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Recovering Marginalised Histories through Digital Humanities: A Study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract

History has traditionally been documented through dominant political, social and cultural perspectives, often overlooking the experiences of marginalised communities. The histories of enslaved people, women, indigenous populations and racially oppressed communities have frequently remained underrepresented in conventional historical narratives. Literature, particularly the historical novel, provides an alternative space for reconstructing these neglected experiences and challenging established historical interpretations. This research paper examines the representation and recovery of marginalised histories through Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), employing the interdisciplinary perspective of Digital Humanities. Morrison's novel reconstructs the traumatic experiences of African American communities under slavery, focusing on racial oppression, maternal suffering, collective memory and historical trauma. Similarly, Rhys's novel reimagines the colonial Caribbean through the experiences of Antoinette Cosway, a white Creole woman whose identity is shaped by racial conflict, patriarchal domination and cultural displacement. The study investigates how both writers challenge dominant historical narratives by recovering silenced identities and alternative experiences of the past. It further explores the potential of Digital Humanities methodologies, including digital archival research, textual analysis, geographical mapping and historical timeline construction, to examine and visualise the marginalised histories represented in these novels. The paper argues that combining literary interpretation with digital methodologies can contribute to a broader understanding of historical memory, colonial power and the recovery of suppressed cultural identities.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, Marginalised Histories, Historical Fiction, Cultural Memory, Slavery, Colonialism, Gender, Toni Morrison, Jean Rhys.

Introduction

History is generally understood as the systematic documentation and interpretation of past events. However, historical records are not always neutral or comprehensive. They are frequently shaped by the perspectives of those who possess political, economic and cultural authority. Consequently, the experiences of marginalised communities, particularly enslaved people, women, immigrants and colonised populations, have often been excluded from dominant historical accounts. Such omissions create significant gaps in the understanding of social and cultural histories. Literature becomes an important medium through which these forgotten experiences can be reconsidered, reconstructed and represented. The historical novel occupies a distinctive position in this process because it combines fictional imagination with historical realities. Unlike conventional historical documents, novels can explore the emotional, psychological and personal consequences of historical events. They provide access to experiences that may not have been adequately recorded in official archives. Through fictional characters, fragmented memories and alternative narratives, writers challenge established historical perspectives and restore visibility to overlooked communities.

In this context, Digital Humanities offers new possibilities for literary and historical research. It combines traditional humanities disciplines with digital technologies to investigate, preserve, organise and interpret cultural materials. Digital archives, geographical information systems, text mining, word-frequency analysis and digital timelines enable researchers to examine literary representations of history from different perspectives. These methods do not replace conventional literary criticism; rather, they supplement close reading by revealing textual patterns, historical connections and geographical relationships.

The present study focuses on two significant novels: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Published in 1987, *Beloved* explores the continuing consequences of American slavery through the experiences of Sethe, an enslaved woman who escapes from Sweet Home in Kentucky. The novel examines the relationship between historical violence, motherhood, memory and identity. Morrison draws upon the historical case of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who escaped to Cincinnati in 1856 and resisted the forced return of her children to slavery. The National Endowment for the Arts identifies this historical incident as an important inspiration for Morrison's novel. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, published in 1966, revisits the colonial Caribbean through the life of Antoinette Cosway. The novel offers an alternative perspective to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* by

presenting the history of the woman who becomes Bertha Mason. Set primarily in post-emancipation Jamaica and later moving to England, the narrative explores colonial divisions, racial tensions, patriarchal authority and female displacement. Rather than accepting the representation of Antoinette as merely a mysterious or mentally unstable woman, Rhys investigates the historical and cultural circumstances that contribute to her fragmented identity.

Although the novels explore different geographical and historical contexts, both challenge the authority of dominant historical narratives. Morrison recovers the experiences of enslaved African Americans, whereas Rhys questions the colonial and patriarchal construction of female identity. This study therefore examines how literary narratives recover marginalised histories and how Digital Humanities can provide additional methodological approaches for investigating these representations.

Research Objectives

The major objectives of this study are:

- To examine how Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* reconstruct the historical experiences of marginalised individuals and communities.
- To investigate the representation of slavery, colonialism, racial discrimination, gender oppression and cultural displacement in the selected novels.
- To analyse how memory, identity and historical trauma challenge dominant historical narratives.
- To explore the application of Digital Humanities tools in identifying, mapping and preserving marginalised literary histories.
- To establish the significance of integrating literary interpretation, historical research and digital methodologies in contemporary literary studies.

Recovering Marginalised Histories in *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a powerful literary reconstruction of the historical experiences of enslaved African Americans. The novel is set in the aftermath of the American Civil War and examines the continuing psychological and social consequences of slavery. Through Sethe's experiences, Morrison demonstrates that the abolition of slavery does not

automatically eliminate the suffering, discrimination and historical trauma experienced by formerly enslaved individuals. The character of Sethe represents the struggles of enslaved African American women whose personal histories were frequently ignored by official historical records. Her experiences at Sweet Home reveal the brutality of the institution of slavery, including physical violence, sexual exploitation and the denial of human dignity. The novel also explores the suffering caused by the separation of families and the denial of maternal freedom. Sethe's desperate decision to prevent her children from being returned to slavery becomes one of the most disturbing moments in the narrative. This incident reflects the extreme conditions under which enslaved mothers were forced to make impossible decisions.

Morrison's treatment of historical memory is particularly significant. The past does not remain confined to historical records; it continues to influence the present through memories, psychological disturbances and haunting experiences. The mysterious presence of Beloved symbolises the return of suppressed histories and the suffering of those whose experiences were never adequately acknowledged. Through this supernatural element, Morrison transforms historical trauma into a narrative experience. The concept of collective memory is also central to the novel. Sethe's personal suffering gradually becomes connected with the experiences of the wider African American community. Baby Suggs, Denver and Paul D contribute to the representation of a community struggling to overcome the consequences of slavery. Morrison suggests that historical recovery requires not only individual remembrance but also collective recognition. An important dimension of *Beloved* is its representation of the limitations of official history. Enslaved individuals were frequently treated as property rather than as human beings with independent identities and personal experiences. Their emotional lives, family relationships and cultural traditions were rarely given adequate space in institutional records. Morrison attempts to fill these historical gaps through literary imagination. Her narrative gives prominence to experiences that conventional historical documentation could not fully preserve.

Digital Humanities can provide useful approaches to investigating these representations. Digital archives containing historical photographs, newspaper reports, abolitionist documents, slave narratives and records relating to fugitive slave laws can be examined alongside the novel. In particular, the historical case of Margaret Garner provides an opportunity to compare documented events with Morrison's fictional reconstruction. Such

archival comparison can help researchers understand the relationship between historical evidence and literary imagination.

Textual analysis through tools such as Voyant Tools can also be used to examine the recurring vocabulary associated with memory, family, motherhood, violence, freedom and slavery. Word-frequency patterns and contextual searches can help identify the prominence of these themes throughout the narrative. However, numerical findings must be interpreted through close reading because the importance of a literary theme cannot be determined through word frequency alone.

Geographical mapping offers another research possibility. The novel's movement between Kentucky and Ohio can be represented through a digital map, illustrating the geographical dimensions of enslavement, escape and freedom. A digital timeline could also connect the fictional narrative with significant historical developments, including the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the Civil War and emancipation.Thus, *Beloved* demonstrates how literature can recover suppressed historical experiences while Digital Humanities provides methods for organising and visualising the historical evidence associated with them.

Recovering Colonial and Gendered Histories in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* offers an important reconsideration of colonial history and female identity in the Caribbean. The novel challenges the representation of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* by giving her a personal history, cultural background and narrative voice. Through Antoinette Cosway, Rhys examines how colonialism, racial discrimination and patriarchal authority shape the experiences of women in colonial societies. The historical setting of the novel is particularly important. Following the abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean, former slave-owning families experienced social and economic instability. However, emancipation did not immediately produce equality. Racial divisions, economic exploitation and colonial hierarchies continued to influence Caribbean society. Rhys represents these tensions through Antoinette's family and her relationships with the Black Caribbean community. The relationship between Antoinette and Rochester is central to the novel's exploration of patriarchal power. Rochester's inability to understand Caribbean culture and his desire to control Antoinette contribute to her loss of identity. His decision to rename her Bertha becomes a symbolic act of domination. Naming functions as a form of

power through which he attempts to replace her personal identity with an identity of his own construction.

The novel also highlights the significance of geographical space in the formation of identity. Coulibri, Granbois and Thornfield Hall represent different stages of Antoinette's displacement. The Caribbean landscape initially provides a sense of belonging, although it is also associated with racial conflict and social insecurity. England, particularly Thornfield Hall, becomes a place of confinement and alienation. The geographical movement from the Caribbean to England reflects the loss of cultural belonging and the gradual destruction of Antoinette's independent identity. Rhys's narrative structure is significant because it presents different perspectives, particularly those of Antoinette and Rochester. Their conflicting accounts demonstrate how historical and personal experiences can be interpreted differently according to the position of the individual. By giving Antoinette a voice, Rhys challenges the dominant narrative of *Jane Eyre* and restores complexity to a character previously presented largely through another writer's perspective.

Digital Humanities can contribute to the study of this novel through historical archival investigation. Researchers can examine digital records relating to post-emancipation Jamaica, Caribbean plantation economies, colonial social structures and the changing status of Creole communities. Historical newspapers, maps, colonial documents and other archival materials can help contextualise the social conditions represented in the novel. Digital geographical mapping can be used to trace the movement between Coulibri, Granbois, Jamaica and England. Such mapping would demonstrate how geographical displacement is connected with cultural alienation and the exercise of colonial power. A digital timeline could also connect the novel's historical setting with the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, which took effect in 1834, and the subsequent transformation of Caribbean society.

Textual analysis can further investigate the language associated with identity, madness, race, belonging, confinement and displacement. Comparing the vocabulary used in Antoinette's and Rochester's narrative sections could reveal differences in their perceptions of Caribbean culture and personal identity. These findings, when combined with close reading, would help explain how language reflects unequal power relations. Therefore, *Wide Sargasso Sea* demonstrates how literary fiction can challenge established colonial narratives and recover the complex experiences of individuals whose identities have been shaped by racial and patriarchal structures.

Comparative Analysis: Digital Humanities and the Recovery of Marginalised Histories

A comparative examination of *Beloved* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* reveals important similarities in their treatment of historical memory, identity and marginalisation. Although the novels belong to different geographical and cultural contexts, both writers challenge the limitations of dominant historical narratives.

In *Beloved*, Morrison focuses on the historical oppression of enslaved African Americans and the lasting consequences of racial violence. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys examines the colonial and patriarchal structures that contribute to Antoinette's cultural displacement and loss of identity. Both novels demonstrate that history is not simply a record of political events; it is also composed of personal memories, suppressed experiences and competing interpretations.

Memory functions as an important means of historical recovery in both works. Morrison presents memory as a haunting presence that connects the past with the present. Rhys uses fragmented narration and conflicting perspectives to demonstrate the instability of personal and cultural identity. In both cases, the recovery of marginalised histories requires a reconsideration of whose experiences are remembered and whose voices are excluded.

Digital Humanities provides a common methodological framework for investigating these narratives. Four approaches are particularly relevant.

Digital Archival Research: Historical documents, photographs, newspapers and public records can be examined to establish the historical contexts of the novels. For *Beloved*, archival research may focus on slavery, fugitive slave laws and the experiences of formerly enslaved African Americans. For *Wide Sargasso Sea*, it may investigate post-emancipation Jamaica, colonial administration and Caribbean racial relations.

Text Mining and Computational Analysis: Digital text analysis can identify recurring vocabulary and thematic patterns. Terms relating to slavery, motherhood, memory and freedom in *Beloved* can be compared with terms relating to identity, madness, race and displacement in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Voyant Tools can assist in generating word-frequency lists, contextual visualisations and word clouds.

Geographical Mapping: GIS-based mapping can visualise the movement of characters and the historical locations represented in the novels. Mapping the geographical journey from

Kentucky to Ohio in *Beloved* and the movement between Caribbean locations and England in *Wide Sargasso Sea* can demonstrate how physical spaces influence historical and cultural identities.

Digital Timeline Construction: A comparative digital timeline can connect the fictional narratives with their historical contexts. It can include the development of slavery and emancipation in the United States, the abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean and the social changes that followed. Such a timeline would make the historical relationship between the novels more accessible and visually understandable.

These methodologies can be combined with traditional close reading to produce a more comprehensive interpretation. Importantly, digital visualisations should not be treated as independent historical proof. Archival materials require careful verification, and computational findings must be interpreted within their historical and literary contexts. Digital Humanities is most effective when technological methods support critical thinking rather than replace it.

The comparative study also requires an awareness of the differences between the two novels' representations of marginalisation. Sethe's experiences emerge directly from the institution of racial slavery, whereas Antoinette's experiences are shaped by her complicated position within colonial racial and gender hierarchies. Their histories should not be treated as equivalent. Instead, the comparison demonstrates the different ways in which colonial power and historical inequality affect individuals and communities.

Conclusion

The study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* demonstrates the significant role of literature in recovering marginalised histories and challenging dominant historical narratives. Both novels reconstruct experiences that have been inadequately represented in conventional historical accounts. Morrison gives literary visibility to the suffering, memory and resistance of enslaved African Americans, while Rhys reinterprets colonial history through the experiences of a culturally displaced Creole woman.The application of Digital Humanities expands the possibilities of such literary investigations. Digital archives enable researchers to access historical documents and photographs; text mining helps identify recurring thematic patterns; geographical mapping visualises the relationship between place and identity; and digital timelines connect fictional

narratives with historical developments. These approaches create opportunities for interdisciplinary research by bringing literary criticism, historical investigation and digital technology together.

Ultimately, recovering marginalised histories involves more than identifying forgotten events. It requires recognising the human experiences, identities and cultural memories that dominant historical narratives have overlooked. The selected novels demonstrate that fiction can function as an alternative space of historical remembrance, while Digital Humanities offers valuable methods for preserving, analysing and communicating these histories. The intersection of literature, history and digital technology therefore contributes to a more inclusive understanding of the past and provides new possibilities for contemporary literary scholarship.

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