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Speaking for the Silenced: Narrative Mediation and Subalternity in Allende's Island Beneath The Sea

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Abstract

This study investigates how silence, embodiment, and memory operate as mediated forms of speech when direct articulation is denied in Isabel Allende's *Island Beneath The Sea* (2010). The researchers will examine the portrayal of freedom, haunted by fear and history embodies Spivak's paradox: the subaltern can speak, but remains unheard in the selected novel through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) work "**Can the Subaltern Speak?**" *Island Beneath The Sea* (2010) is historical novel written by the Chilean author Isabel Allende. It depicts how Allende has portrayed the story of an enslaved girl's journey from a girl to a mother and reveals how motherhood becomes both a refuge and a prison for her. Through Zarité's voice, Allende crafts a narrative that is both a personal odyssey and a collective reckoning, making it a compelling text for analysis through postcolonial and feminist lenses. The researchers have employed the method of textual analysis for this study. The findings reveal that Zarité's speech is continuously reframed by colonial law and racial hierarchy, yet her body and memory articulate resistance beyond verbal language.

Keywords: Historical Novel, Subalternity, Silence, Memory, Postcolonialism, Resistance, Narrative Meditation

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Introduction

Island Beneath the Sea (2010) was originally published in 2009 in Spanish and later translated into English by Margaret Sayers Peden in 2010. Allende is considered as the leading feminist writer of the contemporary Latin American literature. For Allende, narrative becomes both a tool of recovery and a site of ethical risk. She brings Zarité's story to global readers; disrupting historical erasures. The novel depicts that how Allende has portrayed the story of an enslaved girl's journey from a girl to a mother and reveals how motherhood becomes both a refuge and a prison for her. Allende structures the novel with two narrative modes: a third-person omniscient perspective and Zarité's brief first-person reflections. These interludes are often short, italicized, and fragmentary. One early entry reads: "This is how I remember it" (Allende, 2010, p. 53). This fragment is powerful precisely because it claims memory and subjectivity, but its brevity also highlights absence. Her voice oscillates between narration and erasure, and her story is mediated through masters, laws, and memory. The current study is based on the view that Allende's novel dramatizes the speech-silence paradox at the center of the thinking of Spivak and her narrative form is an ethical act of listening. Reading Zarité through Gayatri Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) reveals the novel's deeper preoccupation with structural inaudibility: the inability of the colonized female subject to be heard within patriarchal and racial hierarchies. This study analyzes how Allende transforms narrative form into an ethical act of listening. The analysis of Zarité's character and narrative with the question of Spivak: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) unveils a characteristic interest of the novel in structural silence- the non-audibility of the colonized female subject in patriarchal and racial power structures.

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Literature Review

Critics typically situate Allende's historical fiction at the intersection of gendered storytelling, exile, post-Boom Latin American narrative, and global readership debates. Overviews emphasize how her fiction reenters' women's lives within national and transnational histories. Her fiction is directly relevant to a Spivakian reading of voice and "speaking for." Different studies have been done on this novel to explore for bringing history to life, moving from Saint-Domingue to New Orleans while showing the harsh realities of slavery and racial divides. Hartman S (1997) argues that post-emancipation life reproduces slavery's logic in subtler forms: freedom demands gratitude, silence, and endurance. Dubois, L. (2004) contextualizes the novel's transatlantic background. Spear, J. M. (2009) explains why free people of color became a significant population in the early days of New Orleans and to show how authorities attempted to use concepts of race and social hierarchy to impose order on a decidedly disorderly society. Starkston (2010), note that omniscient passages often overshadow her perspective, suggesting that her voice is both present and mediated. White A. (2010) redefines the relationship between republicanism and slavery at a foundational moment in American history. McAlpine (2011) highlights this as subaltern resistance Diary of an Eccentric, (2011) provides visibility to an enslaved woman's subjectivity. Clark E (2013) interrogates the romanticized myth of *plaçage*: the system of concubinage between white men and women of color that literary and popular narratives often frame as protective or empowering. Schaub M. (2010) shares a review that Allende handles a difficult issue with, for the most part, considerable restraint and grace. Samaikya K. (2015) analyzed *Island beneath the sea* as the successful slave rebellion narrative. Christina Sharpe (2016) calls this the "weather" of anti-Blackness: pervasive, inescapable, shaping consciousness itself. Zarité's admission that she "will never lose [her] fear of whites" exemplifies such

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weathered existence: her freedom is literal, yet her subjectivity remains conditioned by the psychic climate of racial terror. Watkins A.D (2017) analyzed spiritual healing through Vodou in black women's narratives of Haiti and New Orleans. A critical essay, Identity, beauty, and Black womanhood (2018) argue that Allende stages how women of color negotiate externally imposed standards. David P (2018) critiques, Allende at times reproduces stereotypes and troubling tropes, showing the ambivalence of subaltern representation. The 2019 study in the *Bulletin of the Faculty of Languages & Translation* highlights emancipation and the symbolic role of music and dance but frames these elements as straightforward expressions of resilience. This strand aligns naturally with subalternity concerns about who is legible as a subject and under what gaze but there is no application of Spivak 'lens Can Subaltern speak? (1988). Dayan A (2020) has written extensively on how Vodo in Haitian was a religion of history. Studies such as New Historical work on 1810 New Orleans including the *Historic New Orleans Collection* (2023) and *64 Parishes* (2020) reframe Zarité's fear of whites as a realistic response to racialized surveillance following the Haitian refugee.

Cardona-Hampton, S. (2023), analyses the experiences of enslaved African women and their struggles against the brutalization, oppression, and dehumanization of colonialism. Y. Peng (2024) reads *La isla bajo el mar* through "cuerpo como espacio de resistencia," arguing that dance/ritual and embodied memory become counter-languages for an otherwise silenced subject". A critical Review by Ceaser etal (2025) explores gender roles of women within the novel. Together these studies position Allende's novel within contemporary debates on epistemic violence, gendered subalternity, and the afterlives of slavery, illustrating that Zarité's final voice haunted yet conscious embodies the Spivakian paradox of a woman who can speak, but is still unheard.

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While existing scholarship illuminates themes of emancipation, embodiment, and historical realism in *Island Beneath the Sea* (Allende, 2010), there remains a significant gap in Spivakian readings of Zarité's voice as a *process of mediation rather than recovery*. Most prior analyses interpret her silence as trauma or endurance, but few explore how Allende's narrative form itself enacts Spivak's (1988) paradox of audibility that the subaltern woman may speak only through structures that distort her meaning. Moreover, little research bridges this theoretical insight with the localized context of 1810 New Orleans, where law, architecture, and racial hierarchy continue to regulate post-slavery speech. Additionally, most criticism is descriptive rather than theoretically anchored, and Haitian or Afro-Caribbean responses to the novel are largely absent. This study therefore contributes by offering systematic Spivak's lens *Can Subaltern Speak?* (1988) that examines Zarité's bodily expression, legal dependence, and inherited fear as stages of subaltern articulation revealing how Allende transforms silence into an ethical and historical testimony of the colonized female self.

Research Objectives

- To investigate how Allende represents the systemic silencing and objectification of enslaved women in *Island Beneath The Sea*.
- To analyze how Allende's narrative depicts the mechanisms of colonial and patriarchal silencing through Zarité's lived experiences in Saint-Domingue and New Orleans.

Research Questions

The researchers will explore the following questions in this study:

1. How does Isabel Allende depict the silencing and objectification of enslaved women in *Island Beneath The Sea*, and how does this reflect Spivak's (1988) argument that the subaltern woman is doubly erased?
2. How does Allende construct Zarité's voice as a site of mediation and resistance within colonial and patriarchal systems?

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Theoretical Framework

This study conducts qualitative textual analysis on subalternity and mediated voice in Isabel Allende's *Island Beneath The Sea* (2010). It analyzes the character of Zarité's Sedella while paying attention to her voice, absence, and her bodily expressions communicate the invisible barriers placed on her by colonial domination and patriarchal oppression. Since Spivak's (1988) contribution remains central, the methodology conceptualizes the text as a site where subaltern voice is articulated indirectly and mediated through narrative, social and cultural structures. This research is articulated through three linked components of analysis. First, thematic coding determines the most salient moments are recognized such as Zarité's enslavement, mothering, ritual dances, and encounters with the colonial order. These scenes are assembled around the themes of silence, mediation, resistance, which denote subaltern experience verbally and non-verbally.

Second, each passage undergoes analysis through Gayatri Spivak analytical framework. This stage examines the circumstances under which Zarité 'speaks' and the degree to which her 'speech' is refracted or absorbed by the dominant discourse. Questions such as who is authorized to hear? What remains unarticulated? And how do colonial, racial, and gendered hierarchies shape the perception of her voice? This process of deconstruction clarifies how Allende dramatizes the dilemma of the subaltern whose speech, however, is overshadowed by the social, legal, and patriarchal structures. Third, the analysis incorporates historical and contextual grounding, placing Zarité's experiences within the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century socio-historical realities of Saint-Domingue and New Orleans. The contextualization is based on historic texts, legal archives, and documented works about the colonial slavery and emancipation, legal racism and prejudice, and Afro-American ritual practices.

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Such analysis deals with the unequal distribution of power and subaltern subjectivity in its composite and meaningful manner. Spivak warns that efforts to recover the subaltern voice in its fullness should be made ethical considerations. This study determines the parameters of representation and how Allende constructs the voice, gestures, and memory of Zarate as a perverted form of mediated subaltern speech. This study is the first to combine the textual analysis, theoretical deconstruction, and historic contextualization, offering an ethically mature and sound framework of the study of the complex interplay between silencing, mediation, and resistance in *Island Beneath the Sea*.

Discussion and Analysis

The discussion and analysis of this study outline a close examination of the chosen excerpts of *Island Beneath The Sea* by Isabel Allende through Spivak analysis of the postcolonial model. It clearly focuses on Allende's *Island Beneath the sea* (2010) featuring issues of feminism, slavery, gender oppression and the subaltern voices through subalternity views of Gayatri Spivak (1988). Spivak (1988) defines subaltern as people so oppressed by colonial and social structures that they cannot represent themselves or be properly represented by others. Spivak (1988) explains that the subaltern cannot speak at least not in a way that is heard or understood within the dominant frameworks of power and knowledge. While examining Allende's selected work through Spivak's (1988) views on subalternity helps to examine how subaltern groups those excluded from dominant social, political, and historical narratives are often silenced or mediated through elite perspectives.

Zarité's Dominant Self Erasing out her Enslaved and Silenced Self

Zarité's first memories of freedom demonstrate how dance serves the purpose of being subalter and silenced self: "With the drums the everyday Zarité disappears, and I am again the little girl who danced when she barely knew how to walk." (p.8)

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The contrast between “everyday Zarité disappears” and the return of “the little girl who danced” indicates the presence of a dual consciousness; the enslaved and quieted self is temporally frozen, and she is surrounded by a moment of agency and pleasure, a raptured interval. In a Spivakian sense, such a moment illustrates the paradox of subaltern speech, though Zarité is speaking by means of motion, her expression is conditionally audible and falls outside discourse. The rhythmic motion of the drums and her bodily engagement enact what Peng (2024) describes as “cuerpo como espacio de Resistencia,” a form of non-verbal communication that asserts subjectivity when formal avenues of speech are obstructed. In addition, the childhood memory of innocence is contrasted with the repressive order, which she lives in, highlighting the mediating of subaltern voice: her agency is only tentative and subject to ritualized space and finally defined by the social order around her. Here, thus, is a dramatized attempt by Allende to elicit narration through embodiment and memory to make the subaltern speak, although obliquely, citing that it is and cannot be possible to speak the truth under colonial and patriarchal control. There is a mediated awareness of the subjectivity of Zarité , where her force of character is felt by another but not in her own words:

Tété had none of those attributes—she was merely a slave dressed in rags—but Violette intuited her strength of character. (Allende, 2010, p. 33). The term slave in rags only, diminishes Zarité to her social and material meaninglessness as an illustration of the colonial and patriarchal formations that repress and objectify the subaltern. Her inner world is refracted through the eye of Violette, reflecting on Spivak (1988) observing that the subaltern woman cannot voice herself in the dominating discourses; rather, when it involves mediated by the power. Such mediation highlights the ethical ambiguity of such representation of subaltern voices: despite their recognition, the identity of Zarité will always be situated within the disposition of others, which is that the subaltern speech cannot be

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audible, and hence visible. The phrase also highlights the reserved expression of opposition indicating that the agency of Zarité is both internal and relational but is not able to express her selfhood in full because of the systemic structures that limit her. This narrative strategy helps Allende dramatize the process by which the voice of the subaltern is interpolated and refracted, providing an understanding of the constraints and opportunities of the subaltern representation in historical and literary terms.

Deepest silencing in slavery

Allende showcases the doctrine that slavery not only controls bodies but colonizes desires and imagination. *“A slave remains a slave. If she escapes, and is lucky, she dies in her flight. If she doesn’t, she is caught alive. (Allende, 2010, p. 41).* This excerpt highlights the realities of slavery by making it clear that Zarité experiences such a bleak existence that she barely stands a chance to truly be free. The fact that escape too will only result in death or a recapture serves to emphasize the inability to gain any freedom. One suggestion of giving up ideas of freedom is an embodiment of internalizing oppression, in which hope is suppressed in order to better guarantee conformity. Allende reveals the potential of Zarité to resist under the influence of structural covertures and how the subaltern subjects are forced to move around systems which are in denial of voice and self-determination. The text emphasizes the conflict between survival and the wish to be free and demonstrates that the subaltern agency is usually confined to the unofficial, personal modes of survival.

“I cannot accept that Negroes are as human as we, even though they have intelligence and soul. The white race has created our civilization. Africa is a dark and primitive continent.” (p. 73). This text reveals the ideological principles of racial superiority that uphold colonialism in the *Island Beneath The Sea*. The statement made by the speaker that Africans are not as human as we, represents

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the process of dehumanization that defends slavery by making whiteness the measure of civilization and intelligence. This kind of language objectifies what Spivak (1988) has termed epistemic violence, the creation of regimes of knowledge that kill or misconstrue the humanity of the subaltern. In making Africa a dark and primitive place, the statement is a recreation of colonial binaries between black and white civilization and savagery that silences Black voices and deprives them of subjectivity. Allende uses this dialogue to criticize the functioning of racialized ideology in everyday language, which comes to define not only the worldview of the enslaver, but also the place of the enslaved individual in it. The excerpt thus highlights the role of racism as not merely a physical rule, but as a form of discursively as well that makes the subaltern silent in the apparatus of moral and psychological superiority.

“Valmorain had heard that Negroes have more capacity for suffering; the proof was that no white could bear what the blacks endured, and just as they take pups from bitches, or calves from cows, they were able to separate the slaves from their children...She existed only to serve him.” (Allende, 2010, p. 98)

Slaves are compared to animals: puppies, cows, breeding stock. Their grief is dismissed as short-lived, naturalized as “animal instinct.” This reflects the colonial epistemology Spivak critiques (1988) the subaltern is placed outside the realm of human subjectivity, treated as body and function, never as voice. Valmorain assumes that Zarité’s “sentiments were very limited.” This assumption is itself an act of silencing: even if she feels grief, her emotions are erased within the dominant discourse. Spivak argues that the subaltern “cannot speak” (1988) because even when she feels, her emotions are erased within the dominant discourse. ‘She existed only to serve him’ suggests that she is imagined as “nothingness.” This dramatizes the Spivakian paradox (1988): the subaltern woman’s existence is contingent on the master’s recognition; she cannot assert her own subjectivity. Zarite’s silence confirms Spivak’s (1988) notion that the

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ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant (p.82) Zarité's body is assaulted, beaten, and threatened: "***She groaned, and he began to hit her with his fist, with the anger of jealousy and pleasure of revenge***" (Allende, 2010, p. 162) she is reduced simultaneously to property and to flesh for violence. This embodies Spivak's (1988) idea that the subaltern woman's body becomes the site where patriarchal and colonial power inscribes themselves .Valmorain's threat extends to Rosette, Zarité's daughter in anger "***Yellow bitch!.. I will sell your daughter, too.***" (p. 162). The violence is not only physical and sexual but genealogical: even the future of her bloodline is subject to being sold.

Allende thereby describes how historical atrocities create momentary self-awareness to the privilege and the voice of the subaltern is muted under the burden of representation.

"In Le Cap the white rabble..... Attacked people of color in the streets, broke into and wrecked their houses, ravished their women, slit their children's throats, and hanged the men from their own balconies." (p.136)

.This text changes the perspective of the story to witness oppression at the collective level, demonstrating that racial violence is a form of social and moral retaliation. Le Cap and its scenes of riotous murder and violation reveal how easily the colonial order can be overturned and how hypocritical the superiority of race can be.

The racism and gender oppression is also echoed in the following line: "*The whites think that we blacks are deaf and that women are dumb.* (p.169). Here, Spivak's (1988) notion is affirmed what she highlights in her essay "Clearly If you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways" (p. 90) Allende reveals the colonial logic by which the enslaved are silenced by being denied the right to voice and perception when she says that the whites opine of blacks as deaf and dumb. The image of deaf and dumb is used to indicate that power works through

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erasure, which lessens Black women to objectified and speechless objects. In this regime, race and gender collide as a means to enhance invisibility and silence. However, even the formulation of this understanding by *Tété* defies this silencing; by acknowledging that her oppressors have assumed something of her, she briefly repossesses her voice. So, in this manner, Allende makes the language of oppression a mute rebellion, where the consciousness of *Tété* could counter the mechanisms that sought to silence her consciousness.

This exemplifies the race- class- gender over determination. Spivak (1988, p. 101) It highlights how colonial power assumes both racial and gendered silence, while the very act of voicing the line resists that assumption. Zarité's longing for emancipation is reframed through her daughter Rosette. Spivak (1988) explains that there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak, (p.103) *"Do you want your daughter to live in misery?* (p. 199-200) summarizes the collision between legal, racial, and patriarchal subjugations that characterize the fight of Zarité to gain independence. In a postcolonial feminist perspective as developed by Spivak the discussion highlights the fact that the law itself becomes a means of epistemic violence, silencing the agency of Zarité in the name of social order. The legal argument by the white master shows that the system is structured to continue subjugation disguising oppression under the law. The inner reaction of Zarité, though, alters the moment of the imposed silence into thoughtful protest; her knowledge of the eternity of six years means both the resistance to the moment, and the awakening. This text sheds light on the dual marginalization of the voices of enslaved women not only by sex but also by race; however, this is not the only way in which slaves express resistance in the form of emotional, temporal awareness. As in Spivakian language even the muted opposition of Zarité reflects the ability of the subaltern to speak indirectly through self-awareness, reconstituting victimhood into silent power. The enslaved cannot

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“speak” even through their actions, because their intentions are pre-interpreted by the colonizer’s logic. *“A slave lacks incentives.”* (p.266). Their slow labor is treated as evidence of inferiority, not as an assertion of agency. For Spivak, this is part of the *epistemic violence* of colonial discourse: it translates the subaltern’s silence and resistance into moral or economic deficiency. Moreover, the conversation frames Rosette’s fate as a transaction between Valmorain and Zarité. Rosette, like her mother, exists as property, moving from one form of dependency to another. Valmorain’s claim that “Negro girls mature early” (Allende, 2010, p.287) naturalizes exploitation through racist pseudo-biology. Spivak’s (1988, p.86) insight applies here: *the subaltern woman’s sexuality is never her own*; it is always defined by male, colonial authority. Though Zarité insists that “Rosette is also your responsibility,” (Allende, 2010, p.287) Zarité’s moral appeal carries no power. It is overridden by Valmorain’s pragmatic cruelty. Her words, though spoken, remain structurally unheard that highlights even when the subaltern speaks, she is not listened to within the frameworks of power. Spivak’s (1988) *Can Subaltern Speak* reveals that even within apparent empathy, Allende’s text enacts the impossibility of full articulation: Zarité and Rosette remain subjects who are spoken *about*, never fully allowed to speak *for* themselves. This captures the central paradox of Spivak’s argument that the subaltern feels, knows, and resists internally, yet cannot **speak** that resistance within structures of domination and points to an unhealed continuity of trauma. This recalls Spivak’s (1988, p. 96) reading of the sati woman: both are denied the capacity to narrate their own suffering. Their bodies tell the story that their words cannot. Though she is silent, her “*trembling*” and “*indignation burning like a flame*” signify a hidden resistance. Her body becomes the only site where defiance still flickers. The phrase “*years of obeying that man*” reveals that Tété’s silence is not merely emotional repression; it is the result of systematic conditioning through fear and

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repeated subjugation. The “threshold” is metaphorical: she remains on the boundary between speech and silence, between survival and justice. Spivak (1988) argues this as the limit of subaltern expression where the voice reaches the edge but is turned back by power.

Fear in Freedom

The afterlife of the slaved is even not free from fear. She realized that she is not able to celebrate and feel her freedom because the bitterness of suffering is more than the sweetness of freedom. It is also because her former master is unable to console her as “.....whites did not even register the suffering they caused others.” (p. 349-350). Zarité’s reflection suggests not only cruelty but structural incapacity for empathy. Despite her silence, Zarité’s realization is a form of knowledge denied to the master. This shows that her pain, though deeply felt, cannot cross the boundary between slave and master. By the end, she sighs heavily: “*Four* years have gone by..... I have lost my fear of being free, although I will never lose my fear of whites” (p. 360). This text is a turning point in the development of *Tété* as an enslaved person into a semi-liberated one, but it indicates also the psychological trauma of the colonial oppression. In Spivakian view, her statement carries the irony of the liberation of the subaltern--the external liberation, but the fear within her as the echo of the past violence remains as the after-effect. Her comparison of the difference between freedom and fear reveals the extent of liberation in society that is still organized by racial hierarchy. She also speaks in first person but her voice is subjected to the same discursive history of oppression as Spivak suggests that the subaltern can speak but never entirely without the framework of domination that has muted her. Allende describes this tension by means of self-consciousness of *Tété*: her freedom is actual but disturbed, her voice is listening but not touching but mediated. The text, therefore, summarizes the continuation of colonial trauma in post-slavery subjectivity, showing the

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emancipation as never an ultimate goal imposed by the subaltern woman, but a tentative agreement between freedom and inherited fear.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that the *Island Beneath the Sea* expresses Spivak's theoretical question into a lived experience. Zarité's voice oscillating between the silence, dance and endurance, shows that the speech of the subalterns remains silenced and suppressed. Even with the freedom bestowed by Allende, the remnants of epistemic violence suggest that freedom does not guarantee audibility. These forms of absence are a witness to history- compelling the readers to ethical silence. This study narrows the focus of feminist postcolonial theory to Allende' fiction as broadening the narrative beyond the story of woman with little voice to that of very construction and system that renders her inaudible. Allende's novel thus dramatizes Spivak's description of epistemic violence as the destruction of subaltern's relation to being perceived as a speaking subject.

Zarité's silence is not merely muteness but is also a product of systematic conditioning, fear and erasure. When she does not achieve formal freedom, her voice is still contained within the parameters of motherhood, gratitude, and endurance. Her daughter inherits this muted fate, this subalternate continuity from mother to child. Freedom is indeed real for Zarité's, yet haunted by fear is the permanent inheritance of slavery's epistemic violence. Her speech is bound one-freedom not constituted by equality, but by the endurance of fear. As a whole, *Island Beneath the Sea*, through Zarité and the spiritual cosmologies, certainly amplifies subaltern subjectivity. But still risks reproducing, hierarchies and, thus, silences.

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