

# Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*: an Ecocritical Reading

Zahra Sadat Ismailinejad\*

Shiraz University, Iran

\*E-mail address: Zahra.ismaili@yahoo.com

## ABSTRACT

The present paper seeks to analyze Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the light of the theory of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism focuses on the relationships of individuals with nature and how their interactions are portrayed in a literary work. Ecocritics consider nature as an active participant in literary works that possesses agency. Throughout history, religion and industrial developments affected nature and man's relation to it. Religion put so much value on man that he ventured to destroy nature for his own good and industrialism estranged man from nature to the extent that now nature and culture or civilization are two different entities. Nature and wild life turn into the objects in the hand of modern culture and technology. *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows how agent of culture, Mr. Rochester exploits and dominates Antoinette as agent of nature since he lost his connection with nature as a native of an industrial country like England. As a woman she is more harmonious with nature as nature is her sole protector in this hostile environment and finally she united with it. As her true friend, nature sets her free and helps her to destroy patriarchy.

**Keywords:** Jean Rhys; *Wide Sargasso Sea*; nature; culture; ecocriticism; Antoinette; Mr. Rochester

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The environmental crisis has attracted the attentions of many scientists, politicians, and writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as nature has her own special ways of showing her objection in natural disasters like earthquakes, draughts, and global warming. Nowadays, human beings arrive at this conclusion that they face serious environmental crisis. Infact, they are paying back what they had done to the environment earlier. Man had treated nature violently and thoughtlessly, now he has to bear the sad and ominous repercussions of his cruelty and indifference. The crisis is mainly a repercussion of industrial developments that endanger the earth and all the living being on it. Despite the global warming, ozone layer's problems and all the natural problems caused by humans, there is still some kind of hope. Humans should concentrate their attentions on preserving areas that are not much affected by humans' interventions. Human beings should reconsider their ways in treating nature. Instead of anthropomorphic study of environment, they should participate nature into the dialogue to preserve nature for its own sake not as the habitat of human being that should be save as nature has an intrinsic value of her own.

The attention to nature and environment grew between 1500 and 1800 in England. There was a gradual shift in individuals' attitudes toward the killing of animals for food. By

18<sup>th</sup> century, as Rigby states this growing awareness and caring led some people like Shelly to become vegetarian. (As cited in Wolfreys, 2002, p. 105) Despite all these efforts, a full-fledge movement for the study of the relationship between physical world and literature did not form until the end of twentieth century. This might be due to mentality of Westerners that they saw themselves as masters of nature. Thanks to the Christianity and Bible, man thought of himself as the king of earth and all animals were considered as his subservients. Any way, they took Bible as their justifications to exploit nature. Also, Industrial Revolution and the introduction of machineries have hurt nature. These two factors broke the link between humanity and nature.

Human beings used to exploit nature as their properties but they are only part of this nature and even without human beings, it can function more properly. So, the whole universe doesn't revolve around man as he might think. He should bears in mind that all of the elements in nature are interrelated since all of them are made by Mother Earth and everybody should focus on the interrelatedness and interconnectedness of human and nature. So, when one sees this mutual relationship, the act of damaging nature by men is actually equivalent to damaging himself. He should only use nature to satisfy his vital needs.

Although human life is never separated from nature and there is always a connection between literature and nature as it is evident in the Romantic Movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and their glorification of nature in their works, however, the field of ecocriticism commences in the 1990s by the publication of two seminal works *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell and *Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Glotfelty (1996) defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” (p.xviii) And Garrard (2004) adds that ecocriticism focuses on detecting “the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and environment in all areas of cultural production.” (p.i)

It became a known literary discipline in the 1990s only when more attentions were paid to nature and its preservation. The eco in ecocriticism is borrowed from ecology as Merchant states that “the word ecology derives from Greek word “oikos”, meaning house. Ecology, then, is the science of the household-the Earth’s household.” (As cited in Sandilands, 1999, p. 4) Ecocriticism comes from the combination of ecology and literary criticism to preserve Mother Earth and man's survival. Meeker says literary ecology is “the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works...and an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of species” (Qtd in Chandra& Das, 2007, p.10).

Eco criticism is a literary discipline that concerns with the representations and manners of presenting nature in literary works. It tries to relate humans and non-humans and since human society is named as culture and physical environment as nature, ecocriticism digs deep into the two-way relationship of these two. Ecocriticism tries to catch the attention of the inhabitants of earth to the question of preservation of earth and its natural resources.

A sub-branch of ecocriticism i.e. ecofeminism mainly deals with the relationship of women and nature and animals and how they have been treated by male figures. Ecofeminists claim that patriarchy undermines the fundamental elements that can help develop the discipline of ecofeminism.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is actually a prequel to Charlotte Bronte’s novel *Jane Eyre* to defend the Creole culture against colonial literary canons or as Lasser (2004) puts it the novel is in fact “Rhys’s critical response to Charlotte Bronte’s demonizing representation of the traumatized colonial woman, Bertha Mason” (p.106). In her *Letters* (1985), she talks about her motives in writing this novel as she says “The Creole is of course the important one. I'm

fighting mad to tell her story” (p.157). Rhys tries to empower this Creole girl as she says “she seems such a poor ghost, I thought I’d like to write her a life” (Qtd in Thieme, 2001, p.77). In fact, these kind of extended intertextualities and adaptations are the strategies used by postcolonial writers like Rhys and Césaire to give voice to the previously marginalized and oppressed characters in colonial literature. In this way, the readers can inform about the other side of the story to reach a better understanding of literary works. Different narrations of the same story help them understand the real colonial motives behind the literary masterpieces of colonial literature.

The novel is divided into three parts and as opposed to the first person point of view of Jane Eyre, here Antoinette, Mr. Rochester, and Grace Poole all has the opportunity to narrate their stories. To avoid a biased narration of the original work, here Rhys let the unnamed husband to have a say in the novel as the entire Part Two is narrated by him.

A lot of factors contributed to her loneliness and final madness. She is always an Other in Caribbean land, and in England and even in Coulibri. Her mother rejects her to the extent that Christophine is her surrogate mother. She is totally isolated from the Black and the White as she is neither a pure white nor she belongs to the black community. In fact, she is torn between" the ideologies of colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed, and the menacing anxiety of being neither white nor black." (Burrows, 2010, p. 28) Nunez believes that" she is oppressed not merely because she is a woman but because she is a certain kind of woman- a white Caribbean woman."(As cited in Francis, 2010, p. 109) She experiences multiple levels of oppression from the colonial agent and newly emancipated slaves. The feeling of being located somewhere between two cultures frustrates her as she says “I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all.” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 93) All these make *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) as a decent context for its analysis in the lights of different critical theories like feminism, postcolonialism, and in this article ecocriticism.

## 2. DISCUSSION

As an environmentally-oriented work, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) has met all the criteria that are proposed by Lawrence Buell in his book *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995). Rhys incorporates elements of nature in the novel but in *Wide Sargasso Sea* nature and natural imageries are no longer there to heighten literary effect of the work rather they are things in themselves. Bertha is connected with nature. So, nature is not depicted as only a setting in the novel rather it serves as a metaphoric place in its own and she can identify herself with nature. The setting and nature are defined and described in a detailed way to show the importance of each element in nature. Each scene in the novel is accompanied by a description of nature since Rhys gives nature a role in each scene as we can consider this part as an example "There was grass on each side of the path and trees and shadows of trees and sometimes a bright bush of flowers."(*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 48)

The novel shows the symbiotic nature of the relationship between human and non-human in Caribbean land. The novel suggests that Caribbeans are more nature-conscious and animal-conscious as opposed to the English man that comes from an industrial country. These people hold nature and natural elements dear and near to themselves. Nature shapes their life and nurtures them and as grateful human being they grab each opportunity to mention it. They also use nature and animals to enrich their language and expressions:

I thought that when I saw him and spoke to him I would be wise as serpents, harmless as doves. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 161)

He had the eyes of a dead fish. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 44)

He wouldn't go. He'd probably try to force us out. I've learned to let sleeping curs lie,' she said. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 20)

The title of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is so telling that this piece of literature is very much concerned with the nature and natural elements and also with the inside nature of human beings. The harmony between nature and human world can be one of its special aims. *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is totally conscious of the fact that human beings are destroying nature by their aspirations and activities, so nature is glorified and cherished here. Nature is presented as an active participant in the novel. Those who respect nature and preserve it in the novel are of superior moral and ethical value but those who are against it are depicted as evil characters.

The place is another important element in the novel and this act of changing place and moving from one house to another affected Bertha as she considers herself belonging to Coulibri. She feels herself totally at home in Coulibri when she says that:

I am safe. There is the corner of the bedroom door and the friendly furniture. There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. The barrier of the cliffs and the high mountains. And the barrier of the sea. I am safe. I am safe from strangers. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 24)

When their house was burnt by angry ex-slaves, they have to move. She compares the two gardens

Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible – the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell. Underneath the tree ferns, tall as forest tree ferns, the light was green. Orchids flourished out of reach or for some reason not to be touched. One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root. Twice a year the octopus orchid flowered – then not an inch of tentacle showed. It was a bell-shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. The scent was very sweet and strong. I never went near it. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 17)

And when she describes the new house she says “We are no longer in the forest but in an enclosed garden surrounded by a stone wall and the trees are different trees.” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 55) When she got married, she had to go to Thornfield Hall and finally she was confined in an attic. The mad woman in the attic is detached from the society forcefully. She hates human civilization and wants to escape this society to return to nature as it is her spiritual heaven. She gains comfort in relation to nature, so she decides to unite herself with this faithful friend to end patriarchy.

She seeks her solace in nature. She is grown up in nature and it is her sanctuary. She is in such a perfect harmony that in a scene she firmly believes that any further movement would interfere with this harmonious relationship:

When I was safely home I sat close to the old wall at the end of the garden. It was covered with green moss soft as velvet and I never wanted to move again. Everything would be worse if I moved. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, pp. 20-21)

She is like a crying baby that only when her mother holds her can be calm. And though her biological mother is a heartless and cold mother that had to tolerate her for nine months in her bosom, Mother Earth holds her dear and helps her to elevate and blossom like when she says 'If you are buried under a flamboyant tree,' I said, 'your soul is lifted up when it flowers. Everyone wants that.' (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 166)

Nature is not only her mother and her sole protector but also all of her elements like fire, wind and animals are sources of comfort to her. This point is evident when she says "I wished I had a big Cuban dog to lie by my bed and protect me" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 34). At the end of novel, she knows for sure that once again nature and her elements come to rescue her as she says "there was a wall of fire protecting me" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 170) or when she thinks that wind can help her to fly "the wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 170). The metaphor of light and darkness in the novel was used to show lack of knowledge and the search for it and Bertha finally manages to steal the fire. Fire is shown as a disaster to the patriarch and colonial agent and a hero as it sets Bertha free from pain and sufferings.

And although sometimes nature and natural elements can be harsh, she prefers harshness of nature as they just hurt human beings physically and with no intention but angry ex-slaves slams her and her people that she'd rather bears the pain of a natural element when she whispers:

And if the razor grass cut my legs and arms I would think 'It's better than people.' Black ants or red ones, tall nests swarming with white ants, rain that soaked me to the skin – once I saw a snake. All better than people. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 25)

Even bird as part of nature is killed here to foreshadow her doomed destiny "I heard someone say something about bad luck and remembered that it was very unlucky to kill a parrot, or even to see a parrot die." (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 39)

The black people have their special curse for white Creole and again an animal is brought to the fore as Antoinette says "They called us white cockroaches." (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 20) When Antoinette's half-brother wants to show that his father was such an arrogant man he says "he walks like he owns the earth." (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 111) as earth is the most precious thing in the world and owning it makes anybody proud. Even Mr. Mason believes that they pay too much tribute and respect to nature "I leaned on the railing and saw hundreds of fireflies – 'Ah yes, fireflies in Jamaica, here they call a firefly La belle.'" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 73)

The arrival of white men like Mason interferes with this harmony. Mr. Mason is so tyrannical to the parrot Coco that crippled him and after he "clipped his wings, he grew very bad tempered, and though he would sit quietly on my mother's shoulder, he darted at everyone who came near her and pecked their feet" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 38) but no man should venture to destruct nature or hurt animals. None of earth's creature is superior to others and all of them are parts of nature.

The unnamed husband comes with the intention of exploiting the natural resources as he acknowledges that "like the swaggering pirates, let's make the most and best and worst of

what we have. Give not one-third but everything. All – all – all. Keep nothing back... (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 154) and this is not a secret to anybody as Christophine tells Mr. Rochester that

Everybody knows that you marry her for her money and you take it all. And then you want to break her up, because you are jealous of her. She is better than you, she has better blood in her and she doesn't care for money." (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 138)

For the unnamed husband, nature becomes the raw material for his exploitation. He is totally indifferent towards nature as he only cares for his own material gains. The main problem is that this man considers nature and woman as his possessions. The Creole girl and her assets can secure him after he was disinherited as he received thirty thousand pounds as dowry. So Antoinette loses her previous vitality that comes from nature as now she and nature are exploited and dominated by patriarchy and agent of culture.

Rhys shows that how the ownership of land is actually a by-product of dominating a woman. She creates a harmony between woman and nature. As a result of this harmony, Antoinette can be dubbed as representative of nature. As a man and a person from an industrial country, Mr. Rochester is so disconnected with nature that he sees only woman and nature as commodities. However, Bertha represents both nature and woman that is exploited and dominated by a man and Mr. Rochester embodies the western man that exploited nature and woman by virtue of the supposed superiority of his race and gender. Even his utilitarian attitude is evident in his moments of intimacy with nature as it is for a special reason. He uses nature against a natural phenomenon like rain when he says "there we were, sheltering from the heavy rain under a large mango tree, myself, my wife Antoinette and a little half-caste servant who was called Amélie." (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 59) Nature is a force that has the potential to annihilate man but human can fight with it. Here the harshness of nature is reflected in its interaction with the white man but he is detached from nature and hates any sort of connection with it when he says "The rain began to drip down the back of my neck adding to my feeling of discomfort and melancholy" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 61). The beauty of the island frustrates him when he says:

Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hill too near. And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me. I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks. (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 63)

One can compare the relationship of Tia and Antoinette with nature with Mr. Rochester's relationship with nature which shows that how Caribbeans as Other or inferior race can interact with nature better. Antoinette says "all the flowers in the world were in our garden and sometimes when I was thirsty I licked raindrops from the Jasmine leaves after a shower." (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 119) In part one of the novel, she speaks about her friend Tia and how " (fires always lit for her, sharpstones did not hurt her bare feet, I never saw her cry)" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, pp. 20-21).

Throughout history, western societies took the Bible as their justification and turned the earth into their dominions. They even believed that heaven would also be another earth to be dominated. Religion and its teachings may be to blame for man's actions since he puts so much value on man that he ventures to destroy nature for his own good. Here this western man is

also affected by views of his predecessors as all these justifications form his mentality. This white man only pursues his own benefit in nature."Everybody knows that gold pieces, treasures, appear in Spanish Town – (here too). In all the islands, from nowhere, from no one knows where. For it is better not to speak of treasure. Better not to tell them."(*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 153)

So, both women and environment tend to be object of his exploitation and control or else these two would destroy everything since they are considered as threats to men and patriarchal structure of society; as if he unconsciously acknowledges the supposed closeness and connection between woman and nature.

The trees were threatening and the shadows of the trees moving slowly over the floor menaced me. That green menace. I had felt it ever since I saw this place. There was nothing I knew, nothing to comfort me (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 135).

To this patriarch, nature and culture seem to be two different entities but actually, nature exists beyond and before city was around. He believes that wild nature should be tamed by civilization. When Antoinette tells him that her friend has a hard time adapting to the reality of a city like London; he annoys and answers "that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream." (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 73) and then their argument regarding nature and culture begins:

"But how can rivers and mountains and the sea be unreal?"

"And how can millions of people, their houses and their streets be unreal?"

"More easily," she said, "much more easily. Yes a big city must be like a dream."

"No, this is unreal and like a dream." (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 73)

Antoinette land is depicted as opposite of the city which is associated with civilization and social manners and good will. The city is the domain of the white especially white males and this Creole woman is considered as a threat to his comfort zone. So, here Antoinette represents harsh and wild nature that should be tamed by Mr. Rochester, the agent of civilization. The first step is to deprive her of her identity by calling her Bertha:

"Don't laugh like that Bertha."

"My name is not Bertha; why do you call me Bertha?" –

"Because it is a name I'm particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha."

(*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 122)

When he finds out that Antoinette is not pure Englishwoman, he tries to avoid and neglect her since Negroes and by extension Creoles were considered as sexual predators. White people should be aware of their evil and promiscuous natures to defy these evil creatures. He misinterprets her true love and affections and associates them with evil desires but she just wants to be loved by her husband. He finally turns her into his slave; a possession of Mr. Rochester.

---

Rhys embodies nature in her works through various characters. She draws on an analogy between mother earth and woman to show how characters treated them. Mother earth is a female character that is exploited by masculinity and patriarchy and both take the plights of women, nature and black for granted. Men fail to develop a thing in their bosoms unlike Mother Earth and women. It seems as if they hold some kind of grudges against women and nature and patriarchy is an option to fulfill this inability. Antoinette as the representative of nature gives Mr. Rochester the ability to become rich, to appear as a gentleman in the eye of Jane Eyre. She is just like the mother earth that exploiters suck her essence to maintain the superiority of their races. He separates her from nature as she is a part of it and transferring her to the city. She is now absent from the society through patriarch who renames her first as Bertha and then as mad woman in the attic. In the same way that rain and flood are used to fill dams, here a white male channels a Creole's girl ability to bring heirs for him and then imprisons her as a caged animal but the mad woman in the attic rejects his attempt to civilize her.

Bertha's imprisonment and her rebellious act of setting house on fire can be read in different lights. In Foucauldian term, her madness is in fact a label to term her as abnormal. This provides the oppressor with a legitimization to keep her under control. The prison serves to show the power of patriarchy over a woman and how patriarchy drives her to go mad. However, as power does not belong to a single person and tends to circulates, It can come from different directions and find its way from above and below of this net of power. So, when she set house on fire, she proves her true essence that presents her as a powerful figure that can exert her power. As the agent of nature, a natural element like fire comes to rescue her. From Said's view, here patriarchy looks down on her as inferior creature. However, Rhys empowers her by giving voice to this silent figure. The ending shows the preservation and survival of nature is achieved through the omission of patriarchy.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The importance of harmony between nature and human is one of the most important themes of the novel. It shows how nature and its elements like animals, wind, fire, trees, and flowers can play vital roles in the life of a character as Rhys endows them with power to protect her agent. Antoinette as a woman is more connected to nature since both of them have man as their enemy. she is always treated as Other and she experienced a double Othering both as a woman and as a postcolonial subject. She suffers from patriarchy and tyranny of agent of culture and only nature can calm her. We see that how native people live in symbiosis with nature and how it has a key function in their everyday lives and speeches. Nature annoys agent of culture who was detached from nature long time before but it helps her representative at the end of the novel.

## References

- [1] Burrows, V. (2010). *Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid, and Toni Morrison*. New York: PALGRAVE, MACMILLAN.
- [2] Chandra, N. D. R., & Das N. (2007) *Ecology, Myth, and Mystery: Contemporary Poetry In English from Northeast India*. Delhi: Sarup & Sons.
- [3] Francis, D. (2010). *Fiction of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature*. New York: PALGRAVE, MACMILLAN, 2010.
- [4] Garrard, G. (2004). *Ecocriticism: The new critical idiom*. New York: Routledge.
- [5] Glotfelty, C., & Fromm H. (1996). *The ecocriticism reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press.
- [6] Lasser, P. (2004). *Colonial Strangers: Women Writing the End of British Empire*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press.
- [7] Bersani, L. (2003) Pynchon, Paranoia, and literature. In H. Bloom (Ed.). *Thomas Pynchon: Bloom's Modern Critical Review* (145). Philadelphia: Chelsea House.
- [8] Rigby, K. (2002) Ecocriticism. In J. Wolfreys (Ed.). *Introducing criticism at the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (105). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- [9] Rhys, J. (1985). *The Letters of Jean Rhys*. In F. Wyndham & D. Melly (Eds.). London: Penguin .
- [10] (1982). *Wide Sargasso Sea*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- [11] Sandilands, C. (1999). *The Good-natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- [12] Thieme, J. (2001). *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon*. London & New York: Continuum.

( Received 24 February 2015; accepted 04 March 2015 )