resistance. Postcolonial theorist Helen Tiffin, in her essay “Postcolonial Literatures and Counter Discourses”, intricately examines the trend of writing back from the privileged point and labels it as a “canonical counter-discourse” that serves a dual purpose: to “consume their ‘own biases’ at the same time...expose and erode those of the dominant discourse” (96- 97). Observing the predominance of rewriting in postcolonial literature Helen Tiffin argues:

The rereading and rewriting of the European historical and fictional record are vital and inescapable tasks. These subversive manoeuvres, rather than the construction or reconstruction of the essentially national or regional, are what is characteristic of post-colonial texts, as the subversive is characteristic of post-colonial discourse in general. Postcolonial literature/cultures are thus constituted in counter-discursive rather than homologous practices, and they offer a ‘field’ of counter-discursive strategies to the dominant discourse. (95-96).

Tiffin argues that rewriting is a postcolonial project to ‘investigate’ European texts in terms of their own ‘cognitive codes’.

Edward Said’s ideas on the representation of the ‘Other’ and the power dynamics inherent in colonial discourse are relevant to the concept of postcolonial rewriting. In his groundbreaking book *Orientalism* Said stated, “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences (‘Introduction’ to *Orientalism*).” This idea reflects how colonial literature often reduced diverse cultures and peoples to simplified and exoticized stereotypes. Postcolonial rewriting aims to correct these distortions by offering alternative perspectives and narratives. Said’s concept of ‘othering’ refers to the process of portraying a group as fundamentally different from oneself, often leading to the marginalization and subjugation of that group. In colonial literature, this manifested as portraying colonized peoples as inferior and exotic. Postcolonial rewritings challenge this by humanizing the ‘Other’ and giving them agency and depth.

One of the most significant contributions that the discipline of postcolonial studies has provided is the practice of reinterpretation and reimagining of English classics. Many of these texts have systematically erased or misrepresented the colonies and their people. Postcolonial reimagination allows a reader and a writer to bridge these gaps and explore newer ways of representation and interpretation. Meenakshi Mukherjee suggests that postcolonialism is empowering and liberating as it provides the necessary critical and theoretical framework to scrutinize years of racialised and prejudiced representation of the colonies. The practice of postcolonial reinterpretation has also questioned the criteria by which a text gains its place in the canon. The scathing indictment Chinua Achebe leveled against Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* exemplifies this. Achebe claimed that Conrad's novel, which is widely taught in English Literature curricula all over the world, is largely a text that is full of racially prejudiced assumptions and ideas. The psychological and moral collapse of the Protagonist Kurtz is symbolised through the lesser-known (thereby dark to the west) territories of Africa. The entire African continent was reduced to a mere metaphor for a White man's ethical degradation and an allegory of his psychological decay. Achebe's accusations stirred up many such debates around the idea of how certain English classical texts dehumanised and trivialised former colonies and their history. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* involves a rigorous re-examination and reimagining from a postcolonial standpoint which entails a nuanced exploration of colonial and postcolonial themes within the narrative, scrutinizing the relationships between colonizers and the colonized characters, such as Prospero and Caliban. Postcolonial rewritings seek to subvert stereotypes present in the original play, amplify the voices of marginalized characters, embrace cultural hybridity, and address themes of resistance and decolonization. These reinterpretations contribute to a more complex understanding of power dynamics within both the colonizer-colonized relationship and the broader context of colonial and postcolonial societies. Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest* offers an alternative perspective on power, agency, and identity in the colonial experience. J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*, a postcolonial re-working of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, is another example of the engagement with rewriting in postcolonial literature. Coetzee has very self-consciously undertaken the challenges of writing back by refer-

ring to two pertinent texts, primarily *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and *Roxana* (1724) secondary. Though *Foe* reads a host of intertextual connotations and references, Coetzee concentrates more on re-opening the different issues of *Robinson Crusoe* by giving them a new critical paradigm. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is "without the woman as inventor and progenitor...in Coetzee's story it is described as a road not taken" (Spivak, "Theory" 12).

Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a re-inscription of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, demonstrates the potency of postcolonial reinterpretation by looking at the source text from gendered or precisely, from marginal perspectives, and providing a compelling counter-narrative to it. Rhys, born in Dominica and a woman of colour herself, resists the traditional representation of the Creole character Bertha Mason in Brontë's novel. While Bertha is depicted as a shadowy figure in *Jane Eyre*, Rhys delves into Bertha's backstory breathing life into her character, providing her with agency, a voice and empathy. Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* is presented as an enigmatic and spectral presence, scarcely seen or heard distinctly within the narrative. Functioning as a ghost-like figure, her minimal dialogue and mysterious actions contribute to the Gothic ambiance of the text. Mr. Rochester's revelation of his clandestine marriage to Bertha, driven by financial considerations associated with her Jamaican Creole heritage, prompts Jane's abrupt departure from Thornfield. Bertha's descent into madness leads Mr. Rochester to confine her secretly at Thornfield. Jane's accidental discovery of her colonial relatives, the Rivers, during her absence, coincides with her inheritance of a substantial fortune from her uncle, derived from colonial pursuits in Madeira. Paralleling Mr. Rochester's colonial wealth acquisition, Jane ultimately returns to Thornfield, and the novel concludes with her marriage to Mr. Rochester, culminating in a conventional happily-ever-after denouement. The narrative intricately weaves themes of secrecy, madness, gothic elements, and colonial-derived fortunes, shaping the destinies of the characters in *Jane Eyre*.

Jean Rhys, at the age of 76, authored *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966. Motivated by her reading of *Jane Eyre*, Rhys perceived gaps in the narrative, prompting her to address unanswered questions. In an interview, she expressed particular interest in the

character of Bertha Mason, the mad first wife in *Jane Eyre*, perceiving racial bias in Charlotte Brontë's portrayal of a West Indian woman as a lunatic. Rhys critiqued Brontë's gendered and racially discriminatory narration, highlighting the contrasting fates of Mr. Rochester and Bertha. Rhys aimed to expose latent racism and challenge sexist narrative choices in *Jane Eyre*. Asserting that Brontë's novel represents only 'the English side', Rhys, through *Wide Sargasso Sea*, deconstructs and rewrites Bertha's marginalized character, offering alternative dimensions to the issues of race, gender, and identity overlooked in the original. Rhys positions Antoinette (Bertha) at the forefront, granting her agency to narrate her story and providing a counter-narrative that "both engages with and refuses *Jane Eyre* as an authoritative source." (McLeod,162).

*Wide Sargasso Sea* comprises three parts, with the initial segment narrated by Antoinette Cosway, set in Jamaica. Raised in the deteriorating Coulibri Estate after her father's demise and the Emancipation Act of 1833, Antoinette's family struggles to revive the estate. Coulibri is eventually set ablaze, resulting in her brother's death and her mother's descent into madness. Sent to a convent school, Antoinette returns to Jamaica at her stepfather's invitation. In the second part, the narrative introduces Antoinette's unnamed husband, presumably Mr. Rochester. Their strained relationship unfolds during their honeymoon, marked by cultural clashes and the husband's suspicions of Antoinette's family practices. Daniel Cosway, claiming to be her half-brother, exposes her mother's madness, leading to further marital discord. Antoinette loses autonomy, facing the loss of her homeland, inheritance, husband's trust, and control over her own body and mind. The part concludes with her husband's infidelity and decision to return to England against Antoinette's wishes. The third part, set in England, features narration by Grace Poole and Antoinette. Confined to the attic, Antoinette contrasts her bleak existence with her vibrant Caribbean past. Her descent into madness is evident in inner monologues and vivid dreams of setting the house ablaze. As she contemplates turning this dream into reality, she walks the corridors with a candle in hand. This section portrays Antoinette's gradual loss of autonomy and mental stability in the face of societal and personal upheavals.

Jean Rhys' rewriting of *Jane Eyre* attempts to and fulfils several concerns of colonial exploitations as well as the othering and erasure of the identity of the colonized people. We can see how the Rochesters and Jane were supplied with wealth from the colonies to pull them out of their acute financial hardship. In Bronte's text, the source of this vast wealth remains mysterious and not at the focal point of the narrative. The convoluted politics of economic exploitations of the colonial and the sham marriage of the Rochesters are never addressed. Rather, this news of the gain of sudden inheritance comes as a welcome relief to the struggling protagonist. Both Mr. Rochester and Jane are benefited from colonial money. What Jean Rhys does in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is explore how some of the plantation owners became so affluent that they could create ill-gotten wealth to sustain generations. In this grand narrative, it is Mr. Rochester who enjoys the financial freedom provided by the inheritance of his first and second wives respectively. In her essay "'Indian Ink': Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*" Susan Meyer explores the sources of Jane's inheritance and even goes on to suggest that there are geographical routes in certain passages of the novel which connect Jane's Uncle's wealth to the slave trade. This discovery shadows the reader's delight at the surprising culmination of Jane's financial constraints.

In her essay "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse" Benita Parry critiques issues of oversimplification of power dynamics, neglect of colonized agency, lack of cultural specificity, absence of historical context, and oversight of various forms of resistance. She calls for a more nuanced and contextualized approach to understanding the complexities of colonial relationships. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism", analyses three works, including Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Focusing on the character Bertha Mason (Antoinette Cosway) from Rhys's novel, Spivak explores how the book subverts colonial and patriarchal narratives present in *Jane Eyre*. Her analysis delves into issues of identity, power, and the marginalized voices of women within the context of colonialism and patriarchy. Both essays deliberate on the multiple perspectives through which the subject position of Antoinette's black nurse Christophine has been

studied. Whereas Spivak reads an impenetrable opaqueness in her representation and possible interpretation, Benita Parry, on the other hand, hails the character as the embodiment of female counter-discourse.

Part of the reason *Jane Eyre* became a cult English Text and its writer gained the repute of a feminist author is the portrayal of a female character at the centre who makes her way in the world and gains financial independence. In their praise of the text, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, hail Jane as a feminist protagonist who achieves female self-determination in a world otherwise dominated by male privilege. Gilbert and Gubar have commented that the novel *Jane Eyre* saw the birth of the tradition of 'female individualism'. Even though it is true that Bronte's text was unique and revolutionary in its terms, it did in certain ways gloss over the colonial exploitation by Britain and advocated the imperial civilizing mission. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak and V.S. Naipaul have interpreted Bronte's text in this light and have unearthed embedded ideas of the British Colonial project. Spivak in her "Three Women's Texts and A Critique of Imperialism" suggests that Jane's ability to attain financial autonomy and socially respected status in marriage wouldn't have been possible without the psychological and physical oppression of Bertha Mason, a woman of colour from the colonies of Jamaica. In her critique of Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation of *Jane Eyre*, Spivak has suggested that these writers have examined Bertha's character only as Jane's journey and not as an individual. Spivak also opines how Gilbert and Gubar's reading of Betha's anger and madness is devoid of the concerns of racial and psychological tension and thus oversimplified.

Edward Said's theoretical-critical postcolonial ideas in *Culture and Imperialism* argue that British cultural imperialism was founded and propagated based on the rhetoric of the cultural supremacy of the empire over the colonies. The colonies despite being a significant part of the empire's economic and political project, were relegated to the margins culturally. According to Said, the period between the 17th to 20th century witnessed the mainstreaming of the British narrative and a robust dismissal of any other. This dismissal not only oppressed the colonised voices but also prevented the expressions of the many-faceted colonial coercive mechanisms em-

ployed based on geo-cultural specifications. Said calls for giving voices to the silenced people in the colonial texts. However, Rose Kamel, in ““Before I Was Set Free”: The Creole Wife in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*” argues that Said’s notions about imperial hegemony mostly considered male narratives and women’s lived experience were again limited to the private sphere. Therefore, Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* though quite non-critical of the British presence in the West Indies, has portrayed the colonial counterpart of Jane, as rebellious of her surroundings. Similarly, Rhys’s Antoinette is aware of the exploitation of her inheritance from the colonies by her husband and exacts revenge by burning down Thornfield.

English gothic fiction has been re-moulded into a form of postcolonial response by many authors. The setting of the novel *In the Heart of the Country* by J. M. Coetzee seems to deliberately present a subversion of the quaint pastoral English farm life, abundant with green meadows and happy virility. The desolate farm life and the lonely household of Magda depicted in the novel carry elements of Gothic fiction. But the majestic and empty castles with their hidden stories have been replaced by the mysterious farm in a remote part of South Africa. Doris Lessing’s remarkable first novel *The Grass is Singing* also carries a similar motif. The novel questions all possible romantic and conventional ideas about Nature, farming, pastoral life, love, marriage, family, motherhood, etc. Even the grand castle of gothic Romances has been reduced to a small, stuffy, unbearably hot house where Mary and her husband Dick live. The way Mary observes the natives shows her disgust and hatred, of something which she could not possibly comprehend. Towards the end of the novel, the readers witness a once independent and strong-willed Mary reduced to living a completely parasitical life by leaning on Moses, her black servant for physical and emotional support. Magda’s hysteria and loneliness resemble that of Mary Turner’s, although they have vastly different outlooks towards their position as colonisers and the complicated racial relations they have to negotiate in their daily lives. Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) also carries this similar trope of reshaping the elements of gothic fiction as well as the centrality of its female protagonists’ madness. The unruly behaviour of Bartha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, clearly classified as madness, has been ques-



tioned in Jean Rhys' reworking. Critics have opined that there are subtle hints of racism in Brontë's book, where the madwoman's fear-inducing features and her origin were traced back to a far-off English colony. Jane's journey of self-assertion and love has been lauded in the English feminist tradition, whereas the other woman in the text has remained sadly misrepresented and unexplained. With *Wide Sargasso Sea* Bartha has been given an elaborate back story explaining her supposed mental instability, which goes back to the colony shrouded in mystery in *Jane Eyre*. In both *In the Heart of the Country* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, there is an attempt by the authors to voice the formerly silenced narratives of the daughters of the colonies, whether white or aboriginal. Here madness becomes a tool for giving agency to the characters so that they can own authority over their own stories without adhering to the normative ideals of feminine grace, poise, and silent observer. We can see how the tropes of narrative autonomy, writing, madness, and gothic fiction are employed strategically in Doris Lessing, Coetzee, and Rhys' portrayal of unique female characters.

The gothic elements of *Jane Eyre* are supplied by the uncanny laughter and the strange noises made by Bertha who was considered to be a mad woman and therefore justifiably imprisoned. Her murmurs, weird actions, and ghostlike shadows passing through the hall are employed by Brontë to inspire fear in the narrative. Bertha, the first wife of Mr. Rochester is reduced to an animal-like presence in the text devoid of any feminine qualities and is portrayed as the undesired 'other' of Jane. Her bestiality, anger, and demonic presence were essential for the text to justify her imprisonment in the attic by her husband and the reader's feeling of relief at her death. In Rhys' rendition of the story, the dehumanized Bertha of Brontë's novel is supplied with a vivacious life, a strong voice, and empathy. Her Creole identity through mixed parentage and birth in one of the plantations of Jamaica, made her a part of both the worlds of the colonizer and the colonized. Her mother's supposed madness always loomed large over her head as an ominous sign. It was as if her identity and marriage were bound to suffer as she was a hereditary carrier of lunacy and a person of mixed race. Bertha was at ease in her surroundings in Jamaica, and it was her unnamed husband, who we know from the context as Mr. Rochester, that felt like an outsider and the 'other'. Her husband's lack of control in the plantation and his distrust of his racially impure wife

prompted him to force her to come to England. A territory where he can control the excess of his wife and curtail anything that he doesn't consider culturally appropriate.

Rhys' retelling of *Jane Eyre* not only exposes the prejudiced representation of the Creole wife as the 'other', but it also addresses the reception of the text as a feminist narrative of subversion and empowerment. Bertha's mixed-race identity was suspect to her white husband. Interestingly the husband is suspicious of her association with her black maid Christophine but engages in sexual intercourse with Amelie, who is also black. The puritanical Victorian ideals and morals about sexual conduct made the husband fearful of Bertha's abandoned indulgence in physical relationships. However, Rhys' representation of the plantation colonies is not without its criticism. Benita Perry criticized the representation of Bertha Mason as a tormented Caribbean woman because Bertha is "not the real woman from the colonies" in Rhys' novel (qtd in Loomba, 94).

Rhys' rewriting goes beyond just giving Bertha a voice; it examines the larger issues of colonialism and cultural clashes. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is set in the lush landscapes of the Caribbean, where the impact of colonialism is palpable. Rhys portrays the tensions between the English colonizers and the native inhabitants, exploring the power dynamics, cultural differences, and conflicts that arise due to colonization. Through the characters of Antoinette and Mr. Rochester, Rhys exposes how colonialism disrupts identities, erodes cultural traditions, and perpetuates inequalities. In both novels, the house serves as a powerful symbol. In *Jane Eyre*, Thornfield Hall is a place of mystery and confinement, where Bertha is hidden away. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the Coulibri estate represents Antoinette's family history and her connection to the Caribbean. The deterioration of the house mirrors the decay of Antoinette's identity and the destructive effects of colonialism. By reimagining the symbolism of the house, Rhys emphasizes the broader themes of displacement, cultural erasure, and the loss of self.

The novel exposes the intersection of patriarchy and racial bias, portraying Bertha as a product of both her lineage and her environment. Rhys' narrative shifts perspectives, urging readers to question colonial constructs that undermine the agency

of those from colonized backgrounds. The practice of postcolonial rewriting is a revolutionary strategy that goes beyond mere revision. This revolutionary strategy, as exemplified in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, serves as a powerful tool for reclaiming marginalized narratives, amplifying silenced voices, and laying bare the inherent limitations embedded within colonial discourses. Through works like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, authors like Rhys challenge dominant narratives, offering an alternate lens through which to view history and literature. Apart from playing with narratorial viewpoints, Rhys' novel also experiments with the genre of gothic fiction. Whereas Brontë's novel uses gothic tropes to create the unseen monster in Bertha Mason, Rhys' text employs these tropes to unveil the systematic dehumanization and exoticization of non-European, colonized cultures. Jane's fear of Bertha's bestiality and Mr. Rochester's unease with Antoinette's uninhibited sexuality and cultural practices are both conveyed through the motifs of gothic fiction. These transformative processes, encompassing genre bending and narrative perspectives, not only address past injustices but also reshape the literary canon, making it more inclusive and reflective of the multifaceted experiences that colonialism has shaped.

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