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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN C. P. GILMAN, ANITA DESAI AND JEAN RHYS

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ABSTRACT

Female subjectivity has remained a significant concern in feminist literary studies because literary representations of women are closely connected with questions of identity, authority, agency and social recognition. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) emerge from different historical, geographical and cultural contexts, yet all three texts portray women whose understanding of themselves comes into conflict with definitions imposed by external authorities. This paper examines the three works comparatively through the concept of female self-definition, arguing that the central conflict in these narratives is not merely the oppression of women but the struggle over interpretive authority: who has the right to determine what a woman experiences, who she is, and whether her understanding of herself is considered legitimate. The study employs feminist literary criticism, Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "Other," Michel Foucault's relationship between power and knowledge, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's discussions of representation and marginalized voices. Through close textual analysis, the paper examines medical and marital authority in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, emotional and marital authority in *Cry, the Peacock*, and the intersecting colonial, racial, gendered and marital structures in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The comparative analysis demonstrates that female subjectivity is neither entirely autonomous nor completely determined by social structures. Instead, it is continuously negotiated within systems of power. Writing, emotional consciousness, memory, self-naming and resistance to imposed identities become important forms of agency. The study concludes that self-definition itself constitutes a significant form of feminist resistance and that these texts transform the question of female oppression into a broader question concerning the politics of knowledge, representation and identity.



KEYWORDS: Female subjectivity, self-definition, female agency, feminism, patriarchy, medical authority, marriage, colonialism, identity, representation, madness.

1. INTRODUCTION

The representation of women has been one of the central concerns of feminist literature and literary criticism. From nineteenth-century women's writing to postcolonial and contemporary fiction, women writers have repeatedly challenged cultural assumptions concerning femininity, domesticity,

marriage, sexuality, emotionality and women's intellectual capacities. Feminist literary criticism has consequently provided important frameworks for examining the ways in which literary texts expose the structures that regulate women's lives.

Yet the question of female oppression leads to another equally important question: **Who possesses the authority to define a woman's experience?**

This question becomes particularly significant when a woman's understanding of herself differs from the interpretation imposed upon her by her husband, doctor, family, community or society. In such circumstances, the conflict is not merely between an individual woman and an oppressive social structure. It is also a conflict concerning knowledge, interpretation and representation. A woman may possess an intimate understanding of her own emotional and psychological condition, while an external authority may claim a greater right to determine what she is experiencing. The struggle for subjectivity therefore becomes a struggle for epistemological authority.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* provide particularly productive examples of this conflict. Although the three texts belong to different literary and cultural contexts, each places a female protagonist in a situation where her identity is repeatedly interpreted by others. Gilman's unnamed narrator is confronted by the combined authority of husband and physician. Maya, the protagonist of Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, experiences an emotionally alienating marriage in which her intense subjective consciousness conflicts with Gautama's rational and detached worldview. Antoinette Cosway in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* faces a more complex form of identity displacement in which gender, colonialism, race, marriage and naming become interconnected.

The three texts therefore represent different regimes of authority. In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, authority is principally medical and marital; in *Cry, the Peacock*, it is marital, emotional and social; and in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it becomes colonial, racial, gendered and marital. The differences between these systems are crucial because they demonstrate that women's experiences of oppression are historically and culturally specific. Nevertheless, the three narratives share a fundamental structure: an external authority claims the right to define the female subject.

This paper therefore moves beyond a reading of the three texts merely as narratives of female oppression or psychological breakdown. Existing criticism has extensively discussed *The Yellow Wallpaper* in relation to confinement, patriarchy, medical authority and the rest cure; *Cry, the Peacock* in relation to psychological alienation, marriage and Maya's emotional consciousness; and *Wide Sargasso Sea* in relation to colonialism, race, patriarchy, madness and the rewriting of the "madwoman" of *Jane Eyre*. Such scholarship provides an essential foundation for the present study.

The present research instead foregrounds **self-definition**. It asks not only how women are oppressed but also how authority determines the meaning of their experiences. The central argument is that female agency can emerge through the struggle to retain the right to interpret oneself. The act of writing, remembering, feeling, speaking, interpreting and naming oneself may therefore become forms of resistance.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

The critical discussion of the three selected works has frequently concentrated on themes such as patriarchy, madness, confinement, psychological suffering, medical oppression, colonialism and female resistance. These approaches are valuable, but a comparative study that simply establishes that all three protagonists suffer because of patriarchal structures would not sufficiently distinguish the present investigation.

The research problem addressed by this paper is therefore the relationship between **female subjectivity and interpretive authority**.

The problem can be formulated as follows:

When women's experiences are interpreted through dominant medical, marital, social, colonial or patriarchal discourses, how do the women attempt to preserve their own understanding of themselves?

This question shifts attention from oppression alone to the production and control of knowledge. The study consequently considers female subjectivity as a contested space in which individual consciousness comes into conflict with socially authorized definitions.

3. RESEARCH GAP

The existing critical approaches to the three primary texts establish several important areas of scholarship. *The Yellow Wallpaper* has been widely interpreted through feminist, psychological and medical perspectives, particularly in relation to the rest cure, domestic confinement and the authority of the male physician. Historical and critical scholarship has also complicated some established assumptions about the story's publication and reception, demonstrating that its critical history itself is shaped by interpretive frameworks.

Similarly, criticism of *Cry, the Peacock* has frequently examined Maya's psychological deterioration, loneliness, emotional intensity and troubled relationship with Gautama. Recent scholarship continues to approach the novel through psychoanalytic and psychological frameworks, emphasizing Maya's isolation and her inability to reconcile her subjective consciousness with her social environment.

Wide Sargasso Sea has generated extensive feminist and postcolonial criticism. Critics have explored Antoinette's silencing, her relationship to the "madwoman" of *Jane Eyre*, colonial displacement, race, gender and patriarchal power. More recent scholarship has continued to emphasize the relationship between Antoinette's voice, spatial confinement and the colonial politics of naming.

The research gap addressed here lies in bringing these three texts together through a more specific question: **how does the struggle for self-definition function as a form of female agency across different systems of authority?**

Rather than treating medical oppression, marital alienation and colonial dispossession as unrelated problems, this paper understands them as different manifestations of a broader struggle over who possesses the authority to interpret female identity.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study addresses the following questions:

1. How do *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *Cry, the Peacock* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* represent external authority over female identity?
2. How does medical authority influence female subjectivity in *The Yellow Wallpaper*?
3. How do marital and social expectations shape Maya's subjective experience in *Cry, the Peacock*?
4. How do colonial, racial, gendered and marital structures influence Antoinette's identity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*?
5. How does naming function as a mechanism of power and identity formation?
6. In what ways can writing, emotional consciousness, memory and self-definition be understood as forms of female agency?
7. How does a comparative study of these texts contribute to an understanding of female subjectivity beyond the conventional opposition between oppression and liberation?

5. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The major objectives of this study are:

- To examine the representation of female subjectivity in the three selected texts.
- To identify the different forms of authority that attempt to define the female protagonists.
- To examine the relationship between knowledge, power and female identity.
- To analyse the role of marriage in regulating female subjectivity.
- To investigate the relationship between madness and interpretive authority.
- To examine naming and representation as mechanisms of identity formation.

- To understand self-definition as a form of female agency.
- To establish a comparative framework connecting feminist, psychological and postcolonial concerns.

6. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative, interpretive and comparative methodology. It is primarily based on close textual reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The analysis is supported by relevant feminist, poststructuralist and postcolonial theoretical perspectives.

The study does not attempt to diagnose the psychological conditions of the fictional characters. Instead, psychological language within the texts is examined as part of the social and discursive structures through which female experience is interpreted. This distinction is particularly important because the three narratives repeatedly demonstrate that the category of "madness" is connected with questions of authority and recognition.

The methodology is comparative rather than merely thematic. The study identifies similarities among the three texts while also preserving their historical and cultural differences. The purpose is not to suggest that Gilman's nineteenth-century American context, Desai's postcolonial Indian context and Rhys's Caribbean-colonial context are identical. Rather, the comparison demonstrates how different systems of power can produce related struggles over female self-definition.

7. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

7.1 Simone de Beauvoir: Woman as the "Other"

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* provides a foundational framework for understanding the construction of female identity. Beauvoir's distinction between the subject and the "Other" is particularly useful for examining situations in which women are defined through the perspectives of others rather than recognized as autonomous subjects.

Within the three selected texts, the protagonists are repeatedly positioned as objects of interpretation. Gilman's narrator is interpreted by John; Maya is interpreted through Gautama's rational worldview; and Antoinette is progressively transformed into an identity constructed by her husband. The problem is therefore not simply that these women are controlled but that their subjectivity is displaced by external definitions.

7.2 Michel Foucault: Power and Knowledge

Michel Foucault's discussion of the relationship between power and knowledge is especially relevant to *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Power does not necessarily function through direct physical force. It can operate through institutions, classifications, diagnoses and claims concerning what constitutes normality.

John's medical authority therefore becomes particularly significant. His diagnosis does not simply describe the narrator's condition; it determines how her condition is understood and how she is expected to behave.

The narrator's subjective knowledge is consequently placed beneath professionally authorized knowledge. The conflict is therefore epistemological as well as personal.

7.3 Judith Butler: Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a framework for examining the social production of femininity. Gendered identities are maintained through repeated social expectations and practices rather than existing simply as fixed biological truths.

This perspective is useful in all three texts because the protagonists are expected to conform to particular models of femininity. The ideal woman is expected to be obedient, emotionally manageable, domestic, rationally controlled and socially recognizable. When the protagonists fail to conform to these expectations, their behaviour is interpreted as problematic.

7.4 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Representation and Voice

Spivak's discussion of representation and marginalized voices is particularly significant for *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette's problem is not simply that she is silent. She is also represented by others.

The transformation of Antoinette into "Bertha" illustrates the political implications of representation. The authority to name another person can become the authority to construct that person's identity. Contemporary criticism of Rhys continues to emphasize this relationship between naming, colonial power and the suppression of Antoinette's voice.

8. MEDICAL AUTHORITY AND FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY IN *THE YELLOW WALLPAPER*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* presents one of the most striking literary representations of the conflict between female subjective experience and institutional authority. The unnamed narrator is placed under the care of her husband John, who is simultaneously a husband and a physician. These two roles reinforce one another.

John's authority is therefore both domestic and professional.

The narrator understands her condition differently from the way John interprets it. She believes that writing and intellectual activity may be beneficial, but these activities are discouraged. Her own interpretation is consequently treated as unreliable.

The significance of writing cannot be separated from this conflict. The narrator's secret journal becomes a private space where she can express thoughts that she cannot communicate openly. Writing allows her to produce a narrative of herself outside John's authority.

The text's narrative form is therefore itself politically significant. The narrator's private voice challenges the official interpretation of her condition.

The historical context strengthens this reading. Gilman's story has long been associated with nineteenth-century medical practices surrounding women diagnosed with nervous disorders, particularly the rest cure. Contemporary scholarship continues to read the story as a critique of medical paternalism and gendered approaches to mental health.

The narrator's struggle consequently involves more than physical confinement. She is deprived of the authority to determine what is happening to her.

9. THE ROOM AS PHYSICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONFINEMENT

The room in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is commonly understood as a symbol of imprisonment. However, the room can also be interpreted as a space of epistemological control.

The narrator's physical movement is restricted. Her intellectual activity is restricted. Her writing is discouraged. Most importantly, her interpretation of her own condition is dismissed. The confinement therefore operates on two levels:

1. **Physical confinement**, through control of space and movement.
2. **Epistemological confinement**, through the denial of interpretive authority.

The wallpaper becomes central to this process. The narrator gradually develops her own interpretation of its pattern and discovers a woman behind it. Whether the figure is understood psychologically, symbolically or both, the wallpaper provides the narrator with an alternative system of meaning.

John offers an authorized interpretation of reality.
The narrator creates another.

The conflict between these interpretations represents the larger conflict between institutional knowledge and subjective knowledge.

The story's ending is consequently deliberately complex. Her apparent liberation cannot be understood simply as a successful escape. Her psychological disintegration and her resistance exist simultaneously. Contemporary scholarship similarly recognizes the ambiguity of the narrator's final condition, where breakdown and rebellion become difficult to separate.

10. MAYA AND THE CRISIS OF RECOGNITION IN *CRY, THE PEACOCK*

Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* presents female subjectivity through the psychological consciousness of Maya. Unlike Gilman's narrator, Maya is not primarily confined by a medical institution. Her crisis develops within marriage and through the emotional incompatibility between herself and Gautama.

Maya experiences the world intensely through emotion, memory, imagination and sensory perception. Gautama, by contrast, is associated with rationality, detachment and intellectual distance.

This opposition creates a crisis of recognition.

Maya does not merely want affection. She wants her experience to be recognized as meaningful. Her emotional world demands acknowledgment, while Gautama's rationalism provides little space for such emotional intensity.

The conflict therefore concerns more than marital incompatibility. It concerns competing definitions of legitimate experience.

Maya's emotions are repeatedly placed in a position where they can be interpreted as excessive or irrational. Her experience consequently becomes increasingly isolated.

Critical approaches to the novel have frequently emphasized this relationship between Maya's psychological distress, loneliness and her emotionally incompatible marriage.

The present study extends this observation by suggesting that Maya's crisis is also a crisis of epistemological recognition. She knows what she feels, but she cannot secure social or marital recognition for that knowledge.

11. MARRIAGE AS A REGIME OF AUTHORITY

Marriage functions differently in all three texts, but in each case it becomes a significant structure through which female subjectivity is regulated.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, marriage is reinforced by medical authority.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, marriage becomes the central environment within which Maya's emotional experience is judged.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, marriage becomes inseparable from colonial and economic power.

The important question is therefore not simply whether marriage oppresses women. The more productive question is:

What kind of woman does a particular marital structure recognize as legitimate?

Maya does not fit easily within the model of the emotionally controlled and rational wife represented by Gautama's worldview. Her emotional intensity therefore becomes evidence against her rather than a form of knowledge about herself.

This reveals the subtle operation of patriarchal authority. Power does not always require explicit commands. It may operate through assumptions about what a woman should feel, how she should behave and how she should understand her own life.

12. ANTOINETTE AND THE POLITICS OF NAMING

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* extends the question of self-definition into the contexts of colonialism and racial identity.

Antoinette grows up within a society shaped by colonial conflict, racial divisions and cultural displacement. Her identity is already unstable before her marriage. She does not possess an uncomplicated cultural position.

She is simultaneously a woman, a Creole, a colonial subject and a socially displaced individual. Marriage intensifies this instability.

The most powerful example is the transformation of Antoinette into "Bertha."

The change of name is not merely a personal insult. It is an act of symbolic authority.

A name functions as a marker of personal identity and social recognition. To rename another person can therefore become an attempt to control that person's identity.

Antoinette's resistance to the imposed name demonstrates her awareness of this violence. Recent scholarship similarly interprets Rochester's renaming of Antoinette as an act of colonial and patriarchal control that attempts to erase her existing identity.

Antoinette's struggle is consequently both personal and political.

Her identity is not simply taken from her by an individual husband. It is displaced through a larger system in which English colonial authority is privileged over Caribbean identity.

13. COLONIALISM AND THE FEMALE SELF

Antoinette's experience demonstrates that female subjectivity cannot always be separated from race and colonial history.

Her identity is shaped by several intersecting positions:

- woman;
- Creole;
- colonial subject;
- wife;
- cultural outsider;
- economically and socially displaced individual.

These identities overlap rather than functioning independently.

This makes Antoinette's experience particularly important to feminist literary studies because gender alone cannot explain her marginalization.

Unlike Gilman's narrator, whose principal struggle is associated with domestic and medical authority, Antoinette experiences several systems of authority simultaneously. Her female identity is constructed within a colonial hierarchy that determines which cultural identities are considered legitimate.

Wide Sargasso Sea therefore expands the concept of female self-definition beyond the domestic sphere. Identity becomes a site of colonial struggle.

Rhys's rewriting of the "madwoman" of *Jane Eyre* is central to this process. Rather than allowing Bertha Mason to remain a voiceless figure within another woman's narrative, Rhys reconstructs the character as Antoinette and gives her a history, consciousness and cultural location. Feminist and postcolonial criticism has repeatedly recognized this intervention as central to the political significance of the novel.

14. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: THREE REGIMES OF AUTHORITY

The three texts can be comparatively organized as follows:

Text	Dominant regime of authority	Central struggle
<i>The Yellow Wallpaper</i>	Medical and marital authority	The right to interpret one's own condition
<i>Cry, the Peacock</i>	Marital and social authority	The right to have one's emotional reality recognized
<i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i>	Colonial, racial, gendered and marital authority	The right to maintain one's own identity

The comparison demonstrates that the protagonists do not experience identical forms of oppression.

Gilman's narrator struggles against the authority of medical discourse and domestic patriarchy. Maya struggles against emotional invalidation within marriage.

Antoinette struggles against a much wider structure of colonial, racial and patriarchal representation.

- The mechanisms therefore differ.
- The historical contexts differ.

- The cultural contexts differ.

Yet a common structure connects them:

Someone else claims greater authority to define the woman than the woman possesses over herself.

This is the central comparative finding of the study.

15. RETHINKING MADNESS

Madness is an important component of all three texts. However, this study does not treat madness as the final explanation of the protagonists.

Instead, madness is examined through the politics of interpretation.

Who decides that a woman is irrational?

Who decides that her perception is unreliable?

Who decides that her behaviour requires correction?

Who possesses the authority to name her condition?

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the narrator's experience is interpreted through medical discourse. In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya's emotional consciousness increasingly becomes associated with psychological instability. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette's identity is progressively constructed through the language of madness.

Madness can therefore function as more than a psychological category. It can also become a social category through which women's experiences are rendered illegitimate.

This does not mean that psychological suffering should be dismissed or that the characters' conditions are merely social inventions. Rather, the texts demonstrate that the **meaning assigned to psychological suffering is shaped by relations of power.**

The distinction is important because it allows the study to avoid romanticizing madness as liberation. The protagonists suffer genuinely, but their suffering also reveals the consequences of systems that deny them interpretive authority.

16. FEMALE AGENCY AS SELF-DEFINITION

Agency is often understood as freedom from oppression. Such a definition, however, becomes insufficient when examining the three texts because none of the protagonists achieves complete liberation.

A broader understanding of agency is therefore necessary.

Agency may exist within constraint.

The narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* writes.

Maya insists upon the intensity of her emotional consciousness.

Antoinette resists the identity imposed upon her.

These actions are incomplete and sometimes destructive, but they demonstrate attempts to preserve subjective authority.

Agency may therefore involve:

- speaking;
- writing;
- remembering;
- interpreting;
- imagining;
- resisting;
- naming oneself;
- refusing another person's definition.

The struggle to define oneself becomes a form of resistance precisely because dominant authority seeks to control that definition.

17. DISCUSSION

The comparative reading demonstrates that female subjectivity is neither completely autonomous nor completely determined by social structures.

Women develop within systems of power, but they also interpret, negotiate and resist those systems.

The narrator's writing challenges medical authority.

Maya's emotional consciousness challenges the assumption that rational detachment represents the only legitimate mode of experience.

Antoinette's struggle against the name "Bertha" challenges colonial and patriarchal representation.

The three texts consequently invite a shift in the central feminist question.

Instead of asking only:

How are women oppressed?

the study asks:

Who has the power to define women and their experiences?

This shift is significant because it connects oppression with knowledge.

A woman can be physically present yet epistemologically absent.

She can speak but not be believed.

She can possess an identity but have that identity replaced by another name.

She can experience suffering but have another person determine what that suffering means.

The politics of female subjectivity therefore concerns not only the freedom to act but also the freedom to interpret.

18. MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The comparative study produces several major findings.

18.1 Female subjectivity is contested

The three protagonists possess subjective experiences, but those experiences are repeatedly challenged by external authorities.

18.2 Authority operates through knowledge

Medical diagnosis, rationality, marital expectations and colonial representation all function as forms of knowledge through which women are interpreted.

18.3 Marriage is an important site of identity formation

Marriage is not represented simply as a private relationship. It becomes a structure through which gender roles and acceptable forms of femininity are established.

18.4 Naming can become an act of power

Antoinette's transformation into "Bertha" demonstrates that naming another person can function as a means of identity control.

18.5 Madness is connected with social interpretation

The texts demonstrate that the classification of women as irrational or mad is connected with the authority of those who possess the power to define normality.

18.6 Agency can exist within constraint

The protagonists do not achieve uncomplicated liberation. Nevertheless, their attempts to write, remember, interpret and resist demonstrate forms of agency.

18.7 Self-definition is a form of resistance

The most significant finding is that the struggle to define oneself constitutes a meaningful form of female resistance.

19. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this research lies in its comparative approach to female subjectivity across American, Indian and Caribbean literary contexts.

The study does not suggest that these contexts are interchangeable. Rather, their differences make the comparison productive. Gilman's nineteenth-century American narrative reveals the relationship between gender and medical authority. Desai's Indian novel explores emotional subjectivity within marriage and social expectations. Rhys's Caribbean narrative demonstrates how gender is inseparable from colonial and racial structures.

Together, the texts demonstrate the historical flexibility of patriarchal power.

- The form of authority changes.
- The language changes.
- The social context changes.
- But the struggle over who possesses interpretive authority remains.
- This comparative perspective therefore contributes to feminist literary studies by connecting questions of gender with questions of knowledge, representation and self-definition.

20. CONCLUSION

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* represent three historically and culturally distinct experiences of female subjectivity. Yet the comparative analysis demonstrates that each text is structured around a fundamental struggle concerning the authority to define the female self.

Gilman's narrator confronts medical and marital authority. Maya confronts marital, emotional and social expectations. Antoinette confronts colonial, racial, gendered and marital structures. These forms of authority are not identical, and the women do not experience oppression in the same way. Nevertheless, all three narratives reveal the consequences of allowing external authority to become the final interpreter of women's experiences.

The study has argued that the central issue in these works is therefore not simply oppression but **interpretive authority**. The question is not only whether women are controlled, but who possesses the power to determine what that control means, how women's behaviour should be interpreted, and which version of female identity becomes socially legitimate.

In *The Yellow Wallpaper*, medical authority transforms the narrator's subjective knowledge into something that can be dismissed as illness. Her secret writing consequently becomes an important means of constructing a self outside the official interpretation imposed upon her. The wallpaper functions as a symbolic space through which she develops an alternative interpretation of her experience. Her final breakdown cannot be separated from her resistance because both emerge from the same conditions of confinement.

In *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya's struggle takes a different form. Her emotional intensity is not easily accommodated within Gautama's rational and detached worldview. Her suffering is therefore intensified by the absence of recognition. The novel demonstrates that subjective experience requires more than personal consciousness; it also requires a social environment capable of recognizing that consciousness as legitimate. Maya's tragedy lies partly in the inability of her emotional world and her marital environment to achieve such recognition.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the problem of self-definition becomes even more complex because gender is inseparable from colonialism and race. Antoinette's transformation into "Bertha" demonstrates the violence involved when another person claims the authority to rename and reinterpret her. Her identity is displaced not merely through marriage but through a colonial structure that privileges English authority over Caribbean identity. Rhys consequently transforms the silenced "madwoman" of *Jane Eyre* into a subject whose history, consciousness and identity demand recognition.

The theoretical perspectives employed in this study further demonstrate that power operates through more than direct physical domination. Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "Other" explains the displacement of female subjectivity by external definitions. Foucault's relationship between power and knowledge demonstrates how medical and social institutions establish authoritative versions of reality. Butler's theory of gender performativity helps explain the expectations through which femininity is

socially produced. Spivak's discussion of representation reveals the difficulty marginalized subjects face when their identities are constructed through dominant voices.

The study also proposes a reconsideration of the role of madness in feminist literary interpretation. The three texts should not be reduced to narratives in which patriarchal oppression simply "causes" women to become mad. Such a reading risks simplifying the complex psychological and social dimensions of the texts. Instead, madness should be examined as a contested category whose meaning is influenced by power. The crucial question is who possesses the authority to identify a woman as irrational, unstable or abnormal.

At the same time, the study does not romanticize psychological suffering as a form of liberation. The protagonists experience genuine distress, and their attempts at resistance do not necessarily produce conventional freedom. Their agency is therefore partial, contradictory and sometimes destructive. Yet this does not make it insignificant. Their writing, emotional consciousness, memory, resistance and refusal of imposed identities demonstrate that agency can exist within constraint.

The comparative analysis ultimately shifts the feminist question from **"How are women oppressed?"** to **"Who has the power to define women and their experiences?"** This shift is the principal contribution of the study.

Female subjectivity emerges from this analysis as neither completely free nor completely determined. It is produced within relationships, institutions, cultural expectations and systems of representation, but it also possesses the capacity to question and resist those systems. Self-definition becomes important precisely because dominant structures attempt to define women from outside.

Ultimately, the three texts demonstrate that the denial of self-definition is one of the most significant forms of female marginalization. A woman may be denied physical freedom, but she may also be denied the authority to interpret her own body, emotions, memories and identity. Against this denial, the act of self-recognition becomes an act of resistance.

The study therefore concludes that female agency should not be understood exclusively as physical escape from oppressive structures. It should also be understood as the continuing struggle to retain the right to name, interpret and understand oneself. Gilman's narrator writes herself into existence; Maya struggles to preserve the legitimacy of her emotional consciousness; and Antoinette resists the identity imposed upon her through the name "Bertha." Their struggles are different, but they reveal a common feminist concern: **the right of a woman to become the authoritative subject of her own story.**

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