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NARRATIVE CONTROL: THE COLONIZER'S VOICE, FRAGMENTATION, AND NAMING IN JEAN RHYS' *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*

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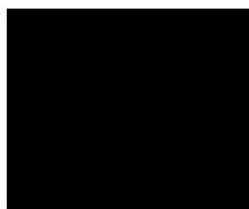
ABSTRACT:

This paper explores Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a postcolonial response to *Jane Eyre*. It focuses on how Rhys uses narrative voice, naming, and fragmentation to underscore her criticism of colonial discourses. Through theorists such as Said, Spivak, and Bhabha, I use postcolonial theory to explore how Antoinette's identity might be shaped and controlled. Overall, this paper argues that the novel's language and structure play a crucial role in exposing the process of dispossession and control that Antoinette suffers, as well as in challenging traditional narration and asking the reader for active interpretation.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Narrative Control, Naming, Fragmentation, Identity

RESUMEN:

Este trabajo explora *Wide Sargasso Sea* de Jean Rhys como una respuesta poscolonial a *Jane Eyre*. Específicamente, en cómo Rhys usa la voz narrativa, el acto de nombrar y la fragmentación para subrayar su crítica a los discursos coloniales. A través de teóricos como Said, Spivak y Bhabha, empleo la teoría poscolonial para analizar cómo la identidad de Antoinette puede ser construida y controlada. En conjunto, este trabajo sostiene que tanto el lenguaje como la estructura de la novela tienen un papel crucial a la hora de exponer el proceso de desposesión y control que sufre Antoinette, así como de cuestionar la narración tradicional y exigir al lector una interpretación activa.

Palabras Clave: Poscolonialismo, Control narrativo, Nombrar, Fragmentación, Identidad

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1. INTRODUCTION:

In literature, the act of narrating is almost never neutral. There are certain decisions dictated by power that shape the narrative, and determine who tells the story, who is silenced, and therefore, what is remembered or forgotten—all of these are decisions tied to power. Jean Rhys, in her novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), explores these dynamics quite deeply, especially by reimagining the life of Bertha Mason—the so-called "madwoman in the attic" from *Jane Eyre* (1847). Rhys does not just add more background to a minor and villainized character; she writes a story that openly questions how stories are told in the first place. To this end, she creates a fragmented novel, sometimes difficult to follow, and full of silences and different voices. As Taib & Dizayi put it, "*Wide Sargasso Sea* examines the subject of power by taking a look at such institutions as marriage, domain, and bondage… all courses in which a man or a group can dominate others" (Taib & Dizayi, 2023, p.254). It is this structure, I believe, that truly reflects the colonial world it attempts to represent, and its power structures. In this way, her novel becomes more than just a story in itself; it becomes a way to challenge how stories are usually told—especially those from the colonial period—and becomes in itself a representation of how colonialism works on a small scale.

Rhys's novel has often been read as a postcolonial response to *Jane Eyre*, and I agree with this view. While Brontë presents Bertha as a dangerous and exotic figure, Rhys gives her a voice, a past, and a name—Antoinette. Rhys does not simply give a voice to the silenced, but also shows how naming, narrating, and even remembering certain parts of history are things shaped by the powerful, in this case, the colonizers. As Stephanie de Villiers would state, Rochester tries to push Antoinette into fitting in the role of the madwoman in *Jane Eyre* (de Villiers, 2018, p. 56).

This work is going to focus on three key aspects of the novel: naming, narrative control, and fragmentation. These are not just literary themes—they are tools that Rhys uses to show how colonial control works, both in the real world and within fiction. In the first section, I will be approaching naming and how it becomes a way to dominate. The other sections will deal with how Rhys fragments both the structure of the novel and the voices of the characters, to challenge the reader's position and the authority of certain narrators.

Throughout this paper, I will be using the ideas and texts of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha to analyze how *Wide Sargasso Sea* confronts colonial and patriarchal

discourses. These three postcolonial thinkers will provide the theoretical frame for my arguments. From Said, I will mainly draw on his concept of *othering*, which is the concept that encapsulates and explains the way in which the empire defines and controls colonized people by marking them as different, exotic, and inferior. I will also use his idea of the "narrative authority of the empire.", in which Said shows how much narrative control shapes what is remembered or erased. As he states, "the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism" (Said, 1993, p. xiii). This is reflected in Rhys's novel, where Rochester's narration confronts Antoinette's voice, revealing how colonialism can also work through language and storytelling itself.

At the same time, Spivak's famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?" frames the novel's deeper analysis of Antoinette's position as a colonized and gendered subject. Her voice narrates in first person, but it is so controlled and challenged that it has no power over the narrative. Spivak's claim that "the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (Spivak, 1988, p. 308) really helps to explain why even a first-person narrator like Antoinette can still feel silenced.

Finally, Bhabha's work on hybridity and the "third space" explains Antoinette's in-between status. She does not fully belong to the Caribbean or to England, and this space between unsettles Rochester's need for clear categories. Bhabha puts it this way: "It is the interstitial passage between fixed identifications that opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 4), meaning that it is this hybridity that makes Antoinette unreadable to those who might want to simplify her. The colonizer then seems to rely on binaries—mad/sane, Black/white, English/foreign—but Antoinette does not fit neatly into any of these categories, for what he ends up taking control and defining her in his own words.

Bearing this in mind, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not just a supplement to *Jane Eyre*; it's a challenge to the novel itself. As Friedman states, "Rhys enters and reimagines Brontë's text—glossing and subverting, reversing and transforming it" (Friedman,1989, p. 117). It shows how colonial narratives are constructed, and therefore how they can be dismantled. Naming, voice, and fragmentation are the tools Rhys uses to do this. Through these tools, she creates a space for Antoinette not just to speak, but to exist.

2. NARRATIVE VOICE:

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the question of who gets to speak is not just a stylistic choice—it becomes a deeply political issue. Jean Rhys's decision to shift the narrative perspective between Antoinette and Mr. Rochester is much more than a formal experiment. It reflects the central problem of narrative control: who is allowed to tell the story and how that story is shaped depending on who tells it. As Carine M.Mardorossian puts it, "The novel deconstructs the opposition between silence and voice and, in so doing, questions the Western assumption that the speaker is always the one in power" (Mardorossian, 1999, p. 1082). The structure of the novel, especially its use of first-person narration from opposing voices, becomes a battleground where colonial dynamics of power, voice, and silence are reenacted. This reflects what Spivak defines as "epistemic violence," where the systems of representation themselves contribute to the subjugation of the colonized subject (Spivak, 1988, p. 280).

From the moment Rochester takes on the role of narrator in Part Two, there is a noticeable change in tone. His language is colder, more distant. Antoinette's poetic and fragmented prose is replaced by a narrative voice that appears rational, structured, and—at least at first—reliable. "There we were, sheltering from the heavy rain under a large mango tree, myself, my wife Antoinette and a little half-caste servant who was called Amélie" (Rhys, 1966, p. 45). This contrast creates an immediate imbalance in how the reader receives each character. Rochester's narration sounds more authoritative, even if he is the 'foreigner' and supposedly the 'Other' on the island. As Jung-Suk Hwang notes, "his narration epitomizes the epistemic violence to suppress and silence" Antoinette (Hwang, 2023, p. 55). His confidence in narrating, despite his ignorance, already tells us something about the colonial mindset: the colonizer does not need to understand in order to define.

Antoinette, on the other hand, is emotionally raw and unstable in her narration. She questions herself. Her sentences are often interrupted and she hesitates. "I have slept there many times before, long ago. How long ago? In that bed I will dream the end of my dream. But my dream had nothing to do with England and I must not think like this, I must remember about chandeliers and dancing, about swans and roses and snow. And snow" (Rhys, 1966, p. 84). As a result, even when she speaks, the reader might be tempted not to trust her, so that the "ideological position of the narrating Antoinette is neither transparent nor central,"

reinforcing her marginality (Mardorossian, 1999, p. 1075). This instability makes her voice feel real and human. Moreover, Rhys does not let us forget that Antoinette had already been silenced long before being locked in Thornfield. Her "utterances are filtered through and consolidate a colonialist discourse whose premises and prescriptions Rochester cannot question" (Mardorossian, 1999, p. 1081). She is silenced when her name is taken from her and when her version of events is constantly questioned. As Spivak argues, colonial discourse "produces the subaltern as mute," stripping her of any true ability to intervene in dominant narratives (Spivak, 1988, p. 294). Thus, although she narrates the first part of the novel, it becomes clear that her control over the story is temporary.

Narrative shifts can also be considered as a form of power struggle. Taib and Dizayi write that Rochester "appropriates not only Antoinette's property but also her narrative," effectively turning her into an object within his imperial framework (Taib and Dizayi, 2023, p. 253). This reflects the effect of colonial domination—how power can erase even one's sense of self. Spivak reminds us that even when the subaltern appears to speak, "her speech is itself captured and contained by dominant discourses" (Spivak, 1988, p. 295). This power dynamic is crucial. When Rochester enters the narrative, Antoinette is displaced and when she returns in Part Three, she no longer has the narrative presence she once had and she has lost all authority over herself and her story. "I thought that when I saw him and spoke to him I would be wise as serpents, harmless as doves. 'I give you all I have freely, I would say, 'and I will not trouble you again if you will let me go' But he never came." (Rhys, 1966, p. 142) Her voice is fragmented, dreamlike, almost ghostly throughout the novel and this reflects her psychological collapse, but also her narrative dispossession. "Watching the red and yellow flowers in the sun thinking of nothing, it was as if a door opened and I was somewhere else, something else. Not myself any longer" (Rhys, 1966, p. 12). She is no longer the narrator of her own life because Rochester's voice has taken control, and although Rhys allows us to hear Antoinette again, it is never with the same strength or clarity. This transition reflects a colonial logic of domination—how the colonizer appropriates not just the land and the body, but also the story.

Edward Said's concept of the "narrative authority of the empire" fits perfectly here. He argues that colonial literature often allows European characters to speak with full authority, while the colonized remain silent or are spoken for. This dynamic is captured in the idea that Rochester recasts the Creole woman's voice as madness, sealing the colonial truth through

narrative control (Hwang, 2023, p. 55). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester becomes the imperial voice. "He enters the Caribbean and immediately begins to describe, categorize, and judge. A lovely little creature but sly, spiteful, malignant perhaps, like much else in this place." (Rhys, 1966, p. 45). He tries to understand everything around him—from the landscape to Antoinette's personality—through his limited perspective. The novel shows us how dangerous this is. His narration is full of fear, projection, and misunderstanding. Yet, because he narrates in a logical and composed tone, the reader may initially accept his version of events as truth.

This danger also connects to what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls "the single story." (Adichie, 2009) In her TED Talk, Adichie explains that the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete—they make one story become the only story. When a single voice dominates the narrative, all complexity disappears, and people are flattened into one-dimensional figures. This is exactly what happens to Antoinette in *Jane Eyre*: she becomes Bertha Mason, the madwoman, the Other. Her story is reduced to a single label—madness—and all her humanity is erased. Rhys challenges this, but she also shows how hard it is to break out of that kind of framing. Even when Antoinette speaks, her voice is constantly interrupted, questioned, and reinterpreted by others, especially Rochester. In this way, the novel becomes a commentary on how difficult it is for the colonized subject to narrate themselves when the language and structure of the novel have been designed by and for the colonizer. Just like Adichie warns, when only one story is told about a person or a place, that story becomes a form of control—and that's exactly what happens to Antoinette, both in *Jane Eyre* and even at times in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Gayatri Spivak's question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—also resonates here. Antoinette can speak, but is she heard? Does her voice carry any authority? Or is it always filtered through Rochester's interpretation? Spivak suggests that even when the subaltern woman speaks, her voice is so shaped by the structures of colonial discourse that it loses its power. As Spivak argues "the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" within imperial structures (Spivak, 1988, p. 308).This seems to be what happens to Antoinette. She does narrate but Rochester is always nearby, narrating louder, more clearly, more "rationally", which makes her voice easier to dismiss. In Friedman terms, Rochester uses his narrative power to transform Antoinette into Bertha, and so, "into Brontë's lunatic" (Friedman, 1989 p. 122), making her

narrative secondary and unreliable by using the label of 'mad', which culminates with Antoinette becoming a full silenced Bertha in *Jane Eyre*.

Rhys plays with this idea by also allowing Rochester to be vulnerable—at least at first. He seems lost in Dominica. He does not understand the people, the customs, not even Antoinette, and he never plans on rendering them as equals. "If these mountains challenge me, or Baptiste's face, or Antoinette's eyes, they are mistaken, melodramatic, unreal" (Rhys, 1966, p. 77). This shows that colonial authority is not based on knowledge, it is based on narration. He confesses confusion and fear. But instead of learning or adapting, he responds with control. He tries to define what he cannot understand. He renames Antoinette, and assumes she is mad and manages to appropriate the story. The colonizer claims power by telling the story, even if it is based on ignorance.

At the same time, Rhys allows Rochester to tell his story so that the readership is able to see it fall apart. The more he speaks, the more it is shown how biased and fearful he is. His voice, though confident, is full of contradictions. "It was a beautiful place — wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I'd find myself thinking, 'What I see is nothing — I want what it hides — that is not nothing'" (Rhys, 1966, p. 64). In this paragraph, Rochester's inner contradictions and confusion can be seen through the choice of adjectives, as well as an idea of how the unknown becomes a space he desires to have control over. He tells the reader one thing, but another might be interpreted. And in that space between what he says and what the reader understands, Rhys creates a place for critique. She demonstrates that even the most confident narrators are unreliable—and that a voice should never be accepted simply because it sounds authoritative.

This narrative strategy also relates to the broader critique of how history is written. Just as Rochester dominates Antoinette's story, colonizers have dominated the histories of the places they conquered. Their voices shaped the record, while other voices were excluded or erased. Rhys mimics this process within the novel but also resists it by allowing the reader to hear Antoinette, even if only in fragments. Even when characters "speak," their voices "are mediated or interrupted," revealing that speech alone is not sufficient to reclaim identity (Mardorossian, 1999, p. 1071). Her broken voice remains a form of resistance. It wants to remind that silence is not absence. The use of multiple narrators also challenges the reader's position. A single voice cannot be followed and one must compare, question, doubt. As

Gangl concludes, "Rhys critiques Brontë's limited view by including multiple points of view in an attempt to tell a more collective story" (Gangl, 2006, p. 33). This makes the reading experience more active and more political. Just as Antoinette struggles to understand her identity through shifting labels, the reader must try to grasp a story that keeps changing. This strategy is especially powerful at the end of the novel. The final part of the novel returns to Antoinette's voice, but the narrative clarity at the beginning is gone. Antoinette regains control, even if only symbolically.

In this way, Rhys's use of narrative perspective is not just a technical choice. It reflects colonial violence, psychological rupture, and the difficulty of self-expression in a world that denies a voice to the marginalized. The novel shows that voice is power—but also how easily that power can be taken away. Rochester's calm and structured voice hides his violence. Antoinette's unstable and poetic voice reveals her truth. Overall, Rhys aim seems to be to ask the readership to interpret and grasp Antoinette's complexity from Rochester's attempt to simplify and other her narration.

3. NAMING:

Naming—or renaming—is a tool through which the one with enough power to name subjugates the one who is named. As Said points out, imperialism operates through systems of representation that define and fix the identity of the colonized other. In other words, the act of naming can reinforce patriarchal and colonial hierarchies. This is how imperialism used this same act of naming to assert dominance and power over colonized lands and populations. By doing so, imperial powers often managed to erase Indigenous identities and histories, replacing them with other names that could reflect the worldview of the colonizer and the West. In this way, they did not seek to see the colonized as an equal, but rather that they would secure ownership over the 'Other'. As Harrisson states, the naming of others is a means of appropriating their qualities for one's own purposes (Harrisson, 1988, p. 185).

The exploration of the power of naming in literature is vast and extends far beyond the postcolonial framework of study. It includes highly influential novels that have shaped Western literature. For example, Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein highlights the importance

of having a name in order to have agency and a soul, and to what extent this act—the act of naming—belongs to the creator or owner. Not only that, but it is also implied that it is precisely the name—or rather, the lack of a name—that deprives the monster of the ability to participate in society. Another example would be Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov, in which the pedophile protagonist manages to transform Dolores's name at will to make it more childlike and sexualized. Her multiple nicknames are capable of transforming her name into something completely unrecognizable, demonstrating to which extent deforming syntax can reflect how an abuser would deform the body and mind of their victim.

In Wide Sargasso Sea, naming is deeply explored, and Mr. Rochester manages not only to deform but to completely change his wife's name to something entirely different. The act of naming, then, is intended to showcase the colonizer's abuse of control and how naming is part of the systemic violence exercised by colonial forces. Aware of this, Jean Rhys wrote Wide Sargasso Sea reclaiming ground—renaming Bertha Mason as Antoinette and eliminating Mr. Rochester's name from the story entirely.

Antoinette's name marks her roots. Her name comes from French, the official language of her native island, the French colony of Martinique. Not only that, but it was also her mother's name, and therefore, her name defines her identity and her past. Her name is tied to her ancestry and to her mother, a Creole woman born in the Caribbean with a mixed racial heritage. Mr. Rochester is aware of the weight of her name, especially with the island's history and its ties to the Caribbean lands. These lands, which are part of Antoinette herself, form part of a landscape that terrifies Rochester. Moreover, with the discovery that her name connects her to her mother, he cannot allow such a name to be associated with him, an English nobleman: "He never calls me Antoinette now. He has found out it was my mother's name." (Rhys, 1966 p. 86). Therefore, when Rochester decides to change her name to 'Bertha,' a typically English name, he is not only stripping her of her identity and her mother but also of her lands and her past. Antoinette herself is very aware of how much her name was tied to her identity, "Names matter, like when he wouldn't — call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass." (Rhys, 1966, 143).

'Bertha', instead, is given without explanation, and at no point is it specified that this particular name holds any special meaning for Rochester, apart from him being fond of the name (Rhys, 1966 p. 105), and it is given authoritatively, "You must be Bertha" (Rhys, 1966,

p. 106). One is left to assume that Rochester chooses this name for no other reason than that it is English, deliberately chosen to contrast with his wife's, which reminds him that everything in the Caribbean—including her—is too unknown to him. This arbitrary desire on the part of the colonizer to control something he does not fully understand and frightens him reflects the colonial need to assert dominance over the foreign and the unknown. Thus, this mirrors Edward Said's idea that "the construction of identity is premised on the existence of 'the Other': the alien, the strange, the different, the threatening" (Said, 1978, p. 332).

By allowing Rochester to change the heroine's name, Rhys connects her retelling to its source text—this is the first real link between Wide Sargasso Sea and Jane Eyre, where the character is introduced directly as Bertha Mason. This nod to the original text reveals to the reader that no matter what happens in Rhys's retelling, Antoinette will inevitably become Bertha in the future for the many readers of Jane Eyre. Antoinette does not exist in Jane Eyre, and she never will, because the world created by Charlotte Brontë allows no space for someone like her to exist. The fact that Antoinette exists only as Bertha in Jane Eyre—that is, as the final product of Rochester's process of colonization—means that her colonization, and therefore the stripping away and abuse of her name, is as frustrating as it is inevitable. As Bhabha suggests, colonial discourse marks the colonized subject as perpetually incomplete, always outside belonging. Thus, Antoinette, positioned between English and Caribbean identities, becomes intolerable to the imperial imagination precisely because her hybridity threatens the coherence that Englishness itself is supposed to represent. This threat demands her erasure, which is done by reducing her to "Bertha". In this sense, what happens to Antoinette is not an individual case, but a structural effect of empire. Gayatri Spivak's argument that "the subaltern cannot speak" further clarifies this inevitability: Antoinette's silencing relies on the systems of representation defined by the powerful. Overall, within the colonial logic of Jane Eyre, her disappearance into Bertha is not just likely, but it might be the only possible outcome.

It is precisely because *Jane Eyre* exists that Jean Rhys was compelled to write Part Three, which connects the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea* to Brontë's novel. The existence of *Jane Eyre* encapsulates the story within a framework where a happy ending for Antoinette in England is impossible, and Rhys cleverly makes this known to the reader by introducing the name Bertha before the book's conclusion. Although the original novel does not allow *Wide Sargasso Sea* to provide a better fate for Antoinette, Rhys ensures that this

connection—through her new name and *Jane Eyre*—leads the reader to question whether, if Antoinette's name in Brontë's novel was never truly hers (at least in Rhys's representation of reality). Any part of the novel's perspective can be trusted. Consequently, it prompts the reader to ask which parts of the colonizer's perspective and narrative are true and reliable. This could be read as a direct challenge to master narratives and a call to retell classical narratives through the lens of the marginalized—thus to uncover how many names and stories were never even mentioned in the original texts. With this, Rhys creates precisely the kind of counter-narrative that Edward Said calls for in Culture and Imperialism, exposing how canonical European literature often perpetuates and is written over the silencing or erasure of colonial subjects. By revisiting Brontë's text from the position of the colonized, Rhys manages not only to challenge the authority of the imperial narrative, but also to expose that the narratives they exclude are essential to understanding its full meaning.

Furthermore, Rhys succeeds in humanizing Brontë's character Bertha in her novel, but her outcome goes much further. Rhys, in her letters, refers to Brontë's "madwoman as her horrible Bertha" (Rhys, 1995, p. 271) and to Antoinette and Rochester as "my Mr. Rochester" and "my Antoinette". Knowing that as an author, she was already writing from a desire to distance herself from the original story. The fact that she names her protagonist Bertha can be read as an act of completely detaching her Antoinette from the madwoman locked in Thornfield's attic.

After reading Antoinette's perspective, a woman with whom the reader has largely been able to empathize in the first part of the book as a victim of colonialist and patriarchal societies—no matter how much Rochester imposes the name Bertha on her, the reader will never be able to see her as the Creole woman of violent nature portrayed in Brontë's novel. Therefore, Rhys succeeds in creating not only an Antoinette, but also a Bertha who has nothing to do with Charlotte's Bertha.

Moreover, by allowing Rochester to rename Antoinette as Bertha, as if baptizing her, the author exposes his need to reaffirm his colonial and patriarchal power. Rochester's fear of the unknown—both of the Caribbean lands and of his wife—reveals his fragility as a colonizer: "Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness." (Rhys, 1966, p. 136). Power, then, needs to be reaffirmed, and naming her Bertha becomes the perfect strategy to strip her from the Caribbean landscape and encapsulate her in an English word. This attempts to force her to embody England, a land she has neither visited nor wishes to.

By simplifying her name into something familiar to him, he is turning her into something manageable and controllable. As Gayatri Spivak discusses, the colonial subject is not simply oppressed materially but is also subjected to epistemic violence, which is enacted through representation, language, and naming. Thus, Rochester's act of renaming Antoinette serves as a symbolic attempt to erase her difference to redefine her in terms that uphold the colonizer's authority. Then, naming her "Bertha" is a way of using familiarity to dominate.

Similarly, the very fact that he has the audacity to name—or rename—means that he must believe he has the power or even the duty to own his wife. This is how Rochester's power over Antoinette reflects the patriarchal and colonial legacies of ownership. In Genesis, Adam named everything around him because it was affirmed that, since all creatures and objects were inferior to man—being the greatest creation—everything could be his, and thus, named by him.

And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him.

(King James Bible, 1769/2017, Genesis 2:19–20)

In the same way, Rochester uses the same pattern of control and "divine" power to rename his wife, excused by a society that is primarily influenced by a text that privileges the patriarchal and the colonialist. Therefore, following the biblical idea that one has the power to name something—an object, an animal, etc.—precisely because of being superior to them, Rochester's renaming of Antoinette might be read as an assumption that surely he considers himself superior to Antoinette. This seems almost excused by divine providence.

The name change in Wide Sargasso Sea reaches its peak when Rochester decides to nickname her "marionette." This exposes the extent to which Rochester is capable of dehumanizing his wife and reducing her to an object created to simulate a person who can only exist, without cognition, when manipulated by an external and superior Other with consciousness.The words "doll" and "marionette", "Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antoinetta" (Rhys, 1966, p. 121) appear throughout Rhys's novel to depict the colonizer's approach and to show the reader how language reflects his ability to dehumanize the colonized. First, the term is

used to infantilize Antoinette, thus stripping her of her dignity. He perceives her as someone he cannot take seriously, someone unworthy of his respect, and as Rochester tells the reader, "Even when she threatened me with the bottle she had a marionette quality." (Rhys, 1966, p. 117). In another passage, Christophine is clearer about how this nickname forces her into submission, "That word mean doll, eh? Because she don't speak. You want to force her to cry and to speak" (Rhys, 1966, p. 121).

Through both nicknames, Rochester manages to encapsulate her in something controllable through strings—a marionette—and finally something completely inanimate with no inner substance—a doll. In Biju Justin's words, Rochester reveals all his self-centeredness and possessiveness even with the language. (Justin, 2019, p. 431). With this, the reader can see the colonizer's capacity to dehumanize, control, and punish the colonized.

Regarding the relationship between the name Bertha, created by Charlotte Brontë, and Rhys's protagonist, Antoinette, one can perceive how even these binaries contributes to the general feeling of hybridity. Antoinette not only does not fit into the description of being either white or black, but her duality also extends to her name. As Homi Bhabha argues, the colonial subject is often caught within ambivalent constructions of identity, never fully belonging to either category imposed by colonial discourse. This is not hybridity as empowerment, but hybridity as instability: the colonized subject becomes both visible and invisible, familiar and foreign, produced through what Bhabha calls splitting. Bertha is not simply a name but a projection of colonial anxiety, a way for Rochester to force Antoinette into a position of manageable otherness. Thus, the binaries of English and Caribbean, colonizer and colonized, start to break down under the pressure of their own contradictions. When Rochester calls her Bertha, he is creating a space in which she exists as Bertha, a space distinct from the one in which she is Antoinette. That is, in England, for the readers of *Jane Eyre* and for her husband in Rhys's novel, she is Bertha. This Bertha is someone foreign to the reader, someone mysterious and full of secrets who is, ultimately, inaccessible. On the other hand, Antoinette is familiar to the reader—she is the one who narrates the first part of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the one with whom the narrator is able to empathize and come to know. This never happens with Bertha, perhaps because Bertha is more of a construct of the colonizer, rather than an identity in itself.

The Caribbean protagonist is therefore forced to constantly decide whether she wants to be Antoinette—someone she knows, someone raised by Christophine, a Black servant who

practices Obeah, and someone deeply tied to the landscape of Dominica—or if, instead, she wants to be Bertha. Someone who would open the doors to the acceptance of her English husband and therefore to the motherland and the center of colonial power. This in-between state embodies what Bhabha calls the "third space," where identity is negotiated, ambivalent, and unstable—a product of colonial hybridity that "initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2). With this in mind, one could argue that Antoinette could never be Bertha, because even if used mimicry to get closer to her English heritage, she would never be English or white enough for Rochester. This is how Bertha becomes unbearable to the Englishman's palate—a hypocritical attempt at transformation and Anglicization whose success was denied from the beginning.

Antoinette might seem aware of this duality in her names within her household when she appears to make a decision about who she is at the end of the book. She is unable to recognize herself in the "symbolic" looking glass of Thornfield Hall. "The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself" (Rhys, 1966, p. 143). This quote exemplifies Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry, in which the colonized subject is trapped in an ambivalent space of being almost the colonizer, but never quite. Antoinette's inability to fully recognize herself reveals the fracture of her identity after colonial domination. However, my argument is that she cannot recognize herself precisely because it is Bertha she sees, meaning that she has overcome her duality of names and clung to her own—Antoinette. By doing this, she manages to resist the colonial attempts to fix her as "Bertha." Thus, her struggle represents a refusal to be wholly assimilated or defined by the colonial gaze.

Building on this argument, I will now examine Antoinette's resistance to the nickname "Bertha." At first, she questions Rochester's decision, and tries to understand his reasons "My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?" (Rhys, 1966, 105). Nonetheless, later, she becomes aware of the damage that being Bertha might cause her. She uses the word Obeah to reproach Mr. Rochester's nicknaming. This leads me to think that Antoinette is able to resist the imposition of her nickname precisely because she is aware of the process of colonization and identity erasure that she is undergoing at that very moment, "You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name." (Rhys, 1966, p. 115).

Throughout the novel, especially the first part, Antoinette has struggled to decipher her identity, never fully fitting into the binaries imposed by Dominican society after the Emancipation Act. This is why it can be argued that she had never felt entirely connected to

the Caribbean landscape. This is 'a woman who feels uneasy in her native country' and why 'any attempt by Antoinette to interact with the landscape will not be fruitful at all' (Nadal-Ruiz, 2020, p. 196, 200). Suddenly, a prominent threat enters her life to change this—the colonizer from the motherland, and triggers a feeling of resistance and attachment to her roots and island. Also, this act of associating Antoinette with Dominica, along with her fear and aversion to the possibility of having to leave the Caribbean for England, pushes the protagonist to cling to the landscape and her past. They act like allies in her resistance to colonization. She is able to ultimately reclaim her name.

Moreover, another act of resistance to the name Bertha is found in Rhys's choice to narrate the story herself. She uses the act of naming—or deliberately not naming—to resist the oppression she perceives the hero of *Jane Eyre* exerted over her protagonist. To achieve this, she omits Mr. Rochester's name entirely, effectively removing him from the novel. Readers must then infer that this unnamed character is Mr. Rochester based on Antoinette's surname, Mason, which later appears in *Jane Eyre*.

Erasing someone's name is a deliberate act of submission, and I believe Rhys was precisely aiming for this result, as she stated in her letters: "I carefully haven't named the man at all" (Rhys, 1995, p. 297). By removing his name from the story, she does not fully succeed in freeing her heroine from the colonizer, but she reclaims territory and uses her narrative power to deprive him of agency and reverses the act of dominance.

Overall, Rhys is capable of successfully using the narrative tool of naming, or the lack of it, to underscore the message of the novel and both classical English novels such as *Jane Eyre*. He also uses colonial practices such as renaming to dominate. He also reasserts power by reclaiming the marginalized name and stripping the colonizer from its own.

4. FRAGMENTATION:

Wide Sargasso Sea is a fragmented novel, both in form and content. From its very structure, it resists the traditional linearity often expected in novels. Instead, it builds itself through discontinuity, abrupt changes of voice, and incomplete memories. This fragmentary form does not feel accidental. Rather, it seems like a necessary reflection of the novel's central message: the destabilization of identity under colonial rule. And thus, the impossibility of a

coherent voice when it has been silenced. This is reflected in the scholarship of Taib and Dizayi, who explain how Rhys depicts a "hybrid identity of a Creole woman," an identity that "leads to the Identity crisis and confusion" as a result of "the encounter of two different cultures" under colonialism—highlighting how fragmentation becomes an expression of internal rupture (Taib & Dizayi, 2023, p. 250).

The novel is divided into three parts, each with a change in voice and perspective. The first one is narrated by Antoinette, the second by Mr. Rochester, and the third briefly returns to Antoinette, although with a much more unstable tone. Kaitlin Gangl emphasizes this structural defiance by arguing that "Rhys presents the chaos itself, making fragmentation and incoherence part of the truth" and thereby mounting a direct challenge to the narrative authority imposed in *Jane Eyre* (Gangl, 2006, p. 30). The third part of the novel, which brings us back to Antoinette in England, is so fragmented that the reader must reconstruct her emotional state almost entirely from images and metaphors—many of which reference *Jane Eyre*. In this way, Rhys forces us into a position of discomfort in which the reader has to understand an incomplete story.

Fragmentation is most evident in the way memory is treated throughout the novel. Antoinette's past is revealed in pieces. Her memories do not emerge in chronological order, nor are they always clear. Certain events are mentioned and then abandoned without resolution. For example, the trauma of her mother's madness or the fire that destroys Coulibri are referenced more than once, each time slightly differently, and yet always remain unresolved. Rhys's form, in this sense, as Taib & Dizayi point out, "mimics the workings of a mind affected by trauma: fragmented, repetitive, and unstable," which reinforces their point about Antoinette being dehumanized under "verbal and mental oppression" (Taib and Dizayi, 2023, p. 252).

The discontinuous nature of memory in the novel also shows that narration is never truly objective. It is shaped by emotion, context, and the narrator's own instability. Senior and Thomas argue that "ways of remembering deserve urgent critical attention" in colonial contexts and that Rhys's narrative strategy aligns with this need as a "creative response to the gaps and silences that haunt" postcolonial identity (Senior and Thomas, 2022, p. 5). Antoinette tells her story with urgency, but not always logically. Her memories are recounted not because they follow a timeline, but because they carry emotional weight in the narrative. This mirrors what Derek Walcott describes as "historical amnesia," a condition in which "the

true history of the New World" is marked by "loss and erasure" (Senior & Thomas, 2022, p. 2). Rochester's memories, on the other hand, are distant and vague. As Gangl notes, Rhys "reveals the limitations and distortions" inherent in male colonial narratives like Rochester's, which are often "constructed to justify control" rather than to seek truth (Gangl, 2006, p. 32). He tells us very little about his life before arriving in Dominica, and what he does reveal is often tied to duty or obligation. In this difference between how Antoinette and Rochester handle memory, it is already seen a colonial imbalance: one character tries to remember in order to understand herself, while the other avoids memory to maintain control.

This contrast becomes even more significant when thinking about *Jane Eyre*. In Brontë's novel, Rochester controls the entire story of Bertha Mason. Rhys directly "reclaims the erased voice" of Bertha Mason through Antoinette, but—as Taib & Dizayi emphasize—"does not pretend this voice can ever be fully whole or coherent" (Taib and Dizayi, 2023, p. 251). He narrates her past to Jane in a way that justifies his actions but leaves many things unsaid. The reader is never invited to question whether his version is truthful, and Jane, as part of the master narrative, never does. In this way, Bertha Mason's voice is erased, and she becomes a character whose madness is not explained or examined—only affirmed. Said argues that colonial literature often "depicts the colonized as a passive object of knowledge," reinforcing imperialist control by silencing alternative perspectives (Said, 1978, p. 207). *Wide Sargasso Sea* directly challenges this silence, but also reminds us that giving voice to the silenced is not always enough, since that voice can be misunderstood or distorted. Antoinette does speak but her speech is unstable, interrupted, and questioned. Rhys does not attempt to restore order to the chaos. Instead, she presents the chaos itself, making fragmentation and incoherence part of the truth.

The narrative gaps are not just moments where information is missing—they are spaces for interpretation. The reader is constantly invited to participate, to read between the lines, to question what is said and what is left out. This reflects Christina Sharpe's idea of "wakeful watching," which she describes as a way of living with the trauma of colonialism that is "not yet past," requiring readers to engage with the silences rather than ignore them (Senior & Thomas, 2022, p. 3).For example, when Antoinette dreams of walking through a forest, or when she speaks of the mirror at the end of the novel, the reader is not directly told what these images mean. Instead, they have to be interpreted from our own perspective and background knowledge. This interpretive role the reader must take on becomes essential to

the novel's politics. Just as Antoinette must reconstruct her identity from fragments, so too must the reader reconstruct the story to grasp an overall meaning. This creates a parallel between character and reader: both seek coherence in incoherence. According to Bhabha, the "in-between" narrative space allows for subversive meaning to emerge—"where cultural meanings and identities always contain the traces of other meanings and identities" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 56).

These gaps also serve as a critique of the narrative authority usually taken for granted in classic novels. In *Jane Eyre,* for instance, the reader trusts Jane, and through her, trusts Rochester. In, the reader accepts that Bertha is mad because Rochester says so. Rhys destabilizes this trust. She shows us what it means to read a story told by the powerful and to question that power. As Gangl writes, "Rhys refuses the comforts of a resolved narrative," making the reader "question the dominant voices of history and literature" (Gangl, 2006, p. 36).The structure of *Wide Sargasso Sea* reflects this idea by making the text itself fragmented. It does not allow the readership to simply follow; it demands engagement. In this way, by refusing to give the reader an assumed truth or force them into a single perspective—and instead prompting interpretation and critical thinking—Rhys enables the reader to discern what is problematic.

Moreover, the fragmentation reflects Antoinette's inner life. She does not have a stable identity—not because she is inherently unstable, but because the world around her does not allow her to be whole. Taib and Dizayi observe that Antoinette is "an in-between character" whose hybrid status makes it "impossible for her to locate the culture to which she belongs" (2023, p. 252). She is rejected both by the Black Jamaican and Dominican community and by the white English colonizers. Even the landscape is described as something constantly changing, something that cannot be trusted. "Everything is too much," says Rochester, (Rhys, 1996, p. 49) and in a way, Antoinette could say the same. She tries to become someone different for each person in her life—someone her mother will love, someone Tia will accept, someone Rochester will understand—but each time, she fails. And each failure fragments her further. As Taib and Dizayi put it, "The hybrid identity weakens her ability to understand herself," resulting in disintegration rather than reconciliation (2023, p. 252). The novel's fragmentary structure does not just reflect this—it amplifies it.

This disintegration is also present in how dreams function in the novel. They appear frequently, and they are not merely symbolic—they are disruptive. Rhys uses dreams "to collapse meaning" and reflect a mind that no longer separates time or reality, echoing M. NourbeSe Philip's poetic strategies to depict trauma, such as the Zong massacre (Senior & Thomas, 2022, p. 2). Antoinette's dreams blend with reality, often becoming indistinguishable from it. In one dream, she walks through the forest and senses a fire, and by the end of the novel, this dream seems to become real. These dreams are not just moments of foreshadowing; they are expressions of a mind that no longer separates past, present, and future. "I passed the room where they brought me yesterday or the day before yesterday, I don't remember. Perhaps it was quite long ago for I seemed to know the house quite well." (Rhys, 1966, p. 151). In postcolonial terms, this might be read as a rejection of Western rationality—a less intuitive and coherent narrative form that allows emotion and imagination to take control, or simply as the result of a mind ravaged by trauma.

Along this same line, I believe fragmentation also becomes a strategy for resisting simplification. In colonial literature, characters like Antoinette were reduced to types: the madwoman, the Creole wife, the savage. Rhys rejects this reduction by making Antoinette hard to define. As Gangl explains, "Rhys challenges the stereotype of the 'madwoman' by writing back with a narrative of contradiction and complexity" (2006, p. 34). The narrative itself is fragmented, and so its shifting perspectives, temporal dislocations, and unresolved contradictions disrupt any stable reading. This formal complexity is crucial, because it prevents *Wide Sargasso Sea* from being reduced to a neat colonial allegory. Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial ambivalence supports this: by refusing narrative coherence, the novel itself resists being absorbed into the imperial discourse that seeks clear, manageable representations of the colonized world. The novel's contradictions are then a method of resistance; through fragmentation, *Wide Sargasso Sea* escapes the simplifications of colonial discourses and exposes the instability of the dominant systems.

Rhys's decision to fragment the novel and leave parts unresolved might reflect the experience of being colonized. the fact that Antoinette's seems unable to tell a whole story parallels what Senior and Thomas describe as "the amnesia of empire," a past so violently buried that "traces must be reconstructed from gaps" (2022, p. 1). By refusing to give the reader a complete or coherent narrative, Rhys captures that sense of loss of cohesion and identity.

There are parts of Antoinette's story the reader will never fully know, parallelling happens with colonial erasure throughout history.

Finally, fragmentation becomes a method of emotional truth. As Taib and Dizayi affirm, "Fragmentation is not a lack but a presence," reflecting "resistance, confusion, and the identity of the marginalized" (2023, p. 250). In this way, fragmentation in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not a deficiency, but a presence—almost like a character itself. It acts as a personification of trauma, of resistance, of confusion, and of the identity of the marginalized. In doing so, Rhys offers us a story that, far from having clear edges or easy answers, demands attention, reflects the fracture of colonial reality, and reminds us that some stories cannot—and should not—be told in a straight line.

5. CONCLUSIONS:

To conclude, I believe *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a novel that successfully exposes how language and narrative can become tools of domination. By using strategies such as renaming, fragmented narration, and shifting points of view, Jean Rhys reveals how deeply embedded colonial and patriarchal systems are in the ways stories are told—and in who is allowed to tell them, as that as Gangl puts it, Rhys "shows [Antoinette] as constituted by colonization" (Gangl, 2006, p. 35). Thus, her novel responds to *Jane Eyre* not by simply rewriting Bertha's backstory, but by complicating the entire idea of narrative authority.

Throughout the text, Antoinette's identity is constantly shaped, questioned, and at times even erased by others—especially by Mr. Rochester. His act of renaming her is symbolic of the colonial need to define, categorize, and control. The power of naming, then, becomes a clear reflection of the power to possess. This same logic appears in the narrative voice, where Rochester's seems structured and rational, while Antoinette's is often dismissed or interrupted. What this reveals is that even within a novel that seeks to recover a silenced story, Rhys is aware that voice itself is shaped by power. And she chooses to reflect that struggle within the very structure of the novel. As Villiers concludes, "Rhys's critique is not directed at the outcome… but at the way in which it is depicted—through the convenient removal of the marginalized and silenced madwoman" (2018, p31).

Furthermore, Rhys does not offer easy resolutions. Instead, she presents a fragmented narrative that resists closure and demands the reader's engagement. The gaps, the silences, the repetition of certain memories are not weaknesses, but deliberate openings. They remind the reader that history is full of absences, especially when it comes to colonized voices. That's why fragmentation becomes such a powerful technique: it reflects the trauma, confusion, and instability of someone like Antoinette—someone who does not fully belong anywhere.

Postcolonial theory—from Said to Spivak to Bhabha—helps to see how *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not just the personal tragedy of Antoinette, but something collective and historical. Her silence, her madness, and her lack of narrative control reflect how colonialism operated and how its legacy continues to shape the way literature is read and understood. By making Rochester a narrator and then slowly exposing the violence behind his words, Rhys forces the reader to question what they trust and why.

In the end, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not just the story of a woman who loses her voice. It is a story about how easily voices can be lost and how difficult they might be to recover. Rhys does not fully restore Antoinette's voice, but she makes the reader aware of the mechanisms that silenced her in the first place. Both awareness and critical reading are already a form of resistance. It is through naming, through destabilizing the narrator, and through embracing fragmentation that Rhys is able to write a story that challenges not only *Jane Eyre*, but the entire structure that allowed Bertha to be forgotten in the first place.

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