

Beteckning: \_\_\_\_\_



**Humanities and Social Sciences**

Double Oppression in the Color Purple and Wide  
Sargasso Sea. A Comparison between the main  
characters Celie and Antoinette/Bertha.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Purpose and main questions

The basic focus of this essay is to study the main character Celie and her life conditions in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and make a comparison to the main character Antoinette/Bertha's in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Themes like gender relations, gender oppression, colonial subordination and identity seem to be salient in these two stories and shed light upon what these two novels very much have in common. Both novels can be seen as feminist as well as postcolonial, and postcolonial feminist criticism is what this study will take as its point of departure. The two female protagonists are doubly oppressed, that is, both subordinated as women and as colonial objects. My main question to focus on here is how patriarchal and colonial oppressions are expressed in the two novels regarding the main characters Celie and Antoinette. How are traces of 'double oppression' throughout these stories depicted? How are main claims of postcolonial feminist criticism represented?

## 1.2 Method and material

The method I have used here is primarily comparative. The reason for doing so is that there are relevant and interesting parallels between these novels *The Color Purple* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* which became evident with the use of the postcolonial feminist criticism. Whereas *The Color Purple* is a womanist novel with an almost utopian happy ending, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is written from another point of view. *The Color Purple* can be classified as a womanist novel which means, in Walker's definition of the term, that it has to do with "a black feminist or feminist of colour" (Coleman 85). In Celie's case, the novel depicts a black woman's development from a poor and marginalised position into a greater extent of independence. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a prequel to *Jane Eyre*, where Antoinette/Bertha is known as the "madwoman in the attic". *Wide Sargasso Sea* depicts an explanation for Antoinette/Bertha's troublesome situation and it ends up tragically with the female protagonist's total deprivation of her freedom.

*The Color Purple* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* were published fairly close in time which makes a comparison of them interesting, as well as the fact that they have other features in common,

like gender oppression and cultural dominance. From a postcolonial feminist perspective there are relevant comparisons that are possible to make as the two female protagonists are both marginalised and doubly oppressed; they are subordinated due to the fact that they are women and colonial objects. My focus is the two protagonists' subordination and the representation of gender relations and gender oppressions in the two literary texts. In the analysis, there will be a presentation and investigation of how the gender oppression is portrayed in each of the novels. The aim will then be to describe in detail how these findings can be related to the perspective of postcolonial feminist criticism. The purpose of the comparison is to analyse how the question of gender relations and gender oppressions can be seen from a postcolonial feminist point of view. At the end there will be a summary and conclusion presented with the main results of the analysis. I have chosen to study the patriarchal oppressions that Celie and Antoinette/Bertha meet, through a few comparable aspects. I find that these aspects are relevant and make an interesting and fruitful comparison possible. Firstly, it is about how patriarchal oppression comes through by the diminishing and isolation of these two women. Secondly, I compare how the patriarchal oppressions are presented via the aspect of the white man's norm.

### 1.3 Theoretical approach

The theoretical approach that will be taken into account in this essay is thus the postcolonial feminist point of view. From such a viewpoint it will certainly very well be possible to interpret, analyse and compare under what conditions the both protagonists have to live. Both Celie and Antoinette/Bertha are forced into miserable marriages; the former with Mr \_\_\_\_\_ and the latter with Mr Rochester. These two marriages make these women objectified and suppressed in many ways as we will see. The feminist critical approach will hopefully shed light upon how the gender relations and gender oppressions can be interpreted. The theory explores the idea that gender is culturally and socially constructed, a thought that there is clear evidence of in these two novels. Feminist criticism also focuses on the power balance between men and women and how, as in these cases, the male norm often can be seen as the dominant and women therefore are the subordinated. Postcolonialism focuses on the marginalisation and oppression of women in colonial contexts. As McLeod puts it "feminism and postcolonialism share the mutual goal of challenging forms of oppression"(McLeod 174). The postcolonial feminist perspective makes it possible to illuminate how and to what extent

Celie and Antoinette/Bertha are ‘doubly oppressed’ which means that these characters can be seen as suppressed both as females and colonial objects.

In the essay I also discuss the main characters’ subordination from the perspective of a few concepts and theoretical thoughts concerning methods of performing power. These methods of performing oppression have been studied and observed by the Norwegian social psychologist Berit Ås. The reason for why I use these is that such ‘reigning techniques’ are relevant and useful tools in helping us understand further how the oppressions seem to function in the relations between male and female characters. I find them useful even in these contexts outside the Scandinavian area, as these thoughts and ideas are general and might suit well for cross-cultural studies. The reigning techniques that are presented here are primarily ridiculousness, invisibility, double punishment, withholding of information and the levying of guilt and shame.

#### 1.4 Previous research – an overview

As far as I know there has not been any studies done concerning the main focus of this essay, namely to compare Celie and Antoinette/Bertha as victims of double oppressions. However, there has been a quite amount of research done concerning each of these two protagonists. What has been done then is much about the two female protagonists’ gender positions and character development throughout the stories. A number of C-essays deal with topics concerning each of the two protagonists Celie and Antoinette/Bertha and their gender, race and identity. The two C-essays I have studied here are “Race, Oppression and Change in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*”, by Annelie Nilsson and “Finding Yourself through Sisterhood- Celie’s Personal Growth in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*”, by Anna Wängman.

Other critical texts that primarily have been used here are Caroline Rody’s “Burning Down the House: The Revisionary Paradigm of Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*”, Candice Marie Jenkins’ “Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*”, Irene Monroe’s “Response”, Carine M Mardrossian’s “Shutting Up the Subaltern: Silences, Stereotypes, and Double-Entendre in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*.” *The Trauma of Whiteness* by Victoria Burrows deals with the complexities concerning Antoinette/Bertha’s origin and belonging which she claims very much influences her thoughts. It also sets the mother-daughter relationship in focus.

## 1.5 Introducing the novels

*The Color Purple* by Alice Walker was published in 1982 and a film adaptation was released a few years later in 1985. The setting of the novel is in the 20th century American South and the story describes the living conditions of a black poor girl named Celie and gender roles and gender relations are depicted thoroughly. The story is told by the main character Celie through her letters to God and even through her sister Nettie's letters. Celie is raped by Alphonso, the man who she takes for her own father, and her two children Adam and Olivia who she had with him are sent away from her. After a decision by her stepfather Alphonso and Mr \_\_\_\_\_, a widower, she marries the black man Mr \_\_\_\_\_ who is seeking a wife to take care of his home. Later, Celie is separated from her sister Nettie too because of Mr \_\_\_\_\_: 's harsh decision to turn her away from Celie since Nettie refuses to succumb to his sexual invites. At the beginning of the novel Celie is a teenage girl who is just about to be married off to Mr \_\_\_\_\_ and we follow her life story until she is middle-aged and has moved on and successfully built up an independent life. At the end she is also reunited with her children and those who mean a lot to her.

In *The Color Purple* there is physical as well as psychological violence and the female characters are struggling with both gender and racial oppression. In spite of this heavy misery, there is a great extent of personal strength, fighting spirit and courage in the characters. Celie, as a young poor black girl does not seem to have many options in life. From the very beginning of this arranged marriage her destiny seems to be no other than to be a subservient and subordinate wife who does not seem to have her own voice. Later on, however, Celie is gaining more and more control over her life situation and she develops into an independent and self-earning woman. At the same time Mr \_\_\_\_\_ becomes good and friendly as he renounces his previous male sovereignty and authority. At the end of the novel Celie has successfully challenged patriarchal oppression and is no longer a victim of it.

Jean Rhys started to write her *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the early nineteen-forties but it was not published until 1966. Being herself marginalised as a woman and a colonial, she was affected by the colonial power as she had the experiences of being 'the other'. Firstly, the novel was called *The first Mrs Rochester* and it was given a few more titles before the present one. Jean Rhys seemed to be well aware of the advantages of using the literary method of 'writing back' from the colony as she does and thus giving the opportunity to letting the voices from 'the other side' speak (McLeod 166f). By writing back and giving a voice to Antoinette/Bertha in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the author presents a perspective from 'the other

side' and thus gives an alternative to how we might apprehend Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be seen as a prequel and postcolonial response to the English classical *Jane Eyre*, and as a reversionary version to *Jane Eyre* it has interesting parallels to its mother text. In *Jane Eyre* Antoinette/Bertha is much more marginalised than in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and we know her mostly as 'the mad woman in the attic' who has been locked up by her husband Mr Rochester in his house at Thornfield Hall in England. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* we follow Antoinette/Bertha from childhood to her marriage and life together with Mr Rochester. She and the Englishman Mr Rochester are brought together into an arranged and disadvantageous marriage. The young Creole Antoinette/Bertha, a daughter to a former slave-owner, marries Mr Rochester, who visits the Caribbean islands on his search for his future wife. He is on his way to consolidating his fortune and prosperity as well. After the two have married each other this arranged marriage soon becomes an unhappy one. Mr Rochester's cruel attitudes seem to grow the longer he stays in the new milieu and the marriage develops into a troublesome capture for Antoinette/Bertha. The relationship between these two spouses is not only a gender mixed relationship, but also a mixture of different cultures and traditions. This certainly becomes clear both for Antoinette/Bertha and her husband. For Antoinette/Bertha this means a disastrous misery and as both a woman and a colonial she has to go through several tough struggles. Tragically and without a solution for her disastrous marriage, she is at the end of the novel imprisoned by Mr Rochester in the attic of his house in England.

## 2. A comparison of the double oppression in the two protagonists' marriages

### 2.1 The diminishing and isolation of Celie and Antoinette/Bertha

Feminist scholars have defined the term patriarchy as “the rule of the father, including the rule of older men over younger men and of fathers over daughters, as well as husbands over wives”(Jenkins 984, Ehrenreich 284). Like Jenkins argues in “Queering Black Patriarchy: The salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*”, this definition of the concept of patriarchy very well corresponds to the prevailing system of gender order in *The Color Purple*. The way of performing dominance can be done both psychologically and physically. We will start looking at the psychological oppression that Celie and Antoinette/Bertha are victims of and what reference points there are in the two novels in this respect.

There are a number of ways of abusing a woman through psychological violence. Some of these are described as follows and are, as we will see, relevant in the case of Celie and Mr \_\_\_\_\_ as well as to Antoinette/Bertha and Mr Rochester (Enander & Holmberg 31f). One way of exerting psychological violence or oppression is verbally, which means that women are degraded and often described as unintelligent or sexual objects. Secondly, isolating the woman from contacts with friends, relatives or important institutions of society, is a form of violence which prevents her from help and support. Thirdly, the woman is usually economically dependent on her husband. Moreover, the woman is usually frightened and threatened by the destructive relationship she lives within.

Obviously, in Celie’s case it is possible to apply these criteria of psychological violence for woman abuse from above. Undoubtedly, Celie is the object of degrading and diminishing comments and attitudes by her husband. Symptomatically, Celie is also exposed to sexual abuse. Moreover, she is deprived of her earlier so close contacts to her sister Nettie. Finally, as a poor girl Celie has no money and is thus dependent on Mr \_\_\_\_\_. His questioning of his wife’s decision to leave him for Memphis can be seen as an attempt from his side to frighten her: “Nothing up North for nobody like you... He laugh. Maybe somebody let you work on they railroad” (Walker 186). Obviously, he resolutely tells his wife what she should do and with this utterance he seems to demand Celie to stay with him. By commanding his wish to have her at home, the patriarchal order can be maintained. Furthermore, his declarations about the importance of beating an obedient wife who does not see her husband as an authority can

be seen as a way of using threatening or frightening practises with the purpose to maintain the patriarchal system.

In Antoinette/Bertha's case, the oppression she faces can be linked to a few of these criteria for psychological violence. She is definitely degraded/diminished by her husband's comments which becomes clear when he decides to call her 'Bertha' instead of her real name Antoinette. It can be seen as a patriarchal way of controlling and silencing her. The naming of someone is strongly connected with who we are and our identity. When Mr Rochester starts calling his wife by a new name she feels very upset: "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeh too" (Rhys 95). Antoinette/Bertha is deprived of her identity and feels lost. She claims that her husband practises obeh or magic when he insists upon calling her Bertha. What the author Rhys does in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is to let the heroine retain her real name compared to her naming in *Jane Eyre*, and she illustrates the process of re-naming or un-naming. In Brontë's text, she is nameless and mostly referred to as the mad woman. Although Antoinette/Bertha is reluctant to her husband's choice of labelling her, Mr Rochester insists upon continuing using it. It seems to be a way for him to take control over his relationship. As Caroline Rody points out in her "Burning Down the House", Mr Rochester certainly distances his wife from her mother's name Annette, whom he uncritically takes for an alcoholic madwoman (Rody 218f). The madness that he finds in Antoinette/Bertha's family is certainly a reason for him to hide when he calls his wife Bertha. Vivian Nun Halloran claims in her "Race, Creole, and National Identities in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*" that Mr Rochester labels his wife with a new name to separate and distance her from her creole background that he detests (Halloran 98). Ironically, Mr Rochester himself remains nameless throughout the novel. As we saw above in Antoinette/Bertha's case, the naming of someone is closely connected with one's identity. The fact that Mr Rochester is nameless can in one way be interpreted as the author's intention is to diminish and marginalise him. On the other hand, we know that he is definitely given a voice in the novel. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's naming of her husband as "Mr" seems to be a way for her to distance herself from male characters like her husband. It might symbolize the power he is embedded with as both a man and upholder of the white man's norm. However, unlike Mr Rochester, Mr \_\_\_\_\_ does not remain nameless throughout the whole novel.

Moreover, similar to Celie, Antoinette/Bertha faces the oppression of being isolated from close friends. Due to the fact that Mr \_\_\_\_\_ is hiding the letters to Celie from her sister Nettie she is deprived of her integrity. This can be seen as an indication of how patriarchy in one way becomes visible in the way Mr \_\_\_\_\_ takes control over his wife's life. In

Antoinette/Bertha's case you might say that Mr Rochester is using patriarchal power in a similar way when he is blaming his wife for being too close a friend to her nurse Christophine. Christophine, the old and respected servant in the household, was given to Antoinette/Bertha's mother as a wedding gift and has known Antoinette/Bertha a long time before her marriage with Mr Rochester. She is the one who really protects Antoinette/Bertha throughout the story. In Celie's case there are a few close friends who like her sister Nettie, Shug Avery and Sofia play an important role for her personal development.

It is interesting to see how the two female protagonists in the two novels are supported more or less by their near women companions. These companions/friends are so called female communities that figure in both novels against the male oppression the two female protagonists face.

Sisterhood is important and can be a help to challenge patriarchal oppression (Monroe 110f; see also Wängman 27). Antoinette/Bertha finds her great support in Christophine whom she trusts even though she does not always seem to make use of it to the same extent as Celie does. The strong connection that Celie and Antoinette/Bertha have to their female relatives/friends can be interpreted as a threat to the patriarchal order. This is what Mr Rochester seems to feel when he questions the role and impact Christophine has upon Antoinette/Bertha when the two are discussing private matters such as their marriage. Christophine appears as a counterbalance to the very patriarchal order in that such a strong woman as she is, characterized by magic and features typically connected to 'the other', is giving advice to Mr Rochester's wife and thus is performing some sort of control and dominance. It seems like he is afraid of losing his superior position. In this case we may say that the reversed patriarchal order exists where the female part is strong and the male part tends to be the weaker one. That means that the male superiority as well as the male norm is threatened and weakened.

Strikingly, the thoughts and theories about so called 'reigning techniques', or methods used to gain and perform power and authority, might very well be related to these two protagonists' situations. The Norwegian social psychologist Berit Ås has observed and defined five such techniques from a feminist point of view. She names the techniques ridiculousness, invisibility, double punishment, withholding of information and the levying of guilt and shame, which all can be seen as various expressions of 'reigning techniques'. As shown above, Mr \_\_\_\_\_ is withholding information from his wife as he does not let her get in touch with Nettie. Furthermore she is definitely made ridiculous and diminished by Mr \_\_\_\_\_ in his way of oppressing her. Moreover, those deeds may be interpreted as a way of making

someone else invisible. Even in Antoinette/Bertha's case there are traces that very well might be related to these techniques. When Mr Rochester is talking about how his wife Antoinette/Bertha has left him thirsty he seems to project their failed marriage and his unhappiness on her. It can thus be interpreted as he puts guilt and shame for that on Antoinette/Bertha. On the contrary, he should rightfully blame himself for his prejudices and way of domineering. Undoubtedly, he is also using the method of ridiculing or making someone else invisible/diminishing his spouse when he calls her by the name Bertha, something that she naturally finds unfair. In Elaine Bergqvist's book *Härskarteknik* she outlines seven different methods. There is at least one of them that should be mentioned here, namely what is called the self-inflicted one, which means that one diminishes oneself through what and how you do or say something. It means that one gives an insecure impression often indicated through the body language and peak of voice (DN 2008-02-28). Corresponding primarily to Celie, that might be the case when she seems to be rather uncertain how to express herself. Certainly, this insecurity is a consequence of the impact that the oppression has upon her, and the more Celie becomes independent, is given a voice and thus an opportunity to speak up, the more self-confidence she gets. At the beginning of the novel and the relationship with Mr \_\_\_\_\_, when Celie faces a great part of the patriarchal oppression, her voice is also marginalised. Along with her character development and patriarchal challenge she seems to become more secure and she is able to express her opinions.

What is significant in this relationship between Mr \_\_\_\_\_ and Celie and their family is Mr \_\_\_\_\_'s dominance over both his wife and his children. In the earlier parts of the novel Mr \_\_\_\_\_ dominates Celie and his children strongly. He seems to be in total control of the domestic sphere. He beats his wife and hides the letters from her sister Nettie. Martha Fineman has argued that "control, dominance, and independence are quintessentially masculine" (Jenkins 993). This definition of masculinity seems to correspond rather well to Mr \_\_\_\_\_'s behaviour. "The rule of the father and of older men over younger" is certainly evident among these family members. Being a son Mr \_\_\_\_\_ has learnt this idea himself from his father-son relationship. Later on we are told that Mr \_\_\_\_\_'s son Harpo has strictly been told by his father how to behave and deal with his wife Sofia. The best way to rule a wife is, in Mr \_\_\_\_\_'s opinion which he also tells his son, to beat her if necessary. He is thus commanded by his father how to rule his wife. Hopelessly, Celie expresses how difficult it is to speak up and defends herself against the male oppression she faces: "I think about Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive"(Walker 22). Obviously, she is used to do as others always have told her to do. She

really does not know what to do as she says “I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive”(Walker 18). Clearly, Celie concludes that she is marginalised and voiceless without an option to stand up for herself.

Besides Mr \_\_\_\_\_’s performance of control and dominance, he certainly is independent in one way, namely that he obviously manages to do what he wants within the patriarchal domain and he also independently succeeds in ordering other family members what to do. On the other hand, you may wonder how he would manage without his subordinated wife and family members. Obviously he is dependent on someone who does the so called ‘house-wife’s job’ and thus is responsible for the home or domestic affairs.

After having declared that Celie is going to leave home to go off with Shug, Mr \_\_\_\_\_ reacts in a very negative way saying: “You bitch, he say. What will people say, you running off to Memphis like you don’t have a house to look after?” (Walker 181). Here he clearly behaves like he is afraid of losing control when he is blaming his wife for not taking her responsibility with her domestic duties. Certainly he sees the patriarchal institution, with its clearly defined gender roles, threatened and questioned by her choice to break up. The roles between men and women are here described as strictly divided. Men are first and foremost supposed to be the head of the family, as is the case for Mr \_\_\_\_\_, and due to that also the dominant part of the married couple. In this position men have the main duty to deal with affairs outside the domestic sphere and the family. On the other hand, women’s main sphere is the home with its domestic duties. Women are supposed to deal with interior family tasks like taking care of the children, cooking and cleaning etc.

Further on Mr \_\_\_\_\_ decidedly uses his dominance to put Celie down:

You’ll be back, he say. Nothing up North for nobody like you. Shug got talent, he say. She can sing. She got spunk, he say. She can talk to anybody. Shug got looks, he say. She can stand up and be notice. But what you got? You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do in Memphis is be Shug’s maid. Take out her slop-jar and maybe cook her food. You not that good a cook either. And this house ain’t been clean good since my first wife died. And nobody crazy or backward enough to want to marry you, neither. What you gon do? Hire yourself out to farm? He laugh.  
(Walker 186)

Obviously, this quote illustrates well how Mr \_\_\_\_\_ is domineering his wife and weakens her position and individuality. His superiority over her is once again symptomatically expressed

by him. In one of her letters to her sister Nettie, Celie describes the difficulties with the male sovereignty with these words: “Well, you know wherever there’s a man, there’s trouble” (Walker 186). Certainly, it illuminates well her experience of patriarchal oppression and subordination. Celie opposes her husband’s critical views about her decision to leave by responding “The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot” (Walker 187). For Celie, the experience of the limitations that the patriarchal oppression has effected upon her is so strong that she compares it to a jail.

However, at the end of the novel Celie has challenged patriarchal oppression and thus broken up from its limitations. She is no longer isolated in the domestic sphere but is able to find more options in life, like business. Successfully, she has made her choice to break up from the disastrous and disadvantageous marriage and make her wishes come true. Throughout the novel we can also mark a development and transformation that Mr \_\_\_\_\_ undergoes. Jenkins claims that Mr \_\_\_\_\_:

is displaced as patriarch, divested of his former dominance. Ironically enough, this transformation takes place in part because of Celie, who puts a curse on Mr \_\_\_\_\_ as she leaves his house with Shug. While Mr \_\_\_\_\_’s initial response is quintessentially patriarchal- “Who do you think you is? (...) You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam ... you nothing at all” he soon discovers, in the first of many reversals in his life, that the person he had assumed to be most powerless is in fact the one most capable of transforming his existence. (Jenkins 984)

The development of Mr \_\_\_\_\_ takes place after that Celie has left his house with Shug. After having taken up a position in the public sphere Celie is certainly changing the order and balance in their male-female interaction which means that the female part in this gender system of order is thus strengthened and reinforced. When she has the opportunity to be involved outside the domestic sphere she seems to be gaining more equal rights and opportunities than ever. Clearly, and at the same time her husband’s position is weakened. The previous patriarchal order is, at least in the beginning, certainly uncomfortable for Mr \_\_\_\_\_.

While Celie finally finds hope and a meaningful future as a more independent woman, Rhys’ Antoinette/Bertha is totally deprived of her freedom when she at the end of the novel is locked up in the attic at Mr Rochester’s house in England. In contrast to Celie, Antoinette/Bertha does not have such a strong and successful support from the female

community/sisterhood. The influence of the sisterhood that Celie has a strong support from, develops and gets a strong position in the ethnic/racial community where Celie and Mr \_\_\_\_\_ live in. The womanist novel *The Color Purple* has its almost utopian, happy ending as it has a strong emphasis on the black female protagonist's successful development into an independence that is stronger than ever. In Antoinette/Bertha's case, the situation is another one. As a response to Antoinette/Bertha's more marginalised position in *Jane Eyre*, one of the main points of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is certainly to present an alternative reading and thus an explanation for how and why Antoinette/Bertha tragically goes mad.

After having completed a reversionary version to the classics and mother text *Jane Eyre*, we may wonder why Rhys does not rewrite Antoinette/Bertha's destiny in a more positive way. In the mother text *Jane Eyre*, she is tragically burning down the house at Thornfield Hall in England when she desperately is on the move from her captivity and tries to break up from her isolation. At the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, we follow Antoinette/Bertha the time just before the burning of the house when she is thinking: "I was outside holding my candle. Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do. There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage"(Rhys 123). The dark passage might here metaphorically symbolize the suffering of the hard trial she has to go through. Certainly there is a point in focusing on the protagonist immediately before the moment of her dying. This might put more focus on what indeed are the causes behind this troublesome situation that Antoinette/Bertha hopelessly comes into. By rewriting a classical text with the perspective of the voice from 'the other side', Rhys successfully makes her main character a heroine. Antoinette/Bertha is given a voice and position in *Wide Sargasso Sea* while she is marginalised in *Jane Eyre*.

Concerning the question of marginalisation and the importance of searching back, I agree with critics like Benita Parry who argue that there is a great need for reclaiming "historically repressed knowledges and to construct the speaking position of the subaltern, a conception of the native as historical subject and agent of an oppositional discourse"(Mardorossian 1). This is just what *Wide Sargasso Sea* does when it presents the voice from the 'other side'. A postcolonial point of view focuses on the importance of reclaiming the past and marginalised voices (Barry 193). Compared to its source text *Jane Eyre*, in which Antoinette/Bertha is in many ways objectified and one of the most marginalised characters, she is given a voice and can thus be seen as being subjectified to a much greater extent. However, as Spivak and other critics have noted, there can also be a problem with whether the subaltern's or the other's

voice has been constructed and imposed by Western thoughts and ideas (Mardorossian 1). These two views presented by Parry and Spivak do not necessarily have to exclude each other but can rather be complementary because there is of course always a great need to be able to reconstruct the past while, at the same time, it is also of great importance to be aware of the fact that one is more or less influenced by the surroundings. I would also agree with what McLeod claims, namely that *Wide Sargasso Sea* presents not just a pre-existing reality but an exposition of how ‘colonial discourses’ constitute their alternated images and changeable views (McLeod 159f).

As we have seen there are many similarities between the main characters’ life conditions and marriage situations. In Mr Rochester’s and Antoinette/Bertha’s marriage, the gender oppression is much the same as in *The Color Purple*. Like Mr \_\_\_\_\_, Mr Rochester plays the dominant part in his marriage and, for example, regards his masculinity as naturally superior and normative. Looking back at the term patriarchy and its definition as, among other things, “the rule of the husbands over their wives”, this can be said to correspond well to these two relationships and the way the wives are dominated by their husbands. The two protagonists Celie and Antoinette/Bertha are trapped into unfavourable marriages which can be seen as patriarchal institutions. They are marginalised and subordinated as women. Undoubtedly, their husbands are dominant in these marriages and govern and rule to maintain control.

However, there are a few differences concerning the performing of patriarchal oppression in the two marriages as well. Unlike what we are told about Mr Rochester, Mr \_\_\_\_\_ uses physical violence and sexual force against his wife Celie. As advice for his son Harpo who asks him about this issue, he clearly declares that it is a man’s right to beat his wife in order to expect obedience from her. Physically, Mr \_\_\_\_\_ is thus ready for using such hard and severe methods in gaining control in this form of patriarchy. On the other hand, Antoinette/Bertha is, as is said above, oppressed by horrible and severe methods as well in the very imprisoning of her. Tragically, that means an almost complete isolation. While Mr \_\_\_\_\_, at the end of the novel, resigns from performing patriarchal oppression against Celie, Mr Rochester’s patriarchal dominance becomes harder the longer he is married to Antoinette/Bertha.

## 2.2 The upholding of the white man's norm

Strikingly, both Mr \_\_\_\_\_ and Mr Rochester look upon their wives as 'the other' and abnormal. In doing so, they not only define themselves as superior, but also as the norm for unquestionable reason and the norm for how to be human. There are examples of how these two men describe their wives as quite different from themselves and their culture. For instance, Celie faces the dominance of the white man's norm when Mr \_\_\_\_\_ tells her that she is nobody, that she is an unattractive black who is not good enough (Walker 187). What becomes clear regarding Mr \_\_\_\_\_: s behaviour is the fact that he seems to be transmitting the white dominant race's norms and prejudices against his wife Celie, despite his own background as a black. Mr \_\_\_\_\_ is black himself like his lover Shug Avery is, but when he is telling Celie what she is like, it seems as if he defines her as someone 'other', totally different from himself and his lover. In establishing Celie's otherness, he relates his wife's weakened position to her blackness. Here his oppression against his wife consists of a mixture of features connected to class, race and gender. She is degraded because she is categorized as a poor black woman. He goes on by declaring his critique in this way: "He laugh. Who you think you is? he say. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all" (Walker 187). This might fruitfully be connected to postcolonial feminist theory as well. She can be seen as doubly oppressed under the impact of both patriarchal and colonial dominance. Maybe this way of victimizing someone else can be interpreted as a need for letting oneself be, as Mr \_\_\_\_\_ in this case, the stronger part in the struggle between the weak and strong. He upholds not only the patriarchy and the dominance within this marriage between blacks but even the normalization of the white dominance and superiority. With his attitude towards his wife Celie, he confirms the white man's norm in declaring himself as representing it. By disqualifying Celie because she is black Mr \_\_\_\_\_ oppresses his own race. Certainly, he transmits the oppression that the white colonizers bring and thus tyrannizes his own race.

Mr Rochester, who certainly can be seen as representing the white man's norm, also depicts his wife as someone totally different from himself and what he belongs to. In his stay in the Carribean Islands Mr Rochester defines his wife, her family and friends, her culture and origin as abnormal and other (Rhys 44, 112). Moreover, he rejects her culture and its customs as inferior to his. From Mr Rochester's colonialist point of view, almost everything connected with his wife's land and culture stand out as foreign and unnatural for him. Mardorossian points out in her "Shutting Up the Subaltern: Silences, Stereotypes, and Double-Entendre in

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* that Mr Rochester in this state of mind can be seen as not being able to "comprehend the hidden place, he leaves behind the secret he would never know and returns to his cardboard house in England where he can safely and unambiguously recast as madness his wife's association with the resisting opaqueness of the West Indies" (Mardorossian 11). Mr Rochester never learns about neither the culture nor the people in an objective way. Much of the information he gets in touch with is certainly based on prejudices and rumours. We may wonder why he immediately trusts information given to him by new acquaintances. Uncritically, Mr Rochester for example accepts and agrees to what he hears Antoinette/Bertha's half-brother say about her and her family. Possibly, it is because the facts are given by a man, namely by Antoinette/Bertha's half-brother Daniel Cosway. In such a case it might be interpreted in patriarchal terms, how Antoinette/Bertha faces male hegemony, what a man says is true so to speak. Mr Rochester is told by a man, and so takes this for granted, that his wife, her mother and brother, are all tainted by madness. As a result he comes to the desperate conclusion that he has been tricked into this marriage. Being a younger son and in need of a prosperous future, he certainly feels that he has been forced into marrying someone he does not even know (Rhys 157f). He expresses his disappointment about the fact that he feels that he has been tricked into his marriage:

They bought me, *me* with your paltry money. You helped them do it. You deceived me, betrayed me, and you'll do worse if you get the chance... (That girl she look you straight in the eye and talk sweet talk- and it's lies she tell you. Lies. Her mother was so. They say she worse than her mother.)...If I was bound for hell let it be hell. No more false heavens. No more damned magic. You hate me and I hate you. ...I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out. And with the hate her beauty. She was only a ghost. A ghost in the grey daylight. Nothing left but hopelessness. (Rhys 111)

Being tainted by the information he is told about his wife, he agrees to the attitudes that colonial power and its prejudices bring.

As mentioned, the relation between Mr Rochester and Antoinette/Bertha is not only a union of a man and a woman and thus a gender mixed relationship, but also a mixture of different cultures and traditions. This certainly becomes clear both for Antoinette/Bertha and her husband. Moreover, Antoinette/Bertha's background and feeling of belonging is not wholly clear which makes her situation more complicated and complexed (Fish 509).

The complexities concerning the origin of Antoinette/Bertha and how that affects her feeling of belonging is taken up by Victoria Burrows in her *The Trauma of Whiteness*. Burrows claims that Antoinette/Bertha's background as a white Creol and daughter to a prosperous previous slave-owner is not an unimportant explanation for why she marries a white Englishman as this can be seen as adventurous for her. As this marriage is arranged and thus decided wholly by neither her nor Mr Rochester, it is certainly one possible explanation for their marriage.

An example of Mr Rochester's patronizing critique of his wife's culture is when he is thinking about his situation on the island and is deeply displeased with what he experiences. The oppression against Antoinette/Bertha is much constituted of elements belonging to cultural specificity as Mr Rochester brings in a lot of cultural critique in his way of dominating and controlling his wife:

It was all very brightly coloured, very strange, but it meant nothing to me. Nor did she, the girl I was to marry. When at last I met her I bowed, smiled, kissed her hand, danced with her. I played the part I was expected to play. She never had anything to do with me at all. Every moment I made was an effort of will and sometimes I wondered that no one noticed this. I would listen to my own voice and marvel at it, calm, correct but toneless, surely. But I must have given a faultless performance. If I saw an expression of doubt or curiosity it was on a black face not a white one. (Rhys 44)

Certainly, Mr Rochester realises that he has been forced into something he can not stand; a relationship and situation he definitely finds uncomfortable. This is what becomes clear even for Antoinette/Bertha, who feels the distance increase between them.

Moreover the cultural oppression against Antoinette/Bertha is illustrated in connection with Mr Rochester's quarrelling with Antoinette/Bertha about Christophine's behaviour:

Her coffee is delicious (I said) but her language is horrible and she might hold her dress up. It must get very dirty, yards of it trailing on the floor.' 'When they don't hold their dress up it's for respect,' said Antoinette. 'Or for feast days or going to Mass.' 'And is this feast day?' 'She wanted it to be a feast day.' 'Whatever the reason it is not a clean habit.' 'It is. You don't understand at all. They don't care about getting a dress dirty because it shows it isn't the only dress they have. (Rhys 52f)

This disagreement can be interpreted as a 'double oppression' as it focuses on Christophine both as a woman and colonial object. The oppression is therefore in line with the main claims in the findings of postcolonial feminist approach. Obviously, Mr Rochester is not familiar with local traditional customs and he refuses to comprehend. He usually contradicts or argues against his wife's views, which for him is a way to take control and uphold a strong position.

After having been on the islands for a long time Mr Rochester expresses his hatred and discomfort with his wife's cultural belonging:

I was tired of these people. I disliked their laughter and their tears, their flattery and envy, conceit and deceit. And I hated the place. I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it.

(Rhys 112)

What is remarkable here is that the features of the culture and/or nature and Antoinette/Bertha seem to be closely connected to each other, as Mr Rochester sees it. In relation to the theoretical perspective of both feminist and postcolonial criticism this 'double oppression' becomes clear. In his opinion his wife Antoinette/Bertha belongs to these people who are other, characterized by different customs and traditions. The perspective of 'the other' which Mr Rochester describes, distances himself from that culture. It seems clear that the more Mr Rochester comes to hate the place the more he finds his wife disgusting.

In fact, he dreads being part of the Caribs and thus his relation to his wife is strained and problematic. Mardorossian interestingly points out that Mr Rochester "ultimately loses control and carries out the colonizer's worst fear, namely of 'going native', that is, to be one among the inhabitants on the Caribbean island" (Mardorossian 7). Even though the concept 'native' is rather complicated here as it may be difficult to define who really belongs to that category, we may say, if we relate it to the present inhabitants and their culture, that Mr Rochester's fear certainly is strongly connected with natives of creoles in that sense. As it is shown above, he definitely dissociates himself from anything to do with 'that other'.

Regarding the question of otherness as well as power relations and the structure of power, it has been argued that within a multicultural society like the United States, power is used by the

racial hegemony over the minority's culture and race (Christophe 102, see also Nilsson 7). In the relation between Mr \_\_\_\_\_ and Celie, we see how racial oppression even exists between blacks. Mr \_\_\_\_\_ uses the white dominant race's norms and prejudices against his wife Celie despite his own origin as a black. By illuminating Celie's origin and ethnicity while defining her as 'the other' he seems to be performing a double oppression or 'double colonization' (McLeod 175, 179). In contrast to Mr Rochester, who is a European coloniser, Mr \_\_\_\_\_ oppresses his own ethnicity/race.

The concept of 'double oppression' or 'double colonization' is a product of the theoretical approach of postcolonial feminist criticism which is a combination of the two theories of postcolonialism and feminist criticism. As McLeod writes, double colonization implies living under the negative effects of both patriarchy and colonialism (McLeod 175). Celie can be seen as being under this double pressure, suffering from consequences of both patriarchal and colonial oppression. This double oppression is emphasized in the often used critical term women of color, in feminist criticism from 1980s and 1990s.

In *Envisioning American Women: Roads to Communal Identity in Novels by Women of Color* Maria Mårdberg claims that the term "Women of color often designate identification with minority cultures, and the major advantage of women of color is that it draws attention to white dominance and points to the experience of being 'non-white'" (Mårdberg 33). This concept of women of color and the experience of being 'non-white' is relevant to the fact that Celie is influenced by white cultural dominance. The white-dominance is evident in the patriarchal oppression that Celie faces when her husband performs a 'double colonialization' or double oppression against her. That means that the oppression is patriarchal and colonial at the same time. The very naming of Celie's husband as Mr \_\_\_\_\_ can be said to illuminate the occurrence of the white man's norm and authority. As Jenkins suggests, the use of 'Mr' might symbolize not only Celie's subordination to men in general and her husband specifically but also a way to leave "male identity blank" (Jenkins 991). Jenkins also claims that "The appellation 'Mister' is perhaps a more subtle reminder of white controls over black life...the black men in Walker's text are scripted into a pattern of titular naming that even without direct reference to whiteness is informed by racial hierarchies" (Jenkins 981). The fact that southern white men usually are referred to as 'Mister' might possibly indicate the awareness of and connection with the white race's hegemony. The label 'Mr' points to the fact that the identification of the white man's power structure is inherited to and used even within the relations between blacks. Certainly, it seems that Celie's use of "Mr" is an expression for her distance from male characters like her husband, and it might symbolize the power he is

embedded with as both a man and upholder of the white man's norm. At the end of the novel Mr \_\_\_\_\_ has become a friend of Celie who appreciates her and the things she does. Symptomatic of this context, he is named as Albert in the text.

White dominance over subcultures can very well be seen in Antoinette/Bertha's case as well. As is said earlier, Mr Rochester remains nameless throughout the novel. Unlike Mr \_\_\_\_\_, who changes and becomes good, Mr Rochester does not develop into that good fellow-being which certainly is an important explanation for why he is unnamed. Dominated by her husband's views about her and her culture's abnormal otherness Mr Rochester's superiority can be seen as being both patriarchal and colonial.

Both Celie's and Antoinette/Bertha's subordinated positions in their marriages can, as we have seen, be clarified by the theory of postcolonial feminist criticism. The oppressions in both Celie's and Antoinette/Bertha's marriages are to a great extent both patriarchal and colonial and thus illustrate main claims in postcolonial feminist theory. It seems clear that dominance and power are patriarchal and colonial at the same time and that Celie and Antoinette/Bertha thus are suppressed under "double colonisation" (McLeod 174f). They seem to be 'doubly colonized' within the institutions of their marriages because they are subordinated both as women and as colonial objects.

In Celie's case, the double oppression is depicted explicitly when Mr \_\_\_\_\_ reminds her of the fact that she is black and thus makes his explicit reason for diminishing her. He describes her as being worthless and subordinated to him in terms of class, race and gender. That means that Celie is doubly suppressed as both a colonial object and as a woman. On account of her racial/ethnic background, she is worthless according to her husbands' point of view. Besides this fact several of his descriptions, attributes or features connected with Celie that strengthens her 'otherness' and makes her appear as 'the other' in relation to the white norm. She is degraded by her husband as a poor black unattractive woman who is simply not good enough. Celie is characterised by her husband as 'the other', someone totally different from him. Mr \_\_\_\_\_ claims and degrades Celie for being a black woman, and because of that is hardly able to do or manage with anything (Walker 187, Nilsson 6).

In a similar way Antoinette/Bertha is associated with the concept of otherness, as her husband sees it. Clearly, in Mr Rochester's depiction and treatment of his wife he tends to characterize her as the opposite of himself, as 'the other' and abnormal in contrast to the white or English norm or reason that he represents. A central concern here is the marginalisation of Antoinette/Bertha although she is less marginalized here than in *Jane Eyre* where she does not have a voice at all. The aspect of 'colonialism's otherness', that is the perspective of the

colonial dominance over 'the other' and the subordinated culture, is evident here as well. Throughout Rhys' novel we can follow how Mr Rochester increases his control and dominance over Antoinette/Bertha. Antoinette/Bertha is marginalised by the colonial and patriarchal oppression she faces. Strikingly, Mr Rochester seems to be in a greater extent of control and Antoinette/Bertha more oppressed, when the two settle down in England and his home country. Later on he goes so far that he even imprisons his wife at home. The longer away Antoinette/Bertha is from her culture the more marginalised she seems to be.

Comparing the two male protagonists, Mr Rochester seems to consider himself as having a disadvantage in the patriarchal system as he comes to the conclusion that he has been forced into this arranged marriage. Mr Rochester certainly views himself as victimized by the order of not only patriarchy but by the system of colonial domination as well. What we can read clearly from the story is that Mr Rochester is thinking over his situation on the Caribbean Islands and how it comes that he has come to be where he is. This feeling of discomfort is not what Mr \_\_\_\_\_ seems to foretell. We do not know much about his inner thoughts and feelings at all.

## Conclusion

The aim of this essay has been to compare *The Color Purple*'s main character Celie and *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s main character Antoinette/Bertha's subordinated positions in their marriages. The main focus has been to analyze and compare the patriarchal oppression they are set under in these two marriages. The theoretical approach has been postcolonial feminist criticism. In relation to this perspective one main question in focus has been how an image of 'double oppression' can be traced in the two novels.

To sum up, there are many similarities between the two novels' female main characters and their life conditions. Both Celie, who is a poor black girl, and Antoinette/Bertha, who is a white creole and daughter to a former slave-owner, are trapped in arranged and unhappy marriages where they are marginalised and live with dominant husbands. Despite their different backgrounds, there are interesting parallels between these two characters' patriarchal oppressions that they experience. Being marginalised both as women and as a result from the effects of colonialism, Celie and Antoinette/Bertha have very few opportunities to give voices to their own wills and opinions.

I have studied the patriarchal oppression in these two marriages from a few aspects that I have found comparable and relevant. These aspects are the diminishing and isolation of the female spouses, the upholding of the white man's norm and then a comparison of how Celie's and Antoinette/Bertha's subordinations might illustrate main claims of postcolonial feminist criticism, namely that they are doubly oppressed both as women and colonial objects. Regarding the issue of diminishing/isolation they are both controlled and experience comments by their husbands that definitely have diminishing effects. They are both prevented from social contacts with friends and relatives; in Celie's case she is not even allowed to have contact with her beloved sister Nettie. Similarly, Mr Rochester does not like that his wife has too close contact with her old nurse and friend Christophine.

As has been shown, the situation of Antoinette/Bertha and Celie can be seen as illustrating main claims in postcolonial feminist criticism. For Mr Rochester, a European coloniser, almost everything related to his wife and her culture seems to be connected to 'the other' and subordinated to the dominant ethnicity and culture he belongs to. The double oppression that Antoinette/Bertha experiences, is more difficult to challenge because she has not such a strong support from a sisterhood that Celie has. In this situation it seems hopeless to win the fight against the white male colonial power that her husband represents. In Celie's case, the double oppression against her becomes very clear when Mr \_\_\_\_\_ describes her chances in

life outside his house as rather limited. In his opinion she is nothing because of her background as being both black and a woman. With his attitudes towards his wife Celie and her background as black, he seems to uphold the white man's norm while declaring himself as superior. What Mr \_\_\_\_\_ does at the same time is that he oppresses his own race. At the end of the novel when the two spouses become friends, Celie' has developed into a more independent woman. As has been shown, the support from her female community or sisterhood is undoubtedly an important reason for that. Unlike Mr Rochester, Mr \_\_\_\_\_ at least at the end, certainly feels sympathy within his ethnic/racial community as the pressure from the female community is strengthened and Celie has a strong ability to stand up for herself.

Strikingly, both Mr \_\_\_\_\_ and Mr Rochester can be viewed as upholding the white man's norm. The effects of the white man's dominance mean that both Celie and Antoinette/Bertha are 'doubly oppressed' and 'doubly colonized' because these two female protagonists are suppressed in patriarchy both as women and colonial objects. Mr \_\_\_\_\_ and Mr Rochester are the dominant males in their relationships who control and dominate in several ways. They both disregard their wives' views and opinions which obviously is a way to rule their spouses. For example, Celie is deprived of the contact with her sister Nettie as Mr \_\_\_\_\_ conceals her letters. Both Celie and Antoinette/Bertha have within their marriages few possibilities to assert themselves. As we have seen, the oppressions that Celie and Antoinette/Bertha face can be seen as being related to both gender and race.

A few methods of performing dominance and power have been defined by the social feminist psychologist Berit Ås. These are the techniques of ridiculousness, invisibility, double punishment, withholding of information and the levying of guilt and shame. I have discussed and compared these to the oppressions Celie and Antoinette/Bertha face. Undoubtedly and primarily, Celie seems to be under the pressure of ridiculousness, invisibility and withholding information. In Antoinette/Bertha's case the most relevant techniques are ridiculousness, invisibility and the one of putting guilt and shame on someone else.

As we have seen, these two novels *The Color Purple* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* have much in common in considering themes like identity, gender and colonial oppression. The two female protagonists Celie and Antoinette/Bertha have both similar and different backgrounds. They are similar in the way that they lack real options in life and thus suffer as they are unable to choose their future husbands or make other important choices of life. Despite this, Celie succeeds when she later on lives an independent life relatively free from any patriarchal oppression. This is a main difference compared to Antoinette/Bertha's situation. At the end of

*The Color Purple*, Celie has developed into an independent and self-earning woman while the end of *Wide Sargasso Sea* means a tragedy for Antoinette/Bertha. Antoinette/Bertha is still captured in her disastrous misery when we at the very end of the story follow her inner thoughts on her escape away from being imprisoned by her husband. Antoinette/Bertha never releases herself from the patriarchal oppression. Unlike Antoinette/Bertha, Celie successfully makes use of the support she finds in her network of sisterhood. Undoubtedly, she has an advantage of the fact that she finds help from Shug who has a strong position in relation to Mr \_\_\_\_\_ and the patriarchal oppression she is surrounded by. In contrast to Mr Rochester, Mr \_\_\_\_\_ develops into a good guy who resigns from his previous oppressive sovereignty.

There is another difference, namely regarding the two male performances of patriarchal oppression. In contrast to Mr Rochester, Mr \_\_\_\_\_ is depicted as using physical violence and sexual abuse against his wife. As we have seen, and according to the descriptions of psychological violence as well as the definition of patriarchy, Mr \_\_\_\_\_ can be said to use both psychological and physical violence. His way of dominating seems to be harsher as he demands obedience practically immediately from Celie. On the other hand, Mr Rochester imprisons his wife later on and does not change into “a good guy” like Mr \_\_\_\_\_. At the end of the novels, Celie succeeds in challenging patriarchal oppression in her life, while Antoinette/Bertha still is dominated and a victim of patriarchy. It seems that Mr Rochester’s oppressive methods become crueler the longer he and Antoinette/Bertha are married.

In contrast to Celie, who is poor and black, Antoinette/Bertha descends from a white and wealthy family, and her father is a former slave-owner. What we undoubtedly can learn from these two novels is that such a system of order as patriarchy and the negative effects of colonial power can be found in various social classes as well as different cultures and parts of the world. The theory of postcolonial feminist perspective definitely helps us understand what the consequences might be with those circumstances that both Celie and Antoinette/Bertha face in their marriages. It is of a great importance that there are presentations of the versions from ‘the other’ and that the two women thus are given their voices.

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