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From Attic to Pyramid: Gendered and Political Silencing in Rhys and Kadare

Supratim Senapati

M.A. in English, Dibrugarh University

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how systems of power silence marginalized bodies in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys and *The Pyramid* (1992) by Ismail Kadare, while placing them in conversation with *Jane Eyre* (1847) and the figure of Bertha Mason. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's idea of the subaltern, the study argues that colonial patriarchy and authoritarian monarchy maintain their authority by controlling who gets to speak and who remains unheard. Silence in these texts is not an incidental absence but a political strategy that secures dominant myths of civilization, morality, and grandeur. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason's confinement in the attic protects the image of Victorian moral order, while Rhys's novel reimagines this silenced woman as Antoinette Cosway and reveals how renaming, economic dependence, and spatial confinement gradually erode her identity. Similarly, Kadare's novel questions the political myth of monumental greatness by portraying the pyramid as a structure built upon fear, surveillance, and the exhaustion of nameless laborers. Moving from the private sphere of the colonial household to the public sphere of state power, this study shows how celebrated narratives of civilization and greatness depend upon the containment of marginalized lives.

Introduction

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Systems of political and cultural power have historically sustained themselves not only through visible domination but also through the strategic silencing of those positioned as inferior. They often endure by deciding who is permitted to speak and who must remain unheard. This paper examines how such mechanisms of marginalization operate in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys and *The Pyramid* by Ismail Kadare, while placing them in dialogue with *Jane Eyre* and the figure of Bertha Mason. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, the study argues that inferiority is not an inherent condition but a political construction produced through narrative control, spatial confinement, and ideological myth-making (Spivak, 1988).

In the colonial domestic sphere, Antoinette Cosway's transformation into the silenced "Bertha" reveals how patriarchal and imperial discourses construct racial and gendered otherness in order to preserve the illusion of Victorian moral superiority. Similarly, Kadare's allegorical representation of pyramid-building shows how authoritarian power sustains its grandeur by reducing anonymous laborers to expendable bodies and turning human lives into instruments of state spectacle. Moving from the attic to the pyramid—from private confinement to monumental architecture—this paper contends that celebrated narratives of civilization and greatness depend upon the containment and erasure of marginalized voices.

Objective

The primary objective of this study is to examine how political and patriarchal systems construct and sustain marginalization by producing the idea of inferiority within narrative structures. Focusing on *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Pyramid*, and situating them in conversation with *Jane Eyre*, the paper analyzes how silence, spatial confinement, renaming, and institutional control operate as strategies of marginalization. Drawing on Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern, it seeks to demonstrate how marginalized figures—whether Antoinette in the colonial household or the anonymous laborers in the authoritarian state—are rendered inferior through discursive and structural mechanisms that protect dominant myths of morality, civilization, and grandeur. Ultimately, the study considers how literature can uncover and question these systems of power.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and interpretative methodology grounded in postcolonial literary theory. It undertakes a close textual reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys and *The Pyramid* by Ismail Kadare, while situating them in intertextual dialogue with *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. The analysis is

informed by Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern and her discussion of the limits placed on marginalized subjects' ability to speak within dominant systems of representation.

Through comparative analysis, the study investigates how spatial structures—the attic and the pyramid—along with naming practices, silence, and narrative perspective function as political tools of marginalization. Relevant secondary criticism on Kadare's political allegory and the representation of subaltern space in Rhys's novel is used to contextualize the close readings (Danilovska, 2024; Gould, 2012; Poursanati & Pooyandeh, 2026).

Literature Review

Critical discussions of Wide Sargasso Sea have frequently positioned the novel as a postcolonial response to *Jane Eyre*. Rhys brings the silenced figure of Bertha Mason back into narrative history by restoring her Caribbean identity as Antoinette Cosway. Recent scholarship has explicitly connected the novel's Gothic spaces, female voice, and subalternity. Poursanati and Pooyandeh (2026), for example, read confinement, displacement, and spatial control as central to the silencing of Antoinette. Their approach is relevant to the present study's attention to the attic as a space in which gendered and colonial power converge. Spivak's (1988) discussion of subaltern representation also provides a theoretical framework for examining how marginalized subjects may be spoken for or represented through dominant perspectives.

Scholarship on Kadare has examined the political and allegorical dimensions of his fiction. Gould (2012) discusses Kadare's political allegories as critiques of sovereignty and explores the symbolic importance of buildings in his work. More specifically, Danilovska (2024) addresses fear, silence, and power in *The Pyramid*, connecting the construction of the monument with the maintenance of authority. Xhinaku and Pema (2015) also discuss *The Pyramid* as part of Kadare's antitotalitarian allegorical writing. These studies help situate the novel's pyramid as more than an architectural achievement: it becomes a political structure through which authority organizes labor, fear, and public obedience.

Building on these discussions, the present paper brings the domestic confinement of the attic into comparison with the public and monumental structure of the pyramid. Rather than claiming that the two novels emerge from identical histories, it examines how their different settings reveal comparable mechanisms of silencing. The comparison focuses on how spatial structures make marginalized bodies controllable and help dominant systems preserve narratives of moral or political greatness.

Discussion

Systems of political and cultural power do not survive only through open violence or visible force. They also sustain themselves by deciding who has the right to speak and who must remain silent. This paper explores how such systems of silencing operate in Wide Sargasso Sea and *The Pyramid*, while placing them in conversation with *Jane Eyre* and the figure of Bertha Mason. Although the works belong to different historical and geographical contexts—colonial Caribbean and Victorian England in one case, and allegorical ancient Egypt in the other—they reveal how power can depend on the systematic silencing of marginalized people. Spivak's (1988) concept of the subaltern helps frame this comparison.

In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is central to the plot but is denied sustained narrative agency. She is confined in the attic of Thornfield Hall and described through language that presents her as wild, irrational, and dangerous (Brontë, 2021). Her body is visible, but readers receive little direct access to her consciousness. Instead, she is spoken about by Rochester and seen largely through Jane's perspective. This narrative arrangement makes Bertha's silence significant: her confinement helps protect the image of English domestic stability and moral order. Her Creole background also brings colonial anxieties about racial and cultural difference into the domestic space. The attic therefore functions not only as a physical prison but also as a symbolic space in which the contradictions of imperial and patriarchal authority are concealed.

Spivak's (1988) question in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" helps illuminate this dynamic. Her discussion examines how dominant systems of representation can prevent marginalized subjects from being heard on their own terms. Bertha represents a related literary condition: she appears in the narrative, but her life is interpreted and judged by others. Her silence is therefore not simply an absence; it is connected to the structures through which her identity is represented.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* responds to this narrative silence. Rhys reimagines Bertha as Antoinette Cosway and gives her a voice and a history (Rhys, 2001). Through Antoinette's narration, readers encounter the complexities of colonial Jamaica after emancipation. The novel complicates simple binaries of colonizer and colonized by portraying Antoinette as a white Creole woman who is both privileged and vulnerable. She inhabits an unstable social position, rejected by the formerly enslaved community and distrusted by the English. This liminal identity intensifies her isolation and exposes the fragility of colonial hierarchies.

When Rochester renames Antoinette "Bertha," the act becomes more than a personal insult: it symbolizes his power to replace her self-understanding with an identity that fits his expectations. Her financial dependence and removal to England further restrict her autonomy (Rhys, 2001). The attic, which appears in *Jane Eyre* as the place of Bertha's confinement, is revealed by Rhys as the final stage of a longer process of emotional and cultural dislocation. Through Antoinette's fragmented narrative, Rhys challenges the earlier representation and exposes the processes through which her identity is controlled.

While *Wide Sargasso Sea* focuses on gender and colonialism within the private domestic sphere, *The Pyramid* moves into the political realm. Set in ancient Egypt, Kadare's novel depicts a king who orders the construction of a massive pyramid. On the surface, the monument represents glory and immortality. However, the construction project also becomes a means of exhausting and controlling the population. The workers who build the pyramid remain largely anonymous, and their suffering is subordinated to the rhetoric of national greatness (Kadare, 1992/2013). This reading is consistent with criticism that interprets Kadare's monumental structures as political allegories of sovereign power (Gould, 2012) and with Danilovska's (2024) discussion of fear, silence, and power in the novel.

The contrast between the attic and the pyramid is central to this comparison. The attic represents private confinement within a patriarchal and colonial system; the pyramid represents public control within an authoritarian monarchy. One isolates a woman, while the other absorbs the labor of a population. Both structures transform living individuals into manageable symbols. They rely on strategies of surveillance, isolation, depersonalization, and the rewriting of suffering as necessity. They erase inconvenient voices to maintain dominant myths, whether the myth of moral superiority or the myth of monumental greatness.

This comparison does not suggest that colonial patriarchy and authoritarian monarchy are historically identical. Rather, it shows that silencing can operate as a recurring strategy of domination across distinct settings. Whenever authority seeks to present itself as moral, civilized, or glorious, it can conceal the suffering that sustains that image. Inferiority is constructed so that superiority appears natural. Madness, racial otherness, and political obedience are represented not as self-evident qualities but as categories shaped by discourse and control.

Ultimately, Rhys and Kadare challenge these systems by exposing the mechanisms that sustain them. Through *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys destabilizes a canonical English narrative by revealing the violence concealed within its margins. *The Pyramid* exposes the human cost hidden beneath monumental pride and architectural grandeur. By bringing silencing into focus, both novels draw attention to suppressed

histories and remind readers that structures of power—whether domestic or monumental—are sustained by lives pushed to the margins.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that although *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Pyramid* emerge from different historical and geographical contexts, they reveal comparable mechanisms through which power produces silence. When read alongside Jane Eyre and interpreted through Spivak's (1988) idea of the subaltern, the novels show how inferiority can be constructed through narrative framing, spatial confinement, and ideological myth-making. Bertha Mason's confinement in the attic protects Victorian domestic authority, while the erasure of anonymous laborers in the pyramid sustains the image of political grandeur. Moving from the private domestic sphere to monumental state architecture, the novels demonstrate how celebrated images of civilization, order, and greatness can depend upon the containment and invisibility of marginalized lives. Silence in these works is not emptiness but a sign of structural exclusion and hidden violence. Ultimately, both novels encourage readers to look beyond monumental façades and recognize the human voices deliberately pushed to the margins.

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