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Narrating the Anthropocene: Climate Anxiety and the Precarity of Human Agency in 21st-Century Speculative Fiction

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Abstract:
This paper provides a comparative analysis of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, focusing on the character of Bertha Mason. Utilizing Spivak's theory of the "Subaltern," the research explores how Rhys reclaims the narrative of the "madwoman in the attic" to expose the intersectional oppressions of patriarchy and imperialism. By shifting the perspective to the Caribbean landscape, the paper argues that the "madness" attributed to Bertha is a social construct used to delegitimize the colonial subject's agency and voice.

1. Introduction: The Intertextual Dialogue between Brontë and Rhys:
The relationship between Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847) and Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) is a great example of an intertextual dialogue across time, space, and ideology. Jane Eyre is a classic Victorian book about how a woman character develops morally and emotionally in the UK, but it also contains a marginalized and silenced character—Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic." Wide Sargasso Sea, however, is a postcolonial response that rewrites and reimagines this silenced character to give her a voice, history, and subjectivity.

Intertextuality is not just a matter of action but of revision. Rhys's novel draws attention to Brontë's text, filling in its story holes and challenging its assumptions. Where Brontë's narrative relegates Bertha to the margins as an object of fear and disorder, Rhys sees her as Antoinette Cosway, a Creole woman shaped by the complexities of Caribbean colonial society. And in this way, the "madwoman" becomes more than a symbolic obstacle in Jane's journey—she becomes a fully realized person whose identity is shattered by displacement, racial conflict, and patriarchal control.

The dialogues between these two texts are particularly important when we see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern. Bertha is a subaltern in Jane Eyre, silenced, represented, and denied agency in the dominant colonial and patriarchal world. Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea attempts to take the place of this lost voice but does so at the cost of exposing the limitations and tensions of such a project. Rhys not only interrogates the ideological basis of Brontë's narrative but shows how literature helps in the construction and erasure of such marginalized identities.

So, the intertextual exchange between Brontë and Rhys is not just a literary conversation but a political and cultural one. It emphasizes the power of narrative and how later texts can resist, revise, and upend what earlier texts had done to it. By putting these two works in conversation, this paper seeks to explore how Rhys reclaims and reimagines the role of Bertha Mason for her own work as a silenced "other" and how her story undermines the authority of the original text.

2. The Imperial Lens: Bertha Mason as a Plot Device in Jane Eyre:

In Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, Bertha Mason is in a paradoxical position: she is central to the development of the story, yet she is denied interiority, voice and subjectivity. To an imperial mind, Bertha is less an actual character and more a means of narrative development that helps Jane's moral and emotional journey. Her presence is an instrument, creating tension, prolonging a process of conflict, but the intellectual forces of Victorian patriarchy and British imperialism are not dissolving.

Bertha's entry into the story is one of mystery and horror. In animalistic and grotesque terms— "clothed hyena," "savage," "beast"— we are shown her in a way that strips her of humanity and places her with the colonial "other." These descriptions are not peripheral, but a symptom of the wider imperial discourse of the nineteenth century, where colonized subjects were frequently depicted as irrational, uncivilized, and inferior. As a Creole woman from Jamaica, Bertha embodies the anxieties of racial difference, colonial degeneration, and miscegenation. Her "madness" is just a convenient explanation to gloss over the social and colonial context of her condition and see her instead as a source of disorder and chaos to be contained. Bertha is a crucial obstacle in the narrative: She is present to Jane's union with Rochester. Her existence is what prevents Rochester's proposal from becoming the default to seem acceptable to Jane, and creates a moral dilemma for her. In this sense, Bertha is a plot mechanism— the hidden secret that pushes the story forward. Yet she is a crucial part of the story, never told her own story. She is only presented through Rochester's voice and her story is made clear only through Rochester who makes her unstable and dangerous. This narrative control reflects what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes as the silencing of the subaltern, where the marginalized subject cannot speak but is instead spoken for in dominant discourse. Furthermore, Bertha's confinement in Thornfield Hall's attic serves as a potent spatial metaphor for imperial and patriarchal power. She is physically and symbolically removed from the social world and hidden away for the sake of order and respectability. This confinement is in keeping with colonial patterns of domination and erasure of the "other" and it reinforces the lines between civilization and savagery. And her periodic eruptions— her laughter, her violence, her eventual arson— can be read as moments of resistance, but ones that are framed negatively in the text.

Finally, Bertha's death is a convenient one to make narrative. It settles the main conflict and sets the stage for Jane and Rochester's marriage, and restores moral and social order. But this resolution comes at the price of Bertha's entire erasure. Her death serves to show her as a disposable figure in the narrative— one who only serves to help the protagonist grow and be satisfied with her life. Consequently, Bertha Mason, in Jane Eyre, is not just a character but a constructed one based on colonial ideology; a plot device that reflects and reinforces the power systems of the time.

3. Deconstructing Madness: Tropicality and the "Other" in *Wide Sargasso Sea*:

In Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea, "madness" is transformed from a necessary condition to a cultural and oral construct. Unlike the reductive narrative of Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre, Rhys places Antoinette Cosway's internal fragmentation in the context of colonial displacement, racial tension, and patriarchal domination. The core theme here is tropicality, a colonial discourse which exoticizes, eroticizes and pathologies the Caribbean space and its inhabitants. In this way, madness is not just an intrinsic pathology but, according to Rhys's perspective, the result of imperial epistemologies that have been constructed as "other" in the colonized subject. Rhys's Caribbean is not just a background to what is happening but a process of epistemic and emotional change that has undermined European rationality. The lush, excessive, and often uncanny landscape resists confines within the codes of civilized/savage and reason/madness that govern colonial thought. This representation is one of the key points that connect to the imperial notion of tropicality and how the tropics have historically been viewed as a place of moral and psychological decay. In this manner the environment is involved in the production of madness, as in colonial times instability

and excess were often ascribed to the land and its people. Rhys undermines that notion by showing how such associations can be seen as projections of imperial anxiety rather than objective facts.
Antoinette’s subjectivity becomes fractured not because she does not know herself but because she is placed in a liminal socio-cultural space. A Creole woman, she inhabits varying levels of racial, cultural, and national identity, not easily accepted by the Black Jamaican population nor by the white European colonizers. This in-betweenness makes her especially susceptible to othering. She is constantly mediated by external gaze, most notably through the eyes of her unnamed English husband, whose perspective is a reminder of the epistemic violence of colonial authority. His rebranding of Antoinette as “Bertha” is the epitome of this violence: language supremacy erases her identity and sets her in a place of change and control.

The discourse of madness in the novel is thus inseparable from the politics of representation. Antoinette’s emotional distress— her alienation, betrayal, and loss— is given a colonial diagnosis, turning difference into pathology. This resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of the subaltern, especially the idea that the subaltern subject is sidelined in the culture of voice. Rhys attempts to restore Antoinette’s voice in the book, offering her ownership and agency in the narrative, but the novel does not want to underestimate the fragility of this recovery. Antoinette’s voice is fragmented and interrupted, and is then destroyed by the reification of patriarchal and colonial power.

Moreover, Rhys employs Gothic conventions not to reinforce fear of the “other” as in Victorian literature, but to critique the structures that generate such fear. The uncanny atmosphere, the double and fragmentary themes, and Antoinette’s mental breakdown all make clear the violence that underpins colonial modernity. Madness, in this context, is a space of contestation— where contradictions of empire are both inscribed and exposed. But Rhys is not so much depicting Antoinette as a passive victim as a subject whose madness is a manifestation of the impossibility of maintaining identity in an oppressive system.

Finally, Wide Sargasso Sea dismantles the notion of madness to put it in the context of tropicality and colonial othering. Rhys shows that madness is usually a reaction to epistemic and material violence, not a deviation from rationality. In doing so, the novel not only questions the ideological foundation of Jane Eyre but questions the colonial structures that have historically classified difference. Madness is not a disease of the individual but a political issue— one that is entangled in the connections between power, representation, and identity in the colonial imagination.

4. Language and Power: The Struggle for Narrative Autonomy:

In postcolonial literature, language is not simply a medium of expression but also a site of power, control, and resistance in the making. Jean Rhys in Wide Sargasso Sea emphasizes the connection between linguistic authority and subject formation, in which the imposition of dominant narratives serves to silence and marginalize colonial subjects. In dialogue with Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë, Rhys’s text reconfigures the politics of narration by questioning the linguistic structures through which Bertha Mason—reinterpreted as Antoinette Cosway—is rendered voiceless. The fight for narrative autonomy is thus central to the novel’s critique of both patriarchal and imperial domination.

On the level of narrative form, Wide Sargasso Sea disrupts the coherence and authority of a single, unified voice. It is not the linear, first-person narrative of Jane Eyre, in which Jane’s interpretive authority is consolidated into her own narrative, but Rhys has constructed a fractured and multi-voiced structure that resists closure to the story of its own self. Antoinette’s voice is present but not fully solid or authoritative; her English husband voices in between to reestablish colonial dominance in interpretive appropriation. This structural fragmentation is emblematic of the epistemic opacity that the colonized subject faces in the way they are represented and the way they can always self-represent themselves.

Language is deeply implicated in acts of domination in the novel, particularly through naming and renaming. The husband's insistence on calling Antoinette "Bertha" is a symbolic act of erasure, in which she is turned into the archetypal Jane Eyre's name in the colonial archive. This renaming is not just an act of triviality but a form of linguistic violence that strips Antoinette of her cultural and personal identity and places her within a framework that legitimizes her subjugation. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in her theory of the subaltern, the capacity to speak is what makes it possible to be heard and to be recognized. In that sense, Antoinette's struggle is not only to speak, but to assert a form of speech that is not immediately appropriated, reinterpreted, or co-opted by dominant discourse.

Moreover, the novel's linguistic landscape reflects the hybridity of Caribbean culture: different languages, dialects, and modes of expression collide. This multiplicity challenges the idea that English is universal and that it is the language of reason and authority. Creole speech patterns, oral storytelling traditions, and non-standard linguistic forms destabilize the hierarchy between "proper" and "improper" language, revealing how such distinctions are themselves products of colonial power. But this linguistic mix also shows Antoinette's alienation because she cannot be at home in any one language. Her speech is marked by hesitation, repetition, and fragmentation, mirroring her fractured sense of self.

The husband's narrative is the authoritative discourse of empire. His language is rational, measured, and seemingly objective, but it hides the ideological assumptions that underpin his judgments. Antoinette becomes irrational, excessive, and ultimately mad through his narration—a characterization that echoes the imperial logic of othering. Importantly, his control over language extends beyond description to interpretation; he speaks about Antoinette, who is only heard through what is called her terms. This asymmetry in narrative authority illustrates how language functions as an instrument of epistemic control, determining whose reality is validated and whose is dismissed.

But Rhys does not just reproduce this imbalance; she actively interrogates it. By juxtaposing conflicting narratives and exposing their partiality, the novel invites readers to question the reliability of any single perspective. Antoinette's fragmented voice, though seemingly unstable, becomes a site of resistance precisely because it resists total assimilation into dominant discourse. Her moments of assertion—however fleeting—challenge the coherence of the husband's narrative and reveal the fissures within colonial authority. In this way, narrative fragmentation itself becomes a strategy for reclaiming agency, disrupting the illusion of a singular, authoritative truth.

Ultimately, the struggle for narrative autonomy in Wide Sargasso Sea is emblematic of a broader postcolonial effort to reclaim voice and subjectivity within contexts of systemic silencing. Rhys demonstrates that language is both a tool of oppression and a potential medium of resistance, depending on who controls its structures and meanings. By reworking the narrative framework of Jane Eyre, she not only recovers the suppressed voice of Antoinette/Bertha but also exposes the power dynamics embedded in acts of storytelling. The novel thus positions narrative autonomy as a contested and precarious achievement—one that requires continuous negotiation against the forces that seek to appropriate and contain it.

5. Conclusion: Canonical Counter-discourse as a tool for decolonization:

Jane Eyre versus Wide Sargasso Sea shows how canonical counter-discourse can be a powerful tool for decolonization and not only in the form of rewriting literary stories but also in the form of questioning the epistemological basis of those stories. Jean Rhys's reimagining of Bertha Mason as Antoinette Cosway shows how postcolonial texts are capable of undermining the ideological mechanisms of imperialism, patriarchy, and racial othering that undergird the traditional traditions of literature. Rhys transforms the

act of storytelling into a site of resistance and one that questions the authority and neutrality of the literary canon.

Canonical counter-discourse works by engaging in dialogue with dominant texts and undermining their commitment to universality. Rhys does not dismiss the canon, but rather talks about its silence, omissions, and distortions in a different way. This is particularly important when Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern comes to the fore, in that the question is not that the subaltern can speak, but that their speech can be recognized in the very structures that are supposed to silence it. Wide Sargasso Sea is not just "give voice" to Bertha/Antoinette. It is the very thing that makes up the fragility and incompleteness of any effort at recovering a fully autonomous subaltern voice in colonial discourse.

Moreover, the novel shows us that decolonization is not a linear process of recovery, but a complicated negotiation with existing systems of knowledge and representation. Rhys's fractured narrative, her use of multiple perspectives and her deconstruction of linguistic authority all point to the limits of representation itself. The counter-discursive project, then, is not replacing one authoritative narrative with another; it is also about deconstructing the conditions that allow for such authority to persist. In this sense, canonical counter-discourse is as much a tool of reading as it is a means of writing to make the reader question how meaning is produced, who gets what and who gets excluded.

In particular, the decolonizing potential of such conversations extends beyond literature into cultural and intellectual practice. Rhys changes the character of the "madwoman in the attic to critique Victorian imperial ideology— then to also make contemporary readers face up to the continuing legacies of colonial thought in our systems of knowledge. Rewriting, then, is an act of reclamation— of history, identity, and agency— and at the same time, it is a recognition of the reality that one cannot escape the structures it is seeking to resist.

Thus, canonical counter-discourse is an important tool of decolonization because it reveals the structures of dominant stories and makes room for alternative histories and subjectivities to arise. It is a conversationally, disruptive, self-reflexive approach, and through it it challenges the canon and reimagines its future. Wide Sargasso Sea is a case in point of the potential that this has and will be, it is not that we're going to be quiet or forget; but we're doing our work, we are taking action and we're trying to make it happen and we're doing this in a way that we can't do it for the sake of a story justice.

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