Critiques of Disparities: Revising the Mainstream Narratives for the Alternative Relations in *Wide Sargasso Sea, Foe* and *A Tempest*

Niran Khanal[1]

Abstract

This paper aims to study the textual relations regarding the role of ideologies for the maintenance of center-margin relations. My efforts are to uncover the problems related to race, gender and nationality in the discourses of the mainstream texts, and observe the connections between such problems and counter-discursive narrations of the contesting texts. I argue that beside aesthetics, the mainstream texts have political and ideological orientations that serve the interests of the privileged. That is why the alternative writers critique them for the social transformation and justice to the suppressed underclass people and other excluded groups. The new literary discourses emerge from the limitations of the previous discourses. So, epistemology gets the new direction by the disruptive narratives which are constructed with the vision of alternative relations. In this study, I employ the comparative approach to examine the intertextual relations between the pairs of texts with regard to the influence of ideologies in the construction of social hierarchies in the mainstream narratives. The finding of this paper is that the alternative narratives, written from the perspectives of the marginalized, emerge from the ideological fault lines of the hegemonic discourses of the mainstream narratives. The alternative narratives: Aime Cesaire's A Tempest, Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea and JM Coetzee's Foe critique the mainstream narratives: William Shakespeare's The Tempest, Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre and Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe respectively. The critical authors attempt to uncover the suppressed voices of the marginal by reconfiguring the canonical literary discourses. Their attempts are to articulate voices for the justice of socially excluded and underprivileged.

Keywords: *intertextuality, ideology, discourses, counter-discourses, subversion, colonialism, imperialism, postcolonial and hegemony*

1 Dr. Khanal is Assistant Professor of English at Padma Kanya Campus, Tribhuvan University.

Background of the Study

The major differences between the mainstream and alternative narratives in the context of this study are based on the social disparities that have connections with hegemonic ideologies. The alternative texts play the subversive roles to deconstruct the hegemonic ideologies of the mainstream narratives so that the problem of center-margin hierarchies is addressed. To meet this goal, the alternative narratives try to represent the perspectives of the marginalized. In this backdrop, rewriting of *Jane Eyre, Robinson Crusoe* and *The Tempest* in the modified versions as *Wide Sargasso Sea, Foe* and *A Tempest* respectively, reveal the underlying motivations for the greater cause of egalitarian relations where the differences are respected rather than suppressed.

Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds,* argues, "It is difficult to speak of a politics of interpretation without a working notion of ideology as larger than the concept of individual consciousness and will" (161). Spivak views that the political acts of interpretations are under the influence of certain ideologies, and they operate as collective consciousness rather than individual. So, interpreting a text, like *Robinson Crusoe*, can be a political act in order to critique the imperial ideology that runs in the narrative of Defoe. In the same fashion, J.M. Coetzee's *Foe,* the alternative text, is the outcome of the political reading of *Robinson Crusoe.* The textual relations in this study are the relations of differences with regard to cultures, nationality, race and geography.

Ideologies, Perspectives and the Birth of Counter-Discursive Narrations

The social hierarchies depend on various discourses which are influenced by ideologies. For instance, it makes the use of medical discourse to define a sane or an insane. Similarly, anthropology categorizes the people under the ethnic and racial divisions. Literary fictions idealize the 'self' and demonize the 'other'. These discourses in some ways institutionalize unequal relations. Ania Loomba thinks, "Discourse analysis makes it possible to trace connections between the visible and the hidden, the dominant and the marginalized, ideas and institutions. It allows us to see how power works through language, literature, culture and institutions which regulate our daily lives" (45). Importantly, power circulates through the discourses and it is used as per interest.

Jean Rhys's lived experiences of the Caribbean society and the British, Cesaire's of Martinique and the French, and Coetzee's of South Africa, probably motivated them to narrativise the hardships faced by the people of respective areas. These writers articulate their dissident views in the forms of altered narratives in response to the canonical texts that are complicit with cultural and political superiority. Therefore, they are subversive since they try to redefine the positions constructed in the texts, like *Jane Eyre.*

Jane Eyre invites critiques since its author, Charlotte Bronte, could not distance herself from the Victorian mindset of the English society. She constructed the story from the perspective of Jane, an English girl. So, the story revolves around Jane who rises from deprivation to a successful governess. The author places Jane in a dire situation in order to raise her status and empower her. The individuality of Jane is fostered to prepare her to overcome domestic and social challenges. It would not be problematic to empower Jane if the author did not construct binary by placing Bertha Mason, a creole woman, as 'other' of Jane. In representation by Charlotte, the social and the national identities of the Caribbean world of Bertha and the British society of Jane and Rochester get unequal attention. Though both are females, the author places them on unequal footing. The glory of Jane contradicts with the dehumanized Bertha. So, the author fails to do justice to the neglected Jamaican woman who has to pay the cost for the rise of Jane.

The upward mobility of Jane as independent, educated and progressive contrasts with Bertha as dependent, monster like and mad. Socio-cultural discourses play the key roles behind the construction of these binary images. Otherwise, author's mere imagination would not fit into the social patterns that guide our thinking and creativity. To address these problematic representations in *Jane Eyre,* Jean Rhys reframes the narrative in her *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Karen Ya - Chu Yang identifies Jean Rhys's and Conde's positions regarding the colonial texts:

> Rhys and Conde criticize effects of European colonialism which stigmatized people: white superiority based on racial purity and cultural exclusivity was reserved solely for white European parents and bred in Europe. As a result, Rhys's heroine remains excluded in neither/nor margins where she remains an outcast as does Conde's protagonist who performs possibilities of being either/or at the price of giving up her love and life. (8)

Rhys's critical narrative reverses the role of Jamaican girl, Bertha, by assigning Antoinette the role of protagonist in *Wide Sargasso Sea.* Unlike in *Jane Eyre,* the narrative circles around the peripheral woman in Rhys's story due to the change in the perspective.

To some extent, *Jane Eyre* challenges some discursive practices that support the orthodox values of English society. The narrative is able to create an attitude of disapproval of Mrs. Reed who abuses the power of guardianship in case of Jane. Similarly, the greed and cruelty of Mr. Brocklehurst, who runs Lowood school for the destitute girls in the name of Christianity, are exposed. Bronte's attack on these social abuses is laudable. Despite this limited resistance, she fails to address the fundamental problems of gender, class and nationality. Her European middle-class based background seems to shape her perspective that excludes the marginal woman, like Bertha of Caribbean. The author could neither fight patriarchy radically nor she could rise above the politics of nationalism in her representation.

Rhys critiques the ideology of patriarchy that operates in *Jane Eyre.* Edward Rochester, the owner of Thornfield Hall, acts as a macho who plays with women as his puppets to satisfy his promiscuous desires. For instance, He praises, "Jane, you look blooming, and smiling, and pretty, this morning. Is this my pale, little elf? Is this my mustard seed?" (227). Rochester flirts with his mistresses, the French and other women, before he comes in contact with Jane. He recklessly wastes his money on them. Moreover, he does so in his married status as the husband of Bertha. He dumps her after the marriage as 'mad' in isolation, "Glad was I when I at last got her to the Thornfield, and saw her safely lodged in that third story room, of whose secret inner cabinet she has now for ten years made a wild beast's den – goblin's cell" (273). Rochester's unquestioned authority silences Thorn field. His workers are mostly women who dare not raise the voice against his will.

On the other hand, in *Wide Sargasso Sea,* the conflict between Antoinette and her husband is due to the differences of nationality and gender. It is hard to reconcile them. In these terms, a number of differences surface between the rival stories. For examples, Rochester gets Jane though he is married to Bertha, but in Rhys's story, the man has no alternative woman, he must live with Antoinette. Similarly, Bertha though rebellious, commits suicide at the end of the story but Antoinette leaves the confined position in

Thornfield and goes out with a candle at night. She narrates, "then I got up, took the keys and unlocked the door. I was outside holding my candle. Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" (171). Symbolically, she liberates from the colonization of the English man. She becomes victorious. But Bronte presents Bertha, as 'other,' who is defeated since she commits suicide. Ultimately, it is the writerly choice whom to empower in the narrative and who remains neglected. Or, in this sense, who can cross the borders and who cannot.

In the context of colonial and imperial control, in *Death of a Discipline,* Spivak contends, "borders are easily crossed from metropolitan countries, whereas attempts to enter from the so-called peripheral countries encounter bureaucratic and policed frontiers, altogether more difficult to penetrate" (16). Indeed, the marginal have to face a lot of challenges to change the power relationship with the colonial centers practically. But at the intellectual level, the scholars can wage the war discursively. For instance, the author draws the borders between different social identities and nationalities in *Jane Eyre* and they are questioned in *Wide Sargasso Sea.* Jane's superiority over Bertha is connected to the differential view against the Caribbean nationality. Rochester's declaration supports this, "Bertha Mason is mad; and she came out of a mad family; idiots and manics through three generations? Her mother, the creole was both a mad woman and a drunkard . . . Bertha, like a dutiful child, copied her parent in both points" (258). He employs the discourse of 'madness' to justify his treatment to her.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea,* Rhys contends with Bronte by pinpointing the fault lines of gender and nationality. She fields Antoinette for the Caribbean identity different from the European. Unlike Bertha of *Jane Eyre,* Antoinette can defend herself and her identity in connection to her native land. She praises Coulibri, "We were alone in the most beautiful place in the world, it is not possible that there can be anywhere else so beautiful as Coulibri" (118). Similarly, Antoinette claims that she does not belong to the mad family as accused by her husband. She clarifies that her mother's illness was due to the loss of Antoinette's brother and their dislocation from homeland. Thus, the protagonist of Rhys, Antoinette, is conscious of her identity and defends herself on the basis of Caribbean identity.

Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* remains no exception regarding the influence of the hegemonic ideologies. To critique this, Coetzee rewrites the story as *Foe.* Crusoe's

story is the imperial narrative written from the European perspective. With the rise of national consciousness among the colonized nations, the claim for national and cultural identities started to appear in literary productions. So, the story of Crusoe came under scrutiny. The consequences of such scrutiny through the political lens are far reaching.

In *Robinson Crusoe,* women have no voice to represent. So, it tells a man's story from the white man's perspective. In response to woman's exclusion, in *Foe,* Coetzee places Susan Barton to make the story gender inclusive. With Susan's inclusion, the narrative takes new direction as the story is narrated from Susan's perspective. Coetzee creates a contest between Foe, an author, who frames the narratives by listening others, and Susan who wants her story to be written by him in the ways she likes. She challenges Foe for authorship, "I am not, do you see, one of those thieves or highwaymen of yours who gabble a confession and then whipped off to Tyburn and eternal silence, leaving you to make of their stories whatever you fancy. It is still in my power to guide . . . endeavor to be father to my story" (131). In her story, Susan wants herself to be a part in the narrative of Cruso's island where she lived with Cruso. Foe disagrees with the proposal. So, "Susan resisted her positioning as gender object, her predication as being passively related to meaning" (Macaskill et al. 448). She searches more meaningful position in the story. Here, the conflict between Susan and Foe is related to the perspective. While constructing the narrative, so much depends on the perspective to establish or maintain power relations.

For Edward Said, ". . . European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (3). The questionable opposition is set in *Robinson Crusoe* to define Crusoe's identity as civilized, independent, helpful and powerful whereas Friday as savage, dependent, helpless and weak. Coetzee has reservations against these oppositions based on racial and national lines. Strategically, he situates Friday in African context as a black slave without tongue or speech. Since the blacks were enslaved, Coetzee, through Friday, portrays the picture of the impact of colonization and slavery in Africa and other places. So, in *Foe,* Friday is characterized differently than in *Robinson Crusoe*. Defoe Creates an ideal picture of a master, Crusoe, and sets against the ugly image of a slave, Friday. For example, Crusoe fears, "the dread and terror of falling into the hands of

savages and cannibals . . .” (129). Crusoe’s claim of lordship on the island and fear of attack from the savages reveal the contradiction within the colonial enterprise itself.

A number of references of Christian religion and God in *Robinson Crusoe* that idealize the background of Crusoe, evidence how missionaries use religious discourse to institutionalize the colonial authority over others. Crusoe takes pride, “The savage was now a good Christian, a much better than I; though I have reason to hope, and bless God for it, that we were equally penitent, and comforted restor’d penitents; we had here the word of God to read . . .” (174). Crusoe assumes his responsibility of teaching Friday as ‘white man’s burden. He claims that due to the teaching of religious values of Christianity, Friday has become a better human being.

Coetzee takes the radical departure from the position of Defoe in terms of religious ideology. He brings no references of Christianity in *Foe.* Cruso does not claim any credit for the goodness of his religion rather Friday worships his own God as guessed by Susan. She tells, “So I concluded he had been making as offering to the god of the waves to cause the fish to run plentifully . . .” (13). Unlike in *Robinson Crusoe*, Cruso of *Foe* does not impose any religious conviction on Friday. It is up to Friday about it. It seems that Coetzee chooses diversity over the monotheistic principle of the colonialist.

In the subversive play of Cesaire, *A Tempest*, Caliban acts as the anticolonial hero against Prospero’s authority. Throughout the play, he consistently tries to defy Prospero’s command. He knows how Prospero took over the land that he inherited from his mother. He narrates, “Well, you see, this island used to belong to me, except that a man named Prospero cheated me of it” (43). The anti-domination resistance through Caliban is more explicit in *A Tempest* than in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Foe.*

In *The Tempest,* Prospero’s abusive language, “Thou poisonous slave, got by the devil himself upon thy wicked dam, come forth” (117), makes Caliban more rebellious. Like Coetzee’s Friday, Cesaire gives Caliban black-identity to depict the plight of abused black people under colonization. Cesaire’s own experiences of the racial brutality against the black in Martinique, the French occupied territory, probably motivated him to rewrite Shakespeare’s play. His disruptive narrative intends to break the rationality of Shakespeare’s text. To meet this goal, he mobilizes Caliban from the periphery

who defies the rule of Prospero. In addition, Caliban represents the voices of the African-Caribbean people and their identities.

Missionaries' projects were means to justify the European intrusion into the indigenous territories. In *The Tempest*, for example, Stephano intends to train Caliban, "I'll try to civilize him. Oh . . . not too much, of course. But enough so that he can be of some use" (41). Stephano's concern is with 'usefulness' of Caliban. The colonizers have hidden interests behind the mask of service. So, the rebellious Caliban, in *A Tempest,* rejects the teaching of Prospero, "You didn't teach me a thing! Except to jabber in your own language so that I could understand your orders . . . your Science you keep for yourself alone, shut up in those big books" (11 - 12).

In *A Tempest,* the main concern of the subjugated Caliban and Ariel is for their freedom. They aspire for it. Caliban demands 'Uhuru' in his mother tongue for freedom. Ariel unlike Caliban adopts a moderate way in his bargaining for liberation and carries out the command sincerely. He persistently reminds Prospero, "You have promised me my freedom a thousand times, and I am still waiting" (10). Slavery creates an alliance between the mulatto, Ariel and black Caliban since both struggle for liberation. Ariel affirms, "but after all we are the brothers, brothers in suffering and slavery, but brothers in hope as well. We both want our freedom. We just have different methods" (20). It's like Cesaire's unabated efforts for 'Negritude,' the movement for the black-African's distinct identity. He appeals for the unity among the blacks to fight colonialism. For this, language and location can play the crucial role to locate oneself and fight for the intended change.

Identity: Language and Location for the Alternative Relations

Language and place have some connections. Who speaks, in whose language, and from which location, makes difference in power relationship. Different groups contest to develop their own languages to institutionalize the discursive practices, either to establish the ideologies or deconstruct them. The language of feminism interrogates the language of patriarchy. Likewise, the indigenous languages protest the homogenous voice of the colonizers. They try to forge the solidarity among themselves, as Spivak, in *Death of a Discipline,* writes, "Comparative Literature and Area studies can work

together in the fostering not only of national literatures of the global south but also of the writing of countless indigenous languages in the world that were programmed to vanish when maps were made" (15). Literary discourses can be the sites to give space for the heterogeneous languages for their preservation and identity. African, Caribbean and other societies search their identities through the local languages in their writings. For example, Kenyan writer, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o advocates for the use of indigenous languages instead of English. He even demands to ban the English Department that promotes the English language and literature.

Authors adopt different strategies to deviate from the homogeneity of the official or colonial language. Either they use the local languages or appropriate the dominant, "seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place" (Ashcroft et al. 37). Jean Rhys makes use of the creole, nonofficial English of Jamaica *in Wide Sargasso Sea*. Antoinette speaks different English from Jane's of *Jane Eyre as* she belongs to the creole society. Likewise, Antoinette's English husband criticizes the language of Christophine, a black woman from Martinique, who works for Antoinette's family, "Her coffee is delicious but her language is horrible" (77). Patois, a creole version of English, is used by the local people of Jamaica. Like, the black servant, Amelie, complains to Antoinette, "Your husban' he outside the door and he look like he see zombie" (91). The expression, like of Amelie, defies the official standard. It serves as a means to resist.

Personal names matter much to people. Similarly, they identify their places and belongings with local names but the colonizers reinscribe them to blur the old identities and impose the new ones. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the husband calls 'Bertha' to Antoinette in reference to the creole, so-called mad woman in *Jane Eyre*. To which, Antoinette protests, "My name is not Bertha; Why do you call me Bertha?" (122). So, the clash over the name is the clash over the identity.

Foe contends *Robinson Crusoe* on the issues of language and location also. Friday's loss of tongue or speech, in *Foe,* may symbolize the lack of agency for self-representation. His silence is like the silence of the subaltern condition where the socio-political structures do not allow them to articulate their voices. In the postcolonial context of Africa, Coetzee feels the necessity of self- representation through African languages. Though they were silenced, like Friday, during the colonial era, in the postcolonial state,

they need to rise with awareness to deconstruct the colonial discourses. Otherwise, they are misrepresented like Friday. Susan, in the story argues, "Many stories can be told of Friday's tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday, who is mute. The story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday" (118). Giving voice to Friday seems to be like giving voice to the subalterns for self- representation. Though Susan and Friday both represent the marginalized, they hold unequal positions in terms of voice and representation. Friday is dislocated from Africa, his homeland. So, he remains in the state of nowhere. He has neither voice nor his own native place. Whereas, "Susan's problem, then, is not primarily a lack of voice or a lack of art, of representation in its aesthetic and semiotic sense; it is a problem of representation in its political sense. . . "(Macaskill et al. 444). Susan wants Foe to frame the narrative about the island from her perspective and in her language not in Foe's. Here, the clash between Foe and Susan is for controlling the language and perspective of the story. She claims, "For I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire" (131). Since the gender exists, man's way of narrating the story and woman's way of doing it differ significantly.

Cesaire disrupts the Anglophonic discourse of *The Tempest* through Caliban of *A Tempest.* Caliban speaks Swahili, Bantu language of Africa, to demand 'Uhuru'. As he seeks his identity through the native language, Prospero feels threatened, "Mumbling your native language again. I have already told you I don't like it." (11). To show the connection between a language and a place, Cesaire Africanizes Caliban and gives him Swahili. But Caliban of Shakespeare does not use the native language.

Like in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in *A Tempest*, the inscription of imposed name is rejected. Prospero calls the slave, 'Caliban'. But Caliban rejects this naming, "Call me X. That would be best. Like a man without a name. Or, to be more precise, a man whose name has been stolen . . . the fact that you've stolen everything from me, even my identity! Uhuru!" (15). Caliban rejects not only the name given by Prospero but also the imposed identity. So, he claims his native place. This way, Cesaire radicalizes Caliban to protest the colonial takeover**.**

Conclusion

After the analysis of the divergent texts, I have found that textual relations between

the paired stories are based on the social disparities in connection with ideologies and discourses. As the perspectives play the key roles to represent the hierarchies in the mainstream narratives of this study, the alternative narratives change the perspectives from the center to the margin to redefine the relations between the mainstream and the margin. The narratives produced under the influence of the problematic ideologies and assumptions, inevitably meet contestations. For instance, Crusoe's story projects Eurocentric racial biasness against non-European, Friday. So, it needs contestation. Counter discourses develop from the fault lines of the dominant discourses. Therefore, the colonial politics gives birth to the postcolonial politics. The subversive strategies of Cesaire, Rhys and Coetzee question the representations by Shakespeare, Bronte and Defoe respectively regarding the influence of hegemonic ideologies in the mainstream narratives. In response to the homophonic language of the mainstream authors, the heterogeneous voices and languages of the peripheries are used by the critical authors. In this sense, they speak the languages of the marginalized.

Works Cited

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2002.

Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre.* Wordsworth Classics, 1999.

Cesaire, Aime. *A Tempest*. Translated by Richard Miller, Ubu Repertory Theater publications, 1992.

Coetzee, J.M.. *Foe*. Penguin Books, 2010.

Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*. Penguin Books, 2001.

Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism* . Routledge, 2007.

Macaskill, Brian, and Jeanne Colleran. "Reading History, Writing Heresy: The Resistance of Representation and the Representation of Resistance in J. M. Coetzee's 'Foe'". *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 33, no. 3,1992, pp. 432 – 457.

Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea.* Norton and Company, 1992.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Vintage book, 1979.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Cambridge UP, 2002.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death of a Discipline.* Seagull Books, 2004.

- - -. *In Other Worlds*. Routledge,1998.

Yang, Karen Ya - Chu. "Rewriting Canonical Love Stories from the Peripheries." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, Vol.15, no. 4, 2013.