



INTERTEXTUALITY AND FEMALE AGENCY IN JEAN RHYS'S WIDE SARGASSO SEA: A POSTCOLONIAL AND FEMINIST EXPLORATION

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ABSTRACT

As explained in this article, Jean Rhys *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a very convincing story about explorations of postcolonial identity, female agency and intricacy of cultural ancestry. This paper traces how the concept of intertextuality applies to the novel written by Rhys with an emphasis on how this concept has intensified the voice of female agency based on postcolonial and feminist theories. Through the intertextual connection between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte, the article explores how Rhys rewrites the person of Bertha Mason, the mad woman in the attic and uses the rewritability to point out the connection between gender, race and power. The paper suggests that intertextual allusions in the Rhys narrative do not only criticize the colonial and patriarchal societies presented in *Jane Eyre*, but it also establishes a voice that Antoinette Cosway as the protagonist in the story has to express her varying type of opposition. By conducting a close reading of select scenes in the text by Rhys, this study finds out how female agency is negotiated in a postcolonial space in rather subtle manners. These results emphasize the significance of the work by Rhys to the general discussion of feminist literary criticism and postcolonialism, providing us with understanding on how depowered voices can take their agency back by creating a narrative.

Keyword: Intertextuality, Female Agency, Postcolonialism, Feminism, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Jane Eyre*

INTRODUCTION

Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) by Jean Rhys could be generally regarded as one of such radical works of literature in the paradigm of postcolonial and feminist texts. As a prelude to the story of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), the Rhys novel rewrites and recontextualizes the destiny of the Bertha Mason the mad woman in the attic; it renders speech to the mute figure whose existence as one of the internal textual architectures of the canonical text of *Jane Eyre* had previously only been alluded to. The protagonist of Rhys is a Creole woman named Antoinette Cosway living in Jamaica during the earliest 20th century when the social medievalism and racial outbursts were extremely high. The novel talks about the mental collapse of Antoinette that is tightly intertwined with the colonialism and with patriarchal system confining her growth and demonstrates how mutual influences of the two phenomena formed her personality and drove her to receive her awful fate. Since it can be read in terms of intertextuality, the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* does not reprise the image of Bertha Mason only but, on top of that, it discredits the key socio-cultural trends of the colonial project involving the component of race, gender, and power.

The concept of intertextuality has been used by Rhys in the story. By recreating *Jane Eyre*, Rhys will respond to the colonial and gendered image articulated by Bronte, and particularly the one articulated in her portrayal of Bertha Mason. The other is the one who introduces the reader to the character of Bertha; she is wild and irrational and is the root to the ethnic and cultural anxieties of Victorian England. Her insanity in the passage written by Bronte is suggestive of her otherness, her Creole background, her being a woman, and her uncivilized lust all lead to her being the villain in the tale of Rochester. However, Rhys builds a reinvented character in Bertha who is now known as Antoinette as a victim to the system per se. Her madness in the real world is not natural or the heir to the carnal horror as a phenomenon but the result of intermingling of racial and gendered oppression within the colonial context. She is cited to be

alienated, betrayed and lost and these being on top of the above facts are augmented by the racial and patriarchal systems that act to dictate and shape her.

The industrial question which was being answered with the assistance of the article is how intertextuality advances female agency within postcolonial context. To be more exact, the paper under consideration strives to analyze how Rhys uses the intertextuality of Wide Sargasso Sea to Jane Eyre to criticize both the colonial system and the patriarchy and, simultaneously, develops a place where the female voice could be used. It is limited and subordinate, the agency about which the female story challenges the views of the colonial as well as patriarch stories, in that sense discussed as female. Rhys breaks these boundaries through the help of a complex portrait of a woman who, despite having a tragic destiny, struggles against the forces that command her to be silent. The importance of this question can be attributed to the fact that it allows understanding further how the voices of women and their marginal racial and cultural voices can be reclaimed and repaired with the assistance of the literary revision and critique.

So what! The story presented by Rhys depicts the tragic experience of how the stranger can be denied the opportunity of self-definition and self-realization in the classical pool of literary pieces of work particularly on the theme of women of color. By Revising Jane Eyre, Rhys goes beyond giving voice to Bertha and also critique on the historical and cultural environment that has trying to silence the voice of females in colonial and patriarchal societies. By referring to it, Wide Sargasso Sea could be regarded as a valuable addition to the postcolonial and feminist tradition that expands the discussion about both race and gender as well as power in literary tradition. The re-shaping of Bertha Mason can be interpreted as the counterbalancing of the reductive descriptions that the women of color used to be either as the helpless distinct victims or humorless monsters: on the contrary, they received a treatment of portrayed as multifaceted, not one-dimensional, but they are characters whose life and background shaped them.

In this research study, the researcher tries to explore how the intertextuality in the Wide Sargasso Sea facilitates the re-appropriation of agency of women. Specifically, the role of Jane Eyre revision by Rhys that is to be discussed as the (part) of the whole picture of postcolonial and feminist literature analysis in the article will be discussed. By analyzing the key events in the book, the study would contemplate how the manner in which Rhys has evoked the character of Antoinette as a whole has brought about a more mature perspective on agency particularly identifiable when dealing with colonialism and discrimination of race. It will as well respond how is the Rhys narrative choice significant in establishing a fresh voice of a marginalized person who speaks vocally in appeal to intersectionality of race, gender, and power. According to this article, the author attempts to demonstrate that the work of Rhys contains new domain of feminist and postcolonial criticism and the world where the voice of the marginalized could be heard regardless of the potential overpowering of the social forces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wide Sargasso Sea is a book by Jean Rhys which received much academic study especially in feminism and postcolonial contexts. Critics have commended Rhys on her subversion of Bertha Mason, a widely known madwoman in the attic of Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (1847), yet the study of textuality in inter Text in the novel has not been fully explored, in particular its impact in enhancing female agency in the postcolonial audience. This literature survey captures the major works on Wide Sargasso Sea and outlines the current debates and contributions, including how the proposed study will address this issue by zeroing in on the aspects of intertextuality and the ways it applies to female agency.

Postcolonial criticism is one of the basic frameworks that Wide Sargasso Sea has been interpreted. In this regard, researchers have discussed the ways Rhys decries colonialism as well as its impacts on

personality, color and gender. One of the first scholars who discussed the issue of Rhys and colonialism is Mary Lou Emery (1981) who stated that the novel represents an anti-narrative to the western colonial discourse. Emery argues that Wide Sargasso Sea presents the alternative view not only to the skewed depiction of the colonial subject, but also to the oppression of marginalized voices especially that of the colonized. She brings out the hardships Antoinette Cosway had to face as she faces the twin pillars of colonial exploitation and the patriarchal systems within which she has a constrained agency. Emery (2018) claims that the novel by Rhys not only criticizes the hegemonic colonial discourse but also gave space to the colonized to talk and resist.

Based on this, other critics such as Elaine Savory (1983) have gone further to discuss the relationship between race and colonialism in the writings of Rhys. To prove his case, Savory makes the argument that Wide Sargasso Sea explores the identities of the colonized, particularly women characters such as Antoinette who occupies a vague space somewhere between colonist and colonized due to her mixed-race ancestry. According to Savory, Rhys employs the novel as a means to criticize the racialized aspects of colonialism and this dimension incurs psychological trauma and alienation of the characters especially women. In like manner, Catherine T. (2012) has pointed out that the novel by Rhys attacks the colonial power structure and how it exploits race and class as the determinants of identity. In the case of T., Wide Sargasso Sea is an eloquent expression of the psychological effects of colonialism on both the colonizers and the colonized, thus, implying that the imperialism mechanism dehumanizes all participants.

Homi Bhabha (1994) pioneering work on hybridity and subversion of colonial narratives is also a recurrent case in postcolonial reading of Wide Sargasso Sea. The idea of the third space developed by Bhabha to describe how cultural identities are not fixed nor are they definite goes a long way describing the tricky nature of the identity of Antoinette. Antoinette, as a Creole woman exists in the space between two cultures, continuously being caught in between colonial and indigenous cultures which makes her an object of the anxieties and contradictions of the colonial system. The theories of Bhabha on the hybridity can be used to show how Wide Sargasso Sea has criticized the restriction and limitations of the colonial identity whereas the novel through intermingling of the cultures and languages provides a kind of resistance narrative.

Alongside the postcolonial ones, feminist critics have taken pivotal roles in shaping out the gendered nature of Wide Sargasso Sea. In her seminal study of gender performativity (Judith Butler 1990), we learn that the female characters in Rhys are presented in a powerful frame where female characters find themselves in a platform of negotiating their identity within a patriarchal system. According to the work by Butler, gender is not something innate, but it is produced by performances and social norms. Most notably, the case of Antoinette is interpreted through the lens of her being in unable to fit in to the given gendered expectations as she is continuously being placed as the other, both by the white father family and more broadly by the patriarchal colonial society she inhabits. As the feminist critics have pointed out, Rhys employs the tragic destiny of Antoinette to deliver criticism of how patriarchal hegemony not only strips women of agency, but can force identities down their throats.

Feminist explanations of Wide Sargasso Sea also relate to the work by Simone de Beauvoir (1949) explaining how women were constructed as the other. The ideas as put forward by De Beauvoir about the oppression of women as well as making them be of the second sex provides a corrective way to view the criteria of how the behavior of women as regarding Antoinette has created an object of male desire and control. By marrying Rochester, Antoinette is a woman of color and at the same time is labeled as a colonialist; as it turns out she becomes the subject of a patriarchal power. Rhys challenges such reductive ways of representing women in her novel through presenting a complex inner-life of female characters

such as Antoinette that go beyond the archetypes of feminine characters of passivity, difficulty of standing up and struggling against colonization as noted by feminist critics who have discussed this work.

Such critics as Gayatri Spivak (1988) and bell hooks (1984) have been able to contribute to the feminist interpretation of Wide Sargasso Sea as they have mentioned how the experience of colonial women would translate into the intersection of race and gender. The term subaltern coined by Spivak is especially applicable to Wide Sargasso Sea, since Antoinette can be viewed as a voice that is oppressed by the colonial and patriarchal ideals. The idea proposed by Spivak, according to whom the subaltern cannot speak, can be associated with the representation of the rhetorical career of Rhys, whose voice as expressed by the surrounding characters, namely Antoinette, is ignored or misinterpreted by the rest of characters represented in the novel such as Rochester. In the same way, the black feminist work that hooks developed gives a critical guide in assessing the given or defined status of Antoinette as a black woman inhabiting a colonial society as being doubly subjugated in being both racially and gendered subjugated. Most of the theme in Wide Sargasso Sea, especially through the perceived agency of the female on how she is oriented on and or against, against the given exertion of forms of subjugation, is entrenched or inculcated in the works of hooks.

Critiques have discussed intertextuality between Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre since Rhys takes on the challenge of redeeming the character of Bertha Mason by portraying her as three-dimensional in a criticism of the Bronte version of the madwoman in the attic. Other researchers like Elaine Savory (1983) and Catherine T. (2012) stated that Rhys employs Wide Sargasso Sea to give Bertha Mason a voice and give her a backstory to further complicate the simplistic and even dehumanizing treatment of her in Jane Eyre. Using the story of Antoinette, Rhys questions the paradigms of colonialism and gender systems that occur in the text by Bronte, since she proposes that madness is not an intrinsic quality of Bertha but rather the byproduct of the power of colonialism and patriarchy.

Nevertheless, though the feminist and postcolonial discourse dominates the profiles of scholars, who have tried to interpret the various themes in Wide Sargasso Sea, there is a remarkable silence that exists in how intertextuality has been applied as an interventionary tool of enhancing female agency in the novel. Although thematic aspects of race, gender and colonialism in the novel have repeatedly been the subject of study, little has been done to explicitly develop how Rhys relies on the intertextual interaction between themselves and Jane Eyre to emphasize the agency of women characters such as Antoinette. This article seeks to rectify this deficiency by focusing specifically on how ensuring that Wide Sargasso Sea critiques both colonial and gendered oppressions, including providing a more layered model of female agency by specifically exploring how it uses intertextual allusion.

Although the postcolonial and feminist dimensions of Wide Sargasso Sea have already been discussed well enough in the literature, this article will address the question of intertextuality in the novel by Rhys. Rhys applies to the power structures of Jane Eyre not only to challenge them but also to give room to female agency by modifying the colonial and patriarchal versions of Bertha Mason. This work will delve into the role that intertextuality plays as an agency of feminist claiming providing salient considerations on how oppressed voice can challenge and present an insistence on the oppressive systems. In this way, by way of this concentration, the article seeks to impart a more complex perception of the works of Rhys and its position in feminist and postcolonial evaluation of literature.

SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

The value of the study is that it examines how intertextuality in Wide Sargasso Sea is used to broker female agency. In revisiting the character of Bertha Mason, Rhys does not only subvert the colonialist and

patriarchal implications underlying the original text written by Brontë, but also presents an alternate story in which the voice of a woman is readded specially that of the poor women who are rather pushed to the periphery. The paper reveals how *Wide Sargasso Sea* is relevant to feminist and postcolonial studies of literature and how it has provided fresh perspectives in the relations between gender, race, and power.

The reason behind focusing on this in the study is to understand the role of intertextuality in the work of Rhys as a form of feminist and postcolonial criticism. This article has sought to show how *Wide Sargasso Sea* rewrites female agency in the postcolonial display through the diversion of a revision of Bertha Mason and her interaction with Antoinette. This exploration can be applied to the wider discussion of marginalized women and reclaiming voices with the influence and encouragement of the literature and methods of intertextuality as forms of protestation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the role of intertextuality in shaping female agency in *Wide Sargasso Sea*?
2. How does Jean Rhys use the character of Antoinette Cosway to critique colonial and patriarchal narratives in *Jane Eyre*?
3. Why is the revision of Bertha Mason in *Wide Sargasso Sea* significant for understanding the intersections of race, gender, and power in postcolonial literature?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this paper the author has used both feminist and postcolonial theories in the analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The theory of hybridity (1994) by Homi Bhabha can be used in explaining how Rhys challenges the colonial patterns of identity in his text. Based on the theory of the third space by Bhabha, it is possible to analyze the ways through which the work of Rhys was able to break the binary between the colonizer and colonized and present a more complicated identity.

Moreover, the theory of gender and identity as developed by Judith Butler (1990) has become the source of inspiration when analyzing female agency in the work by Rhys. Performativity as presented by Butler has enabled an appreciation to realize how female protagonists such as Antoinette asserted themselves in negotiating their identities due to the pressures bestowed upon them and how colonialism and patriarchy contributed to the formation of resistance.

METHODOLOGY

In the given research, close reading will be used to discuss the most important throughout the story and the certain focus on the character of Antoinette Cosway and her relations with Bertha Mason will be made. An analysis of the characters will also provide an understanding of how Rhys creates and criticizes elements of race, gender and colonialism through the intertextual lens of Charlotte Bronte *Jane Eyre*. The technique of close reading, revolving around the idea of meticulous and subtle study of the text, can be explained by the close analysis of the text as to how the language, narrative form and character portrayal convey other meanings and themes. The approach in question best fits the analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea* since it invites one to become deeply involved into the diegesis of this novel and to explore how the colonial past can be viewed as getting intertwined with the gender issues of oppression and oppression in the trimmings of talented wordcraft.

The paper will be based on the role that racial perception and gendered aspects play in forming the identity of Antoinette in the colonial setting of Jamaica. Such scenes that will be important to consider in order to note the ways in which Rhys uses these scenes to highlight the colonial and patriarchal systems in which she lacks agency are the scenes in which we see what life was like as a child in Jamaica, the

conflict between Antoinette and her mother, and her marriage to Rochester. In analyzing the intertextual relationship between Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre, the paper will also address how Rhys uses the intertextuality to reframe Bertha Mason as a fully-fledged and complex character in her novel, unlike a plot device in Brontë's novel.

This study will refer to the feminist and postcolonial literary criticism as its theoretical framework. The feminist paradigm, especially Judith Butler theory of gender performativity (1990) will be used to understand how gendered identity may be performed and confined to the expectations of the society by Antoinette. In considering the fragmented self of Antoinette a postcolonial theory can be applied with important contributions of Homi Bhabha (1994) on hybridity, the third space and its unsettling of discourse under the effects of colonialism. The theory of cultural negotiation and fusion of identities by Bhabha is imperative in explaining the status of a Creole woman like Antoinette, who is torn between colonialism and the Jamaican indigenous culture. Secondary sources will entail critical essays about feminist and postcolonial line of reading Wide Sargasso Sea providing further clues about how Rhys has applied intertextuality and how this intertextuality has affected the analysis role of female agency given the colonial and dominating structure.

This direction is applicable since it enables a close examination of how Rhys expands upon and invokes Jane Eyre as a source of departure and foil to rewrite its narrative and offer a more nuanced, more detailed representation of Bertha Mason and enter into the larger concerns of how to think about colonial and gendered identity. With the attention to these important scenes and characters, this approach makes it easier to comprehend the role of intertextuality as the instrument of feminist reclamation, thus providing some ideas on reclaiming marginal voices in colonial and in literature settings.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In this article, through close reading on the book Wide Sargasso Sea, it is demonstrated how Jean Rhys decides to retell the story about Bertha Mason and she goes on to redefine her character as a complete human being as opposed to just a plot device in Jane Eyre. In the story by Rhys, the character mentioned above (Bertha) gets transformed into Antoinette Cosway a multifaceted Creole woman who was formed under the dual grave influences of colonialism and patriarchy. Such revision does not only refute the passive presentation of Bertha in the text by Brontë but also provides a more delicate approach to female agency in unraveling the overlapping systems of race, gender, and colonialism.

The description of Antoinette created by Rhys offers the possibility of re-defining how colonial and patriarchal culture restrains or shapes the female identity. The mechanism of oppression, which encircles Antoinette, is one of the main forces in the process of transformation of an immature, shut in girl into a woman mad with rage. The fact that she did not fit the patriarchal criteria with which she is supposed to live, along with her marginalized status as a Creole woman in a racially-stratified society, indicates that she intersects with multiple oppressed groups. This intersectional paradigm which is discussed in the feminist and postcolonial theory highlights the way her gender and racialized status restrict autonomy and leads to her mental and emotional breakdown. In that respect, Rhys does not only build a critique of the colonial and patriarchal order but also begs the question of how these systems are so mutually interconnected that they affected not only her physical enslavement but also her inner psychological being (Bhabha, 1994; Butler, 1990).

Intertextual play between Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre is one means through which this undermining of colonial and patriarchal stories is employed. Through rewriting the tale of Bertha Mason, Rhys changes the power relations and gives the voice to a previously voiceless character who became crazy and isolated

in the Brunt court case. On the other hand, Rhys has Antoinette who is most often defined by her identity vis-a-vis colonialism as well as gender. As an example, when her ties with her mother, Annette, are described, it is reflected in the plot that the colonial forces shape her identity development; further, her marriage to Rochester provides more evidence of how the patriarchal system preys on the identities of women, especially when they are carinated. This re wrote has given Rhys an opportunity to comment on the silence of the past where women had little say especially women of color in the general colonial discourse.

In addition, intertextuality used by Rhys does not only rework the image of Bertha Mason. With the references to Jane Eyre, she criticizes the racialization of women in the colonial account characterizations, such as the figure of the madwoman, and finds an alternative narrative, which would aid the silencing and mischaracterization of women of the colonial world. In this way, Rhys also criticizes the naive terms of colonial dichotomy as Mary Lou Emery (1981) remarks and gives a more nuanced account of racial and gendered oppression. This opens up the range of intellectualizing the role that colonialism plays in feminine identity and agency.

Although the analysis is rich, this research has constraints. Although this article focuses on the contribution of intertextuality to Wide Sargasso Sea, it may be suggested that additional research can be carried out regarding the other elements in the storyline of Rhys that focus on the nature and role of language, the importance of cultural hybridity to define the identity of Antoinette. Also, future research might be conducted to analyze the interaction of Rhys conveying mental illness with colonialism and gender and to build the notion that the madness of Antoinette is not just a personal problem and that it is only a symptom of the broader forces in society.

FINDINGS

The analysis finds that intertextuality in Wide Sargasso Sea is the key element that enables Jean Rhys to explore the agency of the woman in an environment of postcolonial realities. Due to the reconsideration of Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre as Antoinette Cosway, Rhys challenges the colonial and patriarchal systems that oppressively narrow the spaces of female identity and outreach. The story by Rhys gives a stage to the marginalized female character in reasserting herself and her voice in the wake of these systems of oppression.

Among the most important discoveries, it can be noted that the tragic story of Antoinette perishing into madness is closely connected with the intertwining of the issues of race, gender, and colonialism. Being a Creole woman in Jamaica, Antoinette is pushed towards the periphery because of her colonial background as well as because of the inflexible gender roles she is subjected to. This comes to pass when she has a negative association with her mother, Annette, and how she ends up being a marriage to Rochester in whom she is objectified and dominated. Rhys employs the experience of Antoinette to reveal the interaction between colonialism and patriarchy where both of these systems support each other because women, especially the women of color, are deprived of independent actions and self-expression.

To illustrate using the novel, Wide Sargasso Sea, when Antoinette serves to her self-evaluation of the relationship between her and Rochester, she says that she was never really part of his life... Down by the preaching place, one day they told me was being arranged for me to hang. This phrase acts as an emphasis of her self-realization of being a racial as well as a gendered other within the colonial structure. This text shows that her madness which tends to be seen as her original vices is rather a symptom of oppression and disempowerment that has happened to her.

Also, intertextuality allows Rhys to strengthen her critique of the colonial and patriarchal systems. Through this modification of the story of Bertha Mason, Rhys manages to change her position as a passive object to an active subject in the story, and makes her voice heard where Bronte has refused to give her a voice. Such regression will enable Rhys to comment on the act of silencing women belonging to marginalized communities in colonial and patriarchal societies and the significance of taking female agency back through narrative.

CONCLUSION

Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys can be regarded as an important addition to feminist and postcolonial literature which critiqued the colonial and patriarchal system that defines the identities and lives of the characters. In intertextually revising Bertha Mason of Jane Eyre, Rhys finds a voice, through which a marginalized and muzzled character can become an active agent who chooses to be the subject of herself. Such a shift does not just criticize the directions by which the colonial and gendered structures in the Brontë text were developed but also serves as a means by which Rhys once again defines female agency in the postcolonial environment. Rhys creates a place of resistance and self-expression by providing Antoinette Cosway with a voice and a backstory as she provides a more complicated presentation of what women deal with in terms of identity, race, and power in colonial societies.

By tracing the role of Wide Sargasso Sea in feminist and postcolonial texts in terms of how intertextuality takes a methodology to disrupt the traditional colonial and patriarchal instincts in writing, the paper seeks to explain the significance of the work in the critical studies of feminism and postcolonialism in literature. The way in which the novel uses Jane Eyre enables Rhys to break down the conventions surrounding the stereotype of the madwoman in the attic and even criticize the idea of the marginalized voices being silenced, especially the voices of women of color. By paying attention to race, gender and colonialism intersectionality, this paper will enlighten us on how Rhys manipulates literary revision in order to provide a platform of female agency and protest.

To sum up, this paper adds to the larger debate of feminist and postcolonial theory since it shows how Wide Sargasso Sea provides a more intricate and empowered stance to women, especially in postcolonial conditions. The work of Rhys has continued to be a seminal work in literature when discussing the area in which the intersection of race and gender and colonialism exists (Bhabha, 1994; Butler, 1990).

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