
**Deconstructing the Male Gaze: The Shifting Representation of Female Identity in
Literature from Classical Texts to Contemporary Feminist Reinterpretations**

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Abstract

This paper examines how female identity in literature has transformed from classical portrayals shaped by the **male gaze** to contemporary feminist reinterpretations that subvert patriarchal perspectives. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory (1975) and feminist deconstruction, the study analyzes key texts ranging from ancient myth and classical epics to modern rewritings by authors such as Margaret Atwood and Jean Rhys. Classical literature often depicted women as passive figures or archetypes defined through male viewpoints, reinforcing women's role as the "Other." Contemporary feminist reimaginations challenge these depictions by giving voice and agency to female characters silenced or objectified in the originals. Through case studies including *The Odyssey* versus *The Penelopiad* and *Jane Eyre* versus *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the paper demonstrates how feminist writers critique and reconstruct traditional narratives. The findings suggest that such reinterpretations not only transform our understanding of classic works but also highlight literature's power as a site of resistance against entrenched gender norms. This shift in representation carries broad implications for literary studies and the cultural perception of female identity.

Keywords: Male Gaze; Female Identity; Feminist Literary Criticism; Classical Literature; Myth Rewriting; Feminist Deconstruction; Gender Representation; Agency.

Introduction

For much of literary history, the portrayal of women has been largely shaped by a predominantly male perspective. Feminist scholars have long argued that cultural narratives tend to position men as active agents, while women frequently appear as objects or reflections of male desires. As theorist John Berger famously noted, men are typically portrayed as doers, while women are depicted in ways that emphasize their appearance and how they are perceived by men. This dynamic has historically led women to internalize an external gaze, seeing themselves through the eyes of a male observer rather than as autonomous individuals with their own agency.

A similar argument was made by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, where she discussed the way patriarchal societies have positioned women as the “Other” in relation to men, who are framed as the dominant subject. She argued that women’s identities have often been constructed as subordinate, defined not by their own attributes or aspirations, but in contrast to or in service of male figures. This perspective highlights a fundamental issue within the literary tradition: female identity has historically been constrained within roles that reinforce a male-centered view of the world. The concept of the **male gaze** was formally introduced in film theory by Laura Mulvey in her groundbreaking 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Mulvey examined how popular films frame women as passive subjects of male desire, arguing that cinema often reinforces patriarchal norms by depicting women through the lens of a heterosexual male viewer. In such narratives, women’s presence is often reduced to their physical appearance, and their roles revolve around serving the storyline of a male protagonist. Though originally developed in the context of film studies, Mulvey’s theory has been widely applied to literature, where similar patterns of objectification and marginalization can be observed in classic works authored by men. Many literary texts, particularly those written in male-dominated societies, reinforce a similar perspective—women are portrayed in ways that reflect societal expectations and norms rather than allowing them full agency and complexity. In response to these longstanding portrayals, contemporary feminist writers and literary critics have sought to challenge and reinterpret these narratives. By revisiting and rewriting classical texts, feminist authors have questioned traditional representations of female identity and dismantled the assumptions underlying the male gaze. This shift in perspective has led to significant changes in how female characters are conceptualized in literature.

This paper explores the transformation of female representation in literature, from the archetypes found in classical works to the more nuanced and empowered portrayals presented in modern feminist reinterpretations. Using Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze and feminist literary criticism as theoretical frameworks, this study examines a selection of literary texts spanning different time periods. Case studies include Homer’s *Odyssey* and its feminist counterpart, Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, as well as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*. By comparing these texts, this paper highlights how feminist authors have reclaimed female voices and offered alternative perspectives that challenge traditional power structures. The significance of this study lies in its demonstration of the transformative impact of feminist interventions in literature. By reinterpreting historical narratives and giving voice to previously marginalized female characters, feminist writers not only critique past literary conventions but also contribute to a more equitable literary landscape. These reinterpretations do more than correct past injustices—they actively shape the way contemporary readers engage with classic texts and understand the role of gender in storytelling. As feminist literature continues to evolve, it offers

new ways to perceive and represent female identity, fostering a broader and more inclusive understanding of literary tradition.

Literature Review

Feminist Theory and the Male Gaze in Literature

Feminist literary criticism emerged in the late 20th century as an effort to challenge the patriarchal norms embedded in literature and to reinterpret texts from a gender-conscious perspective. One of its primary concerns has been the representation of women by male authors, where female characters have often been depicted in ways that reinforce traditional gender roles. This critique draws heavily from the concept of the **male gaze**, originally introduced by Laura Mulvey in her seminal work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). Mulvey argued that in a patriarchal media culture, men frequently control the means of representation, deciding how women are portrayed in texts and films. As a result, women are often denied realistic or autonomous representations and are instead reduced to objects of male desire. Although Mulvey's theory was initially formulated in the context of film studies, it has been widely applied to literature, where similar patterns of objectification and marginalization are evident.

In literary traditions dominated by male authors, the perspective of the heterosexual male reader is often assumed, shaping the way female characters are constructed. Classic works of literature have long catered to male perspectives, presenting women in roles that reinforce patriarchal ideals rather than allowing them full agency. These roles often include idealized muses, seductive temptresses, or self-sacrificing figures whose primary function is to serve the development of male protagonists. Female characters in such narratives are frequently defined by their physical beauty or their impact on men, rather than by their own aspirations or personal growth. Critics have pointed out that the **male gaze** in literature functions both at the level of individual characters and at the level of narration. Even when female characters appear in central roles, their thoughts and perspectives are often mediated through a male narrator or filtered through a lens that prioritizes male concerns. Some female authors, writing within patriarchal traditions, have also unconsciously reinforced these biases, shaping their female protagonists according to societal expectations rather than depicting them as fully independent individuals. Over time, feminist critics and writers have become increasingly aware of these patterns, leading to a broader push for literary reinterpretations that challenge traditional gender norms.

John Berger's observation that "*men act and women appear*" encapsulates how deeply ingrained these biases are. Women in literature have not only been objectified but have also internalized this objectification, shaping their self-perception based on how they are viewed by men. This **internalized gaze** reinforces gendered power structures, making women's self-worth dependent on male approval. This idea is further supported by Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "**Other**" in patriarchal societies. She argued that, historically, men have been positioned as the default subjects in literature, while women have been defined in relation to them.

This framework limited female identity within literature, often confining women to roles that reflect male fears, desires, and expectations rather than allowing them full self-expression.

Building on these ideas, later feminist critics such as Kate Millett and Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar analyzed how canonical literature has historically reflected and reinforced women's secondary status. Gilbert and Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, identified a recurring dichotomy in 19th-century literature: the "angel" versus the "madwoman." This duality positioned women as either virtuous and submissive or rebellious and mentally unstable—both constructs serving the needs of patriarchal ideology. For instance, their analysis of *Jane Eyre* revealed how the character of Bertha Mason functioned as a representation of the suppressed, transgressive aspects of womanhood, while Jane herself was positioned as the acceptable alternative. Similarly, in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the protagonist's descent into madness is interpreted as a metaphor for the stifling constraints placed on women in a male-dominated society. During the 1970s and 1980s, feminist literary theory incorporated **poststructuralist** and **deconstructive** approaches to further analyze gender representations in texts. Inspired by Jacques Derrida's method of **deconstruction**, feminist critics sought to dismantle binary oppositions—such as male/female, subject/object, and active/passive—that had long shaped literary discourse. They argued that these oppositions were neither natural nor neutral but were instead constructed in ways that privileged men while marginalizing women. By critically analyzing texts through this lens, feminist scholars uncovered the hidden biases within literature and proposed alternative readings that offered more nuanced, empowering representations of women.

Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray were among the prominent feminist theorists who urged women to **write themselves**, advocating for a shift away from phallogentric (male-centered) language and narrative structures. Their work emphasized the need for female authors to develop literary styles that reflected women's unique perspectives rather than replicating patriarchal norms. Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* highlighted the exclusion of marginalized voices—particularly women of color and colonized subjects—from traditional literary discourse. Spivak argued that feminist criticism should not only focus on gender but also consider the intersections of race, class, and colonial history in shaping literary representations. Through these theoretical advancements, feminist literary criticism has played a crucial role in challenging the traditional canon and promoting the inclusion of diverse voices. By questioning the **male gaze**, deconstructing inherited narratives, and advocating for new literary perspectives, feminist scholars and writers have contributed to a richer, more equitable literary landscape—one that continues to evolve in response to contemporary debates about gender, power, and representation.

Reclaiming the Narrative: Feminist Revision and Myth-Making

Feminist writers have not only critically analyzed existing literature but have also engaged in **revisionist projects** that actively rewrite stories and myths from a female perspective. This

movement, known as **feminist revisionist mythology** or feminist rewriting, seeks to challenge traditional narratives by shifting the perspective from male-centered storytelling to female agency. Lisa Tuttle identified the primary goals of feminist literary criticism as questioning old texts, uncovering a female literary tradition, resisting sexism in literature, and raising awareness of gender biases in language. Feminist rewriting goes a step further by creating new works that “**revision**” classic stories, offering alternative perspectives that highlight the voices of previously marginalized female characters.

Poet and critic Alicia Ostriker described feminist rewriting as a means of exploring and transforming both the self and the culture. By making “*the Other*”—the silenced wife, the villainized seductress, or the forgotten handmaiden—the central subject of a story, feminist authors **destabilize** the authority of traditional male-centered narratives and expose their inherent gendered assumptions. This method allows them to reclaim and reinterpret historical and literary figures who were previously denied complexity and depth.

One of the most common techniques in feminist rewriting involves **retelling classic stories entirely from the point of view of female characters**. This approach challenges the traditional passive roles assigned to women and allows them to become the narrators of their own experiences. Other strategies include recreating stories to break down women’s objectification and employing feminist narrators who critically or satirically expose the flaws in earlier portrayals of women. These techniques have been widely applied across literary traditions, from **fairy tales and folklore to Greek epics and Shakespearean drama**.

Notable Feminist Reinterpretations

Some of the earliest and most influential feminist rewritings emerged in the late 20th century. **Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* (1979)** reimagines fairy tales such as *Bluebeard* and *Little Red Riding Hood*, reconstructing them in ways that emphasize female empowerment and sexuality. Instead of passive victims, Carter’s heroines exercise agency, challenging the gendered power structures embedded in the original narratives. Similarly, **Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)** serves as a prequel to *Jane Eyre*, offering a voice to **Bertha Mason**, the so-called “madwoman in the attic.” Rhys humanizes Bertha (renamed Antoinette Cosway), depicting her struggles with racial and colonial oppression alongside the psychological effects of patriarchal control. Through this retelling, *Wide Sargasso Sea* directly critiques the limitations of **Charlotte Brontë’s** original novel and exposes the racial and gendered biases that contributed to Bertha’s marginalization.

By the early 21st century, feminist retellings had expanded into what some call a “**new canon**” of literature. Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005) reexamines Homer’s *Odyssey* from **Penelope’s** perspective, giving voice to the queen who was traditionally portrayed as the idealized faithful wife. Atwood also highlights the fate of Penelope’s twelve handmaidens, who were executed upon Odysseus’s return—an event largely glossed over in the original epic.

Similarly, **Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018)** retells the story of the mythological sorceress from *The Odyssey*, portraying her not as a dangerous seductress but as a powerful woman who carves out her own identity in a world dominated by gods and men. **Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018)** shifts the focus of *The Iliad* from the Greek warriors to **Briseis**, a captive Trojan woman who had been a mere footnote in Homer's narrative, giving her a voice to articulate the suffering and exploitation experienced by women in war.

These works are not isolated retellings but **deliberate acts of resistance** against the patriarchal foundations of classical literature. They do not seek to erase or completely discard the original texts; rather, they engage in a critical dialogue with them, exposing the gender biases that have shaped literary traditions while offering alternative perspectives.

The Cultural Impact of Feminist Rewriting

The purpose of feminist rewriting extends beyond simply reversing power dynamics. Instead, these works interrogate **the cultural impact of storytelling**, asking who gets to tell a story and whose experiences are centered. Feminist reinterpretations invite readers to critically question the authority of **canonical texts** and their underlying assumptions. One study of feminist myth retellings identifies a clear pattern of **"criticizing former representations, exploring why they are problematic, and resisting them in order to create change."** In many cases, feminist retellings function as both critiques and creative "answers" to the original stories, offering a vision of how the narrative might unfold if women's perspectives were fully considered.

This approach aligns with the **deconstruction of the male gaze**, as feminist authors break down the traditional ways women have been depicted and reconstruct new narratives that prioritize female subjectivity. By reimagining stories through a female lens, feminist writers challenge the cultural conditioning that has long dictated women's roles in literature and society.

The broader influence of feminist rewriting is evident in its growing **academic and cultural recognition**. Works such as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *The Penelopiad*, and *Circe* are frequently included in university curricula, often paired with the classical texts they reinterpret. This practice encourages readers to engage in comparative analysis, prompting deeper discussions about gender, power, and authorship in literature. Additionally, these reinterpretations have inspired adaptations in **film, television, and theater**, further expanding their reach and influence.

Moreover, the success of feminist retellings has opened doors for further **intersectional perspectives**. Writers from diverse backgrounds are now reimagining classical myths and literature through the lenses of race, sexuality, and postcolonial critique. By reclaiming marginalized voices, feminist rewriting continues to shape literature into a more inclusive and dynamic field—one that acknowledges the past while forging new paths forward.

Classical Texts and the Male Gaze: Portrayals of Female Identity

In classical literature – from ancient myths and epics to foundational works of later eras – female characters were largely created by men and for male-dominated audiences. As a result,

these characters often conform to roles that fit male-centered narratives, and their portrayal is imbued with the assumptions of a patriarchal society. Female identity in such texts is frequently constrained to a handful of archetypes (the virtuous wife, the fallen woman, the temptress, the monstrous witch, etc.), all defined in relation to male figures and societal norms.

Women in Myth and Epic: Objectified Archetypes

Ancient Greek and Roman literature provides striking examples of the male gaze in action. In these stories, women are crucial to the plot but rarely the masters of their own fate. Take the Greek myth of **Medusa**: originally a beautiful maiden, Medusa is punished and cursed (transformed into a Gorgon with snakes for hair) after being raped by the god Poseidon in Athena's temple. Classical sources often frame Medusa as a terrifying monster to be slain by the hero Perseus. This narrative can be read as a reflection of **patriarchal fear of female power and sexuality** – Medusa's deadly gaze and serpentine hair symbolize a dangerous female potency that must be conquered by a male hero (). Her eventual beheading by Perseus is celebrated in myth as a heroic feat. Symbolically, it represents the reassertion of male dominance over a woman who had become too "powerful" (even if that power was itself the result of victimization). The triumphant display of Medusa's severed head on Athena's shield, as legend goes, "*symbolis[es] the subjugation of female power by male dominance.*" () In short, Medusa's identity in the classical tradition is constructed almost entirely through a male heroic lens: she is an embodiment of a threat to be eliminated, rather than a person with her own perspective or story. The male gaze here is literal – one glance from Medusa can turn a man to stone – yet the irony is that the whole myth turns her into an object of horror for the male hero to overcome.

Homer's epic *The Odyssey* offers another instructive case. The epic, composed by a male poet for an ancient Greek audience, is fundamentally the story of the hero Odysseus. Female characters exist primarily in relation to him and his journey, and the narrative viewpoint is thoroughly male-centric. **Penelope**, Odysseus's wife, is lauded for her fidelity and patience during his 20-year absence. She is portrayed as the epitome of the chaste, loyal wife – *her* heroism consists of waiting, weaving, and cunningly fending off suitors to preserve her absent husband's household. Importantly, we learn about Penelope mostly through the eyes of Odysseus (who tests her loyalty in disguise) and their son Telemachus (who polices her interactions with the suitors). Penelope's own inner thoughts and desires are scarcely, if ever, the focus of the Homeric narrative. In one sense, Penelope has agency – she devises the ruse of the never-finished burial shroud to delay remarriage – but the epic frames this cleverness in service of Odysseus's interest, and ultimately she resumes her role as the dutiful wife once he returns. Meanwhile, other women in *The Odyssey* are largely obstacles or aides in Odysseus's path. The sorceress **Circe** and the nymph **Calypso**, for instance, are powerful female figures, yet the epic's perspective depicts them as seductresses who detain the male hero (Circe by enchantment, Calypso by offering immortality) and thus threaten to divert him from his rightful homecoming. Odysseus "conquers" Circe in a sense (with help from

the gods) and resists Calypso's offer, reinforcing his virtue and willpower. Both women are defined by their effect on Odysseus; their own motivations are secondary. **Nausicaa**, the princess who aids Odysseus, is portrayed as innocent and marriageable – again chiefly relevant as a potential helper or temptress vis-à-vis the hero. Throughout *The Odyssey*, then, female identity is split between the virtuous loyal woman (Penelope) and the dangerous other women (Circe, Calypso, the Sirens) who must either be tamed or left behind. All are observed through the prism of Odysseus's experience. This exemplifies the literary **male gaze** avant la lettre: the epic's narrative structures and descriptions consistently align with Odysseus's male point of view, reducing the women to what they signify for his story (faithful wife, sexual threat, divine helper, etc.).

This pattern is echoed in many classical and pre-modern texts. Women are muses, prizes, or pitfalls for male protagonists. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, for example, Queen **Dido** of Carthage is a strong ruler in her own right, but when she falls in love with Aeneas (due to divine manipulation), she is ultimately abandoned by him so that he can fulfill his destiny. Dido's tragic suicide is narratively framed as a necessary sacrifice for Aeneas's mission, and later Roman writers often cast her as a cautionary tale of *furor* (passion) overwhelming a woman's reason. Similarly, in medieval literature and Shakespearean drama, female characters frequently embody ideals or anxieties of their time rather than realistic individualities. **Juliet** must die for Romeo's story to be immortalized; **Desdemona** is the virtuous victim to Othello's jealousy; **Ophelia** in *Hamlet* is sweet and obedient until madness (and narrative function) overtakes her, at which point she exits the stage (via presumed suicide) once her role in Hamlet's story is done. In all these cases, the women in classical texts are not granted the full complexity or agency that their male counterparts are. Their identities are circumscribed by how the (typically male) author and protagonist perceive or use them within the story.

It is important to note that some classical works do contain proto-feminist threads or moments of female assertion – for example, Euripides' tragedy *Medea* (431 BCE) gives voice to a wronged woman who takes vengeance into her own hands. However, even Medea, who is arguably a fully realized character with emotions and agency, is depicted as transgressing acceptable female behavior to a terrifying extreme (infanticide). The audience is left to view her with a mix of pity and horror, rather than empathy alone. Her story too is mediated by male playwrights and later commentators who often emphasized her monstrosity. Thus, while exceptions and more nuanced females exist in classical literature, the overarching trend was that female identity was something defined by men – either held up to idealized standards (chastity, beauty, obedience) or denigrated and feared if it deviated from those standards.

In summary, classical texts, whether heroic epics, myths, or early novels, largely presented women through a one-dimensional **male gaze** perspective. Women were seen but did not truly *see*; that is, they were objects of narrative focus rather than subjects who drive the narrative. Their

identities were often static (the loyal wife, the femme fatale, the selfless mother, the shrew, etc.), leaving little room for personal development or autonomous voice. These portrayals reinforced societal notions of women's proper place and virtues, effectively using literature to mirror and maintain the patriarchal social order. Such an inheritance, ingrained over centuries, set the stage for a significant backlash once women writers and feminist thinkers gained the opportunity to respond and reimagine these foundational stories.

Contemporary Feminist Reinterpretations and Their Impact

Where classical literature left women voiceless or constrained, contemporary feminist reinterpretations attempt to **fill in the gaps** and correct the biases of those earlier narratives. Over roughly the past half-century, there has been a flourishing of works – novels, poems, plays – that retell famous stories from the viewpoint of female characters who were marginal or silent in the originals. These reinterpretations do more than simply insert women into the spotlight; often, they actively engage in a dialogue with the source material, *critiquing* its treatment of female identity and offering an alternate portrayal that challenges the reader's preconceptions. In effect, modern feminist writers “write back” to the classics, deconstructing the male gaze and creating space for a female gaze or at least a more balanced perspective.

the Epic: *The Odyssey* through Penelope's Eyes

A paradigmatic example of feminist rewriting is **Margaret Atwood's** novella *The Penelopiad* (2005), which reimagines **Homer's *Odyssey*** from **Penelope's** perspective. In *The Odyssey*, Penelope is presented as the epitome of wifely loyalty, and her story is largely told through the male-centered narrative of Odysseus. Atwood's *The Penelopiad* shifts this dynamic by giving Penelope her own voice, allowing her to recount her story from the underworld with hindsight and wit. Additionally, the twelve maidservants who were hanged upon Odysseus's return form a Greek chorus that comments on the unfolding events (Atwood, 2005). This feminist reimagining **challenges the male gaze** by centering Penelope's narrative and scrutinizing the injustices faced by women in the original text.

Atwood's work critiques the patriarchal assumptions of *The Odyssey*, particularly the power imbalance between Odysseus and those under his control. The subtitle of *The Penelopiad*, “*The Myth of Penelope and Odysseus*”, signals a reframing of the traditional narrative by prioritizing Penelope's name (Atwood, 2005). Atwood's Penelope is portrayed as more complex and opinionated than in Homer's version; she reflects on her loneliness, her suspicions, and the limitations imposed on her as a woman in a patriarchal society. Moreover, Atwood highlights an overlooked aspect of *The Odyssey*—the **execution of the twelve maids**—and presents their fate as a grave injustice that had previously been minimized in Homer's account (Wilson, 2018). By giving these maids a collective voice in poetic interludes, *The Penelopiad* forces readers to reconsider Odysseus's return and the consequences of his actions.

This reinterpretation serves as a direct challenge to the **male gaze** in classical literature. While *The Odyssey* frames the maids' deaths as a necessary act of justice, Atwood presents them as victims of **patriarchal violence**, exposing the ways in which women are silenced in traditional narratives. As Haneş (2019) notes, *The Penelopiad* functions as "a postmodern rewriting in which feminist discourse criticizes the patriarchal view on the relationship between sexes in the Odysseus–Penelope couple." By demystifying the glorified image of Odysseus and illuminating the perspectives of Penelope and her handmaids, Atwood's work **deconstructs the gender hierarchy** embedded in *The Odyssey* (Haneş, 2019). The result is both a powerful critique of the epic's male-centric viewpoint and a restoration of balance, where female voices are given their rightful space.

The literary impact of *The Penelopiad* is profound, as it invites readers to engage with *The Odyssey* through a critical feminist lens. Atwood raises significant questions: *What does it mean to celebrate Odysseus as a heroic figure when his return involves the silencing of women?* Her reinterpretation does not simply reverse gender roles but rather **disrupts the traditional power dynamics**, offering an alternative gaze that prioritizes female subjectivity (Atwood, 2005). This is a hallmark of feminist **deconstruction**—revealing the biases of the original narrative and providing a corrective that reshapes how the text is interpreted. As a result, *The Penelopiad* fundamentally alters the legacy of *The Odyssey*, ensuring that modern readers reconsider its portrayal of gender, power, and justice.

Reclaiming the Madwoman: *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Another pivotal example of feminist rewriting is the relationship between **Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*** (1847) and **Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*** (1966). While *Jane Eyre* has been celebrated as an early feminist novel due to its portrayal of **Jane Eyre's** self-assertion and moral strength, feminist and postcolonial critics have pointed out a major **blind spot**: the representation of **Bertha Mason**, the Creole wife of Mr. Rochester. In Brontë's novel, Bertha is depicted as a violent madwoman confined to the attic, functioning as an **obstacle** to Jane's romance with Rochester. She is the embodiment of **the "Other"**, a shadowy presence whose story is left untold (Brontë, 1847).

Jean Rhys, who was born in the Caribbean and had firsthand experience with colonial marginalization, reclaims Bertha Mason's story in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In Rhys's novel, Bertha is given her **real name—Antoinette Cosway**—and her backstory is told in full. Set in the West Indies, *Wide Sargasso Sea* follows Antoinette from childhood to her tragic marriage to an Englishman (implied to be Rochester), offering insight into her experiences of **colonial displacement and patriarchal oppression** (Rhys, 1966). Through this lens, Antoinette's descent into madness is not an inherent condition but a consequence of systemic cruelty—her loss of freedom, erasure of identity, and emotional isolation all contribute to her psychological breakdown.

Rhys's reinterpretation is an **explicit critique** of Brontë's narrative. While *Jane Eyre* presents Bertha's madness as a justification for her imprisonment and eventual death, *Wide Sargasso Sea* reveals the inhumane conditions that led to her suffering. As **Spivak (1988)** argues in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Antoinette's story exemplifies the **silencing of colonized women**, who are written out of history by dominant narratives. Rhys's novel forces readers to confront the **racial and colonial hierarchies** embedded in *Jane Eyre*, raising questions about whose voices are heard and whose are suppressed (Spivak, 1988).

As **Kamal (2018)** notes, "*Bertha is deprived of a voice in Jane Eyre, but Rhys seeks to restore that voice in Wide Sargasso Sea.*" By shifting the narrative perspective, Rhys inverts the gaze: the once-demonized "**madwoman**" becomes the protagonist, while Rochester's actions—previously romanticized—are reexamined as coercive and destructive (Kamal, 2018). He renames Antoinette "Bertha" against her will, symbolically erasing her identity, and isolates her until she loses her sense of self. This reframing **deconstructs the romantic hero archetype**, showing Rochester not as a tragic figure but as an enforcer of colonial and patriarchal power.

The impact of *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been profound, as it has become a **canonical text in its own right**, often studied alongside *Jane Eyre*. It prompts discussions about **race, gender, and power**, forcing readers to reconsider Brontë's novel through a more critical, intersectional lens. Rhys's novel not only reclaims a silenced female character but also demonstrates how literature can **challenge colonial and patriarchal narratives** (Rhys, 1966).

Conclusion

The transformation of female representation from classical literature to feminist reinterpretations marks a **significant shift** in literary history. Where women were once portrayed primarily through the **male gaze**—as objects of beauty, virtue, or danger—feminist authors have reclaimed their voices, rewriting old narratives to prioritize **female agency** (Mulvey, 1975). Works like *The Penelopiad* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* illustrate how feminist deconstruction reveals **hidden biases** in traditional texts and offers new perspectives that challenge **patriarchal and colonial narratives** (Haneş, 2019; Spivak, 1988).

Key findings from this study emphasize that **agency and perspective** are central to female representation in literature. When women are given narrative control, their characters shift from **passive objects to active subjects**, breaking free from the restrictive tropes that have long defined them. This shift **redefines how classic literature is interpreted**, ensuring that contemporary readers engage with it **critically and inclusively**.

The **cultural and academic significance** of feminist reinterpretations continues to grow, influencing literature, education, and media. These works do not erase their predecessors but engage with them in a **critical dialogue**, revealing that stories are not static but **constantly evolving**. By questioning **whose voices are heard**, feminist retellings encourage a more inclusive

literary canon, ensuring that future generations encounter stories that reflect a **diverse and multifaceted** understanding of gender and power.

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