



**The Landscape of the Other: An  
Ecofeminist Approach to Jean Rhys's  
Wide Sargasso Sea**

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## Abstract

The present paper aims at analyzing Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the light of the theory of ecofeminism, the intersection of feminist and ecological studies and movements. The fundamental belief shared by ecofeminists is the understanding of a connection between the dominance of women in patriarchal, typically Euro-western, societies and that of nature. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a story of the white Creole woman from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Bertha, whom Rhys renames Antoinette, takes place in Jamaica and the Windward Islands after emancipation. It was published in 1966, and it is both of its time and ahead of its time, tackling modern issues prevalent in 1960s culture such as the complexity of racial identity and women's oppression. The novel also predates the ecofeminist movement by a few years with Rhys's hints that Rochester views his new wife, Antoinette, with the same mindset with which he views the Windward Islands' natural environment, showing not just a connection between women and environment but also the patriarchal urge to control both.

**Keywords:** Creole, ecofeminism, Jean Rhys, nature, patriarchy

## الخلاصة:

يهدف البحث الى تحليل رواية "بحر سارجاسو الواسع" لجين رايس في ضوء نظرية النسوية البيئية والتي هي تداخل بين الدراسات والحركات النسوية والبيئية. ان الاعتقاد الاساسي الذي يتشاركه النسويون الايكولوجيون هو فهم العلاقة بين السيطرة على النساء في المجتمعات الذكورية , الاوروبية الغربية النموذجية والسيطرة على البيئة. رواية "بحر سارجاسو الواسع" لجين رايس, قصة امرأة بيضاء كاريولية تعود لرواية "جين اير" لشارلوت برونتيه بيريثا, والتي اعادت رايس تسميتها انطونيت, تدور احداثها في جامايكا وجزر الوندوارد بعد التحرر. نشرت الرواية في سنة ١٩٦٦ وهي رواية لعصرها و سابقة لعصرها حيث انها تناولت القضايا الحديثة السائدة في ثقافة الستينات مثل تعقيد الهوية واضطهاد النساء. تسبق الرواية ايضا الحركة النسوية البيئية ببضع سنوات مع تلميحات رايس الى ان الزوج روجيستر ينظر الى زوجته الجديدة, انطونيت, بنفس العقلية التي ينظر بها الى البيئة الطبيعية لجزر الوندوارد مما يظهر ليس فقط صلة بين المرأة والبيئة ولكن ايضا الرغبة الذكورية للسيطرة على كليهما. الكلمات المفتاحية: كاريولي, النسوية البيئية, جين رايس, الطبيعة, الذكورية

## Introduction

Ecofeminism is a social and political movement with the joint efforts of environmentalism and feminism. It is a combination of feminism and ecology and it criticizes the oppression over women and nature. Ecofeminism shows a deep concern for the ecological ethic as well as the social justice. Probing into the problem of environmental degradation, ecofeminists come to realize that environment is a feminist issue. For one thing, women are those who suffer most from the deterioration of environment; for another they are the victims of the same oppressive conceptual framework-patriarchy. Ecofeminism can be understood as an analysis of environmental issues and concerns from feminists' point of view, and vice versa.

Ecofeminism criticizes male-centered way of treating women and considers women as the protector of nature. There are a variety of schools, among which are cultural ecofeminism, socialist ecofeminism, and philosophical ecofeminism, whose emphasis differs while all ecofeminists agree that there are important connections between the unjustified dominance of women and nature. Ecofeminists declare that the oppressive patriarchal conceptual frameworks should account for the men's dominance over nature and women. The Western patriarchal way of thinking is based on dualism, which creates imbalanced power relationships by artificially dividing entities in half, according one side of the equation greater worth over the other. As a sequence, man and nature are abruptly separated, and men and women are not seen in the same hierarchy. On the one hand, women are located on the lower hierarchy when compared with men. Both nature and women can only attach to patriarchal conceptual frameworks and have to abide by the principle that "Man is the measure of all things", from which both women and nature are devalued and unjustly treated. Ecofeminists are strongly against patriarchal thought because it denies the status of women and nature. No matter what forms they take, they all call for an end of all kinds of oppression and prejudices, advocating that efforts to liberate women will not be successful unless nature is liberated. The common destination of ecofeminism is the liberation of women and nature to set up a non-exploitable, harmonious relationship in the modern society. Therefore, the ecofeminists advocate the union of ecology and feminism with the purpose to break away from the domination of patriarchy and make ecological harmony and

equality between men and women come true. As a school of literary criticism, ecofeminism theorizes the interrelations among self, society and nature.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* takes place in Jamaica and the Windward Islands after emancipation. Published in 1966, the novel tackles issues that were both timely and a head of its time, such as the complexity of racial identity and the oppression of women, while also predating the ecofeminist movement by a few years with Rhys's implicit suggestions that Rochester's attitude toward the Windward Islands' natural environment is of the same mind set with which he views his new wife, Antoinette, illustrating not only an association between women and environment, but also the patriarchal desire to dominate both.

### The Theory of Ecofeminism

Since ancient times, women and nature have been inextricably linked in myths, religions, and literature. Despite widespread criticism, the idea of "Mother Nature," or nature as a woman, has persisted as an inspiration for writers throughout time. After all, nature is still personified and feminized in most cultures, and as a result, the colonization of new lands is crucial to understanding the double colonization of women through the acts of violence against the land.

A subset of feminism called ecofeminism is concerned with the parallel subordination of women and the environment. The dominance of both women and nature is closely related to one another. This has occurred as industrial societies have grown, and the need for production and overcoming environmental restraints to produce goods becomes a subject of attention. An ecofeminist approach tackles the ways both women and nature have historically been linked and dominated by man in the name of progress. This approach draws a connection between how women and men are related to various forms of dualism, and the ways women are associated with the subordinated ends of these dualisms. Warren (1996), one of the most prominent ecofeminists, once said:

these hierarchically organized value dualisms include reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature, human/nature and man/woman dichotomies... whatever is associated with emotion, body, nature and women is regarded as inferior to what is associated with reason, mind, culture, human and men (p. 21). This implies that men have innate power over both women and nature. Women have been reduced to the status of inferiority by a male-dominated society with the function of catering to men's needs and producing descendants to men to carry on their ancestral lines. Ecofeminists argue that traditional male-centered approaches involving exploitation of and supremacy over women are echoed in patriarchal practices and discourse with respect to the environment. In other words, the way men treat women is like the way human beings to nature- conquer, possessive and violent or as Warren (1996) calls it the "twin dominations of women and nature" (p.11).

The devaluation of women in society and how it paralleled the devaluation of nature led to the development of ecofeminism. There is a general agreement that man needs to control what is natural and that it is vital to civilize the uncivilized. One of the dualisms that ecofeminism addresses is the idea that nature is less significant than culture or science. Ortner (1972) suggested that "woman is being identified with, or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to man, who is identified with culture", and women are viewed as "closer" to nature and having a "more direct connection" with it (p. 12). Moreover, Alaimo (2000) noted that

Feminism has long struggled with the historical tenacious entanglements of 'woman' and 'nature'. Mother earth, earth mothers, natural women, wild women, fertile fields, barren grounds, virgin lands, raped earths, 'a woman in the shape of monster/ a monster in the shape of woman', the repulsively breeding aliens of horror films- these creatures portray nature as female and woman as not exactly human (p.2).

According to Field (2000), due to women's procreative capabilities, they are identified with what is natural and are consequently perceived as possessing a specific embodiment through their biology (p.49). This particular biology is part of where the association between women and nature comes from. Every time nature is generally conceptualized in a human-like manner, it is always in the form of woman, and almost always of maternal nature. Metaphors of women and nature can be seen in phrases or images like 'Mother Earth' or 'Mother Nature'. These metaphors of nature relate directly to women's reproductive capacities (Field, 2000, p. 52). Moreover, women are considered as capable of putting their energy into one activity—childbirth—and are hence identified with their bodies. Merchant (1980) points out that "women's reproductive functions required that more energy be directed toward pregnancy and maternity, hence less

was available for the higher functions associated with learning and reasoning" (p.136). Men, on the other hand, are associated with reason and mind since "their physiology frees them more completely to the projects of culture" (Ortner, 1972, p. 12). In a society that values progress, mind and reason are privileged as they are thought to be the only thing that can lead to the advancement of science and culture which are contrasted against nature. While science and culture are perceived as being objective and rational, nature is seen as being entirely the opposite - wild, subjective and untamed. Therefore, it is possible to say that science advances in part as a result of the control and dominance of this untamed force. In the same way, women are seen by patriarchal system as wild and untamed. Therefore, both women and nature are perceived as forces that need to be controlled in order to advance and move forward.

Since women are connected to the idea of the natural, they are also oppressed by patriarchy using the same mechanisms to abuse the environment in the guise of development and science. These dualisms are also tied to moral issues. Both women's bodies and the environment are perceived as being out of control and needing to be controlled, and one aspect of this control entails manipulating both for one's own benefit. Because of its constant need to exert control, science turns into a suppressive force. Much of this control is achieved through dominating language and universal claims that shape one's worldview and way of thinking. According to Gudmarsdottir (2010), one way to depict the subjugation of women and nature is to use rape metaphors while discussing human exploitation of the environment (p. 206). A common theme running throughout ecofeminist literature involves characterizing the earth as "body-like" (Field, 2000, p. 49). Almost invariably, when nature is viewed as a body, it is a female body. When the consumption of nature is referred to as "rape of the land", this reinforces, once again, the connection between women and nature, but violently and negatively. (Gudmarsdottir 2010, p. 206).

The notion of the land as a woman and of women as nature, according to ecofeminists, is a means that patriarchal societies use to justify the devaluation of both. According to Warren (1997), "Ecofeminism is the position that there are important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on the one hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other" (p. xi). Ecofeminists oppose all forms of oppression in hierarchical structures, especially those that prioritize males over females and humans over nature, which they see as fundamentally rooted in hierarchical thought. "What makes ecofeminism distinct", Warren (1997) asserts, "is its insistence that nonhuman nature and naturism are feminist issues" (p. 4). In addition to the connections between different forms of domination, ecofeminists put considerable emphasis on the interspecies relationships and dependencies. In the case of colonialism, in particular, it is evident how closely related the exploitation of land, and that of women are. So, while some ecofeminists argue for conceptual links between women and nature, others refer to material connections between their domination, yet others still emphasize the various effects of the environment on different groups of people. Some materialist ecofeminists argue that the environment is particularly important to women since the effects of its exploitation have gendered consequences. Warren (1997) shows how the lives of women, children, and the elderly are influenced by calamities brought on by "deforestation, desertification, soil erosion", and other environmental problems. (p.12).

According to ecofeminism, ending the oppression of women and other marginalized groups viewed as the "Other" depends on ending environmental exploitation. These groups are all aligned on the same inferior ends of dualisms, hence in order to advance in an egalitarian manner, these dualisms must be re-conceptualized. Ecofeminism is aware of the harm that these kinds of oppression do and is concerned about the manner in which they coincide with harm to non-human nature. This branch of feminism reinforces moving towards cooperating and establishing an ethic of care that is mutual between human beings and non-human nature.

### **The Patriarchal Oppression of Women and Nature**

For quite a long time, anthropocentrism has, to a great extent, been the Western main ideology. This is a basic belief embedded in many Western religions and philosophies. Anthropocentrism regards humans as separate from and superior to nature, and holds that human life has intrinsic value while other non-human entities are sources that may justifiably be exploited for the benefit of humankind. As Brooks (1987) states: Men run the risk of distorting themselves if they reject nature in a cold callous asceticism, and they become monstrous if they vent their hatred of nature, if their appropriation of nature becomes a kind of rape. But



love nature though man should, and respect it though he must, he is alienated from nature and must never presume upon an easy union with it if he wished to call himself a man (p. 230).

In ancient Europe, women took control of the highest power and their breeding made them recognize the natural life cycle of the ecology. Under these circumstances, humans never try to go beyond their natural morality. On the contrary, in the modern patriarchal society, men have to set up a God-father image that can create the whole world for the reason that men are unable to reproduce. In societies with such a patriarchal belief, human beings, with the aid of scientific methodology and industrial technology, pursue material prosperity. Merchant (1980) points out that before the Age of Reason, nature, being an organic body, was treated as the mother of everything: "Nature [is] the common mother of all" (p.78). The belief that the destruction of the land is similar to killing one's own mother kept human beings away from the arbitrary damage to nature. However, when the Age of Reason came, human beings began to assault and destroy the earth at will, for Mother Earth was not treated as an organic body with life. For Merchant and other ecofeminists, the theory of "Mother Earth" may prevent human beings from damaging nature. The truth is that men often ignore the complicated interrelationship between nature and women, nor "Mother Nature" or "Mother Earth". Hence, they speak highly of the exuberance of nature and the breeding ability of females. When men must take charge of the fertility and creativity of women and nature, the first thing they need to do is to deprive both of their autonomous rights, and place them in an inferior status. In this regard, the role of women and nature is limited to reproducing and nursing, which finally results in human exploitation and devastation of the natural environment.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* takes an ecofeminist model to show Rochester's descent into a new land and his attempt to uphold colonial notions of masculinity leading to his fall towards insecurity and violence. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette and her geographical location are entangled, creating a landscape that is feminine in nature and setting it in opposition to Rochester. Elements of ecofeminism can be pulled from this connection. Ecofeminism combines ecological and feminist concerns and frames them as products of patriarchy.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, colonized lands are often seen as exotic, pristine and virgin. Europeans see them as places of profit and take them for their own economic gain. Thus a cycle of toxic masculinity is revealed where wealthy white men come into a foreign land and take what will benefit them. This same strategy is seen in Rochester's taking benefit of Antoinette as his wife. In a way, he colonized her for the benefit to his status, much like his ancestors colonized Jamaica and changed the landscape.

In *The Black Jacobins*, James (1989) convincingly establishes the link between male attitudes toward women and the environment by describing the beautiful natural scenery of the island of San Domingo and the European emigrant's reaction to it. This pattern is symbolized in the novel:

The traveler from Europe was enchanted at his first glimpse of this paradise (the island of San Domingo), in which the ordered beauty of agriculture and the prodigality of Nature competed equally for his surprise and admiration... But it was monotonous. Year in and year out, day after day, it was the same, a little greener in the wet season, a little browner in the dry. The wilder scenery was constantly magnificent, but in the colonist who had seen the same domestic landscape from his earliest hour, it awakened little response. To the emigrant who was at first charmed and exhilarated, monotony bred indifference, which could develop into active dislike, and longing for the seasons returning with year (p, 28).

The passage above exemplifies the same behavioral pattern that Rochester demonstrates toward the natural environment of the Windward Islands, which he transfers to Antoinette. In line with James's remark, Rochester is overwhelmed by the wild beauty of his surroundings upon his first arrival to the West Indies, but rather than being fascinated at first, he is somehow infuriated by the extremity of the colors and the strangeness of the place:

'What an extreme green', was all I could say... 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. And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me" (Rhys, 1966, p.59).

Rochester repeats the word "too" several times which shows that he has got to a moderate English style and refuses to accept the real natural style. As he is annoyed with the landscape, he is evenly annoyed with his wife. Antoinette is a stranger to him, so is the island, indicating that Rochester puts them both into the same category, one entity inseparable from each other.

Antoinette and the landscape continue to blend as Rochester starts to see the physical beauty in both and gradually gets spoiled by having full access to them. He considers that "the girl is thought to be beautiful, she is beautiful", and within a few lines he observes the sea, which instead of an extreme blue, is now "a serene blue, deep and dark" (Rhys, 1966, p.59) which is similar to his description of Antoinette's "sad, dark, alien eyes" (Rhys, 1966, p.56). He is filled with wonder when noticing Antoinette's smile while at the same time he looks at the naturally beautiful color of the water:

She smiled at me. It was the first time I had seen her smile simply and naturally...A bamboo spout jutted from the cliff, the water coming from it was silver blue. She dismounted quickly, picked up a large shamrock- shaped leaf to make a cup, and drank. Then she picked another leaf, folded it and brought it to me. 'Taste. This is mountain water'. Looking up smiling, she might have been any pretty English girl and to please her I drank. It was cold, pure and sweet, a beautiful color against the thick green leaf (Rhys, 1966, pp.59-60)

Here, there is an evident connection between Antoinette and the landscape, and Rochester's observation of a natural feature influences his opinion of his wife, thus "feminizing nature and naturalizing the feminine" (Mallan, 2008). In contrast to the island Creole woman who is as wild as the overgrown jungle from which she comes, Rochester creates an image of Antoinette that is in line with what he wants and expects from a wife: a pure, innocent English girl who is more akin to "the ordered beauty of agriculture" from James's binary opposition. Rochester admits conceptualizing her as "any pretty English girl" when she smiles and the water she drinks confirms his perception of her as "cold, pure and sweet" (Rhys, 1966, p.60), undoubtedly untouched by any man but him. He is certain about the significance of the virgin quality of the place, later calling it " a beautiful place-wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loneliness. And it kept its secret" (Rhys, 1966, p.73), implying that the striking beauty hides a terrible secret, most likely the violent history related with slavery. All of these can be attributed to Antoinette herself: "the presumed virginity, her alien eyes, her occasionally disturbing character, her loveliness and her secret" (Mallan, 2008). As a result, she has a strong connection to nature.

For Rochester, the European colonizer of both island and woman, the tropics are figured as oppressive, invasive and bewitching. Like his wife, the island is simultaneously desired and repulsive, and Rochester seeks to match what he describes as the "hostility" of the forest with an aggressive mission to know "its secret. I'd find myself thinking, what I see is nothing- I want what it hides- that is not nothing" (Rhys, 1966, p.73). Thus, the tropical island and Antoinette herself become "entwined in Rochester's mind so that both come to be seen as exotic and dangerous, but also capable of undermining his corporeal control and his superiority" (Gildersleeve, 2011, p. 36).

The analogy Rochester draws between Antoinette and nature stems from his imperialist inclination to impose his Englishness on both and his attempts to make "English sense" out of them. Rochester's portrayal of Antoinette that she could be "any pretty English girl" (Rhys, 1966, p.60) comes from an image of a pure English woman, yet his endeavors to shape her this way ultimately end in failure. Ciolkowski (1997) confirms that Rochester "is determined to resolve Antoinette's ambivalence into the singular tones of English womanhood" (p. 342). She then declares that Rochester's attempts fail, stating that "once his failure to cast Antoinette as the chaste mother of English tones is clear, [she is cast] into the equally singular tones of savage Otherness" (p.343). Ciolkowski's main point is that the English Empire relies on denouncing "female self-indulgence and sexual appetite" because of its dependence on the female's body as a source of control and production of power (p.343). Therefore, when Rochester perceives that Antionette is wild like her island rather than a decent English woman who can resist her sexual desires, he "Others" her and casts her as a savage. It is the recognition of the difference in terms of male/female, culture/natural, civil/savage that leads Rochester to "Other" Antoinette and the landscape. Both nature and Antoinette are placed in the position of otherness, marginalization and hostility. Within the European ideology, nature is placed in an inferior polar as something to be conquered and controlled. The deep-rooted hierarchal ideology has been adopted by Rochester for his conquest of the new land. He finds it difficult to get used to the wilderness of the savage land of exotic features. Thus, each is seen as a "threat to the hierarchy of the patriarchy and must be restrained and manipulated to the male benefit" (Mallan, 2008). Having in mind the powerful presence of power relations between the colonizer and the colonized, Ismailinejad (2015) points out:

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 (p. 151).

For Rochester, nature becomes the raw material for his exploitation. He is totally indifferent towards nature as he only cares for his own material gains. He considers both nature and woman as his possessions.

Cudworth (2005) describes the issue of assuming an intrinsic difference based on binary opposition, conceptualizing "domination on three levels or degrees of dominatory formations and practices of power. These are exploitation, oppression and marginalization" (p. 7). All of these practices are recognized with reference to Antoinette and the nature simultaneously with Rochester as the Western dominator. It has been made clear how Rochester uses Antoinette and the sources of the island for his own benefit in an attempt to exploit both. For a short time, Rochester and Antoinette appear to be happy, but as James notes, "monotony bred indifference" for the European traveler. Rochester also only momentarily appreciates the beauty of his new bride and the lushness of the surroundings. Making a comment on the shortness of this happiness, Rochester says, "I was young then. A short youth was mine" (Rhys, 1966, p.70), foreshadowing the hostility that is to come. However before hostility comes the inevitable indifference: "I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. She was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did" (Rhys, 1966, p.78). Rochester emphasizes that he feels nothing and acknowledges his emotional distance from Antoinette. Although he is aware of his desire for her, he does not love her, which is typical of a patriarchal figure who seeks to dominate a woman before abandoning her once she is no longer useful to him. He laments the fact that she does not even think or feel the same as he does, giving the impression that there is a mental distance between them.

At the same time Rochester admits these feelings of indifference for Antoinette, he remarks on the monotony of the nightly rain showers: "Then I'd listen to the rain, a sleepy tune that seemed as if it would go forever... Rain, forever raining. Drown me in sleep. And soon" (Rhys, 1966, p.79). The use of the word "forever" repeatedly conveys monotony and that he is unconcerned about the rain since it becomes a sort of expected ritual. Therefore, He wants to be drowned in sleep, which emphasizes how desperate he is to scape both this place and the entire situation. At this point, Rochester clearly deems the woman and her natural surroundings as insignificant.

The cycle is finally completed when Rochester's feelings toward woman and nature turn to hatred after receiving a letter from Antoinette's half-caste brother, Daniel Cosway that exposes the violent history of Antoinette's family, calling them "wicked and detestable slave-owners since generations" (Rhys, 1966, p.80). Additionally, he tells him that her family is thought to have a history of mental illness. The letter clarifies how he really feels and justifies his hatred. This letter is just what he has been waiting for: "It was if I'd expected it, been waiting for" (Rhys, 1966, p.82). Then, he goes on, "I passed an orchid with long sprays of golden-brown flowers. One of them touched my cheek and I remembered picking some for her one day. 'They are like you', I told her. Now I stopped, broke a spray off and trampled it into the mud. This brought me to my senses" (Rhys, 1966, p.82). Once again, Rochester blends Antoinette and nature into the same category as if they are one and the same. The statement he recalls telling her in the past, "They are like you", reinforces his preconceived notion that Antoinette and nature are just like identical twins. It seems as though he has come to the realization that his previous mesmerization of both Antoinette and nature was a delusion, and that trampling on the flowers has allowed him to freely loathe them both. What he does to the orchid is exactly what he intends to do with Antoinette- breaking her down and ruining her. When he escapes from the breathless place to the forest to calm himself down, he describes the forest as "hostile": "I was lost and afraid among these enemy trees, so certain of the danger that when I heard footsteps and a shout I did not answer... I feel very much a stranger here, I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side" (Rhys, 1966, pp.87-107). In Rochester's eyes, nature is an ally with Antoinette, the trees in the forest are enemies and there is danger in the natural environment. The sense of dislocation and alienation seizes him tightly and makes him suffering a lot. At the end of Rochester's narration, he is completely over any mixed emotions about nature and his wife:

All the mad conflicting emotions had gone and left me wearied and empty. Sane. 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 sunset of whatever color, 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 (Rhys, 1966, p.141).

Rochester is so detached from nature that he hates any sort of connection with it: "The rain began to drip down the back of my neck adding to my feeling of discomfort and melancholy" (Rhys, 1966, p.57). Rochester's detachment from nature, having come from an industrialized England which he constantly compares to the Caribbean, prevents him from understanding his wife, and this feeling of lack of belonging quickly turns to hatred towards Antoinette and the landscape. Rochester claims to despise the cruelty of the natural environment, which is part of its beauty, implying that it is an intense, hostile beauty. He attributes this fierce loveliness to Antoinette and her ancestry. She is combined with the entire natural world, highlighting Rochester's sentiments for both Antoinette and the island and how his perspective on both shifts at the same time. This demonstrates the ecofeminist claim that the patriarchy has a similar mentality toward both women and nature, which puts them in a position to be exploited for selfish ends and neglected after they are no longer useful.

The pattern is completed when Rochester brings Antoinette, whose name he has changed to Bertha, to his home in England and locks her in the attic since he no longer needs her for sexual purposes. It is here that exploitation and marginalization develop into oppression. It is clear that Rochester still wants to dominate Antoinette, so rather than just leaving her on the island where she can be happy, he brings her to England. He seems to realize that the island is her identity, which he wants to fully destroy, and his vengeance is evident as he separates her from the island:

"She'll not laugh in the sun again. She'll not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking-class. So pleased, so satisfied. Vain, silly creature. Made for loving? Yes, but she'll have no lover, for I don't want her and she'll see no other [...]. She said she loved the place. This is the last she'll see of it" (Rhys, 1966, p.136).

These words show that he still wants to dominate her even though he no longer wants her. He is aware that removing his wife from her natural environment will break her because it is an integral part of her identity, hence linking forever Antoinette and nature as one inseparable unit in his mind. Not only is he unable to differentiate between Antoinette and nature, but he also sees them with the same mentality, wishing to dominate both since he thinks that they pose a threat to the patriarchal English Empire which seeks total control. For Rochester, who stands for the mentality of the English Empire, Antoinette represents the "Other" that needs to be tamed just like the landscape which she comes from. Adjarian (1995) mentions that Rochester "controls what Antoinette comes to represent for him- the island- and the threat they pose to him and his self-conception as an all-powerful, all-knowing European" (p. 206).

Even though it is common for women to be associated with nature, the domination and exploitation of them is the problem that ecofeminists attempt to eradicate. Reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* through an ecofeminist lens is influential for connecting the naturalization of classifying women and nature into the same category and the effects of doing so. It is obvious that Rochester's feelings and attitude towards nature and Antoinette have a great influence on each other, that is, one changes simultaneously with the other, verifying the ecofeminist claim that the patriarchy views both women and nature with the same mindset, which places both in a position to be used for personal gain and abandoned when they are no longer of use.

### **The Feminine Attitudes Towards Nature: Antoinette's relationship with the Landscape**

In patriarchal society, women are regarded as inferior to men, and nature is inferior to culture. Hence the destiny of women and nature is closely connected. On one hand, ecofeminists regard the earth as the mother of human beings; on the other hand, women are nurturers of nature. According to Mack-Canty (2004), early ecofeminism theorized women as being particularly connected to nature, and therefore more likely and more equipped to have an ethic of care towards non-human nature (p. 169). Ecofeminists believe that there is an intimate relationship between women and nature due to the similarities they share. Women, unlike men, have an unwavering love towards nature. Lorentzen & Eaton (n.d.) point out:

The fact that women are most adversely affected by environmental problems makes them better qualified as experts on such conditions and therefore places them in a position of epistemological privilege; that is, women have more knowledge about earth systems than men.

Ecofeminists believe that women always lie in a central position of protecting nature because on the one hand they have a better understanding of nature and, on the other hand, they make a union with nature since



both are victims of patriarchy. Collard (1989) claims that "women's experience with oppression and abuse; as well as their experience of mothering can make them more sensitive to the oppression and abuse of nature, as well as better situated to remedy it" (138). Like women who have been oppressed by the patriarchal society for a long time, nature has also been exploited by human beings. Therefore, ecofeminists advocate that the efforts to liberate women will not be successful unless the negative exploitation of nature ends. What ecofeminists propose to achieve is to build a harmonious society with gender as well as species equality.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette displays a more timid, feminine approach to the landscape. Unlike Rochester, She does not view it as something that can be exploited for personal gain, but as a living entity that has right to life and space. This can be seen in her interactions with the family's garden which she loves despite its wildness. She compares the garden to the one in the Bible, which is amazing and mysterious: "Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible" (Rhys, 1966, p.16). One plant in the garden "was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root" which infect the air with their "very sweet and strong scent", it is a place she avoids as she admits, "I never went near it" (Rhys, 1966, p.17). Antoinette refuses to penetrate the natural world. She respects it as a living entity and sees its purity as something that should be maintained. This sets her in opposition to European, colonial attitudes that nature is a virgin landscape and must be entered and exploited for personal gain. Gildersleeve (2011) notes that Antoinette's refusal to penetrate the forest is "a restraint from invasion or mutual infection" (p. 36). Antoinette gives the plant enough space so she does not harm it through crowding or disease. She gives it a space so it can exist free of human corruption. This shows a stark contrast between the masculine and feminine notions of the environment. While men are seen as conquerors, they take both the land and the women for their own use, women see the land as a living entity, they sympathize with it, and give it the space it needs to exist. Almutairi (2013) points out that "Antoinette sees herself as the warmth of the sun, the bright colors of nature, whereas Rochester mirrors the cold, gloomy, and rainy weather of England in his distanced personality" (p, 50).

Though Antoinette is of English descent, she is very much entangled with the island landscape. Antoinette's association with and love of her natural surroundings are her main source of comfort. The islands are much more suited to her than England as Christophine, a black house servant, says, "She is Creole girl, and she have the sun in her" (Rhys, 1966, p.130). This association of light and warmth with the character of Antoinette signifies her strong connection to the Caribbean environment and links her vibrant personality with flamboyant colors of the island itself: "We are cross-stitching silk roses on a pale background. We can color the roses as we choose and mine are green, blue and purple. Underneath, I will write my name in fire red" (Rhys, 1966, p.44).

*Wide Sargasso Sea* shows that the Caribbeans are more environmentally sensitive than English people who come from an industrial country. Those people value and cherish nature and the natural world. Nature shapes their life and nurtures them so they always intend to glorify it. As a Creole girl, Antoinette seeks solace in nature. She is raised in the womb of nature, which appears to be her haven. She is in such complete tune with the natural world that, in one moment, she genuinely feels that any further movement would disrupt their happy coexistence: "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" (Rhys, 1966, p.20). The garden is just like a shelter in which she feels safe and protected. Mother Earth cherishes Antoinette and aids her in growing and blossoming, as she claims: "If you are buried under a flamboyant tree, your soul is lifted up when it flowers. Everyone wants that" (Rhys, 1966, p.151). Once Antoinette has a bad dream and wakes up crying, she thinks as she lies down, "I'm safe... There is the tree of life in the garden and the wall green with moss. The barrier of cliffs and the high mountains. And the barrier of the sea. I am safe from strangers" (Rhys, 1966, p.23). Antoinette regards the cliffs, the mountains and the sea as barriers to protect her from the strangers. Everything in nature seems friendly to her and serves as a safeguard to her. She is always afraid of being away from home, and it is only the "smell of ferns and river water" can make her feel safe (Rhys, 1966, p.28). Nature is a loyal protector, and whenever Antoinette gets close to it, she feels secure.

Not only is nature Antoinette's mother and her sole protector, but all of its elements, like fire, wind, and animals, are sources of comfort to her. As Antoinette says, "I wished I had a big Cuban dog to lie by my bed and protect me" (Rhys, 1966, p.31). Toward the end of the novel, when she is convinced of what to do,

which is to put Thornfield Hall on fire, she knows that nature and its elements will come to her rescue: "There was a wall of fire protecting me" (Rhys, 1966, p.154). The fire is seen as an agent of nature that ends the patriarchal dominance and, hence, sets Antoinette free from her pain and suffering. She even thinks that the wind can help her 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" (Rhys, 1966, p.34).

Though sometimes nature can be harsh, Antoinette prefers to be close to nature. The ex-slaves slam her and her family that she would rather bear the pain of nature than stand the cruelty of people. Furthermore, Antoinette's rejection by her biological mother and possibly her only friend Tia derives her to desperation. So she tends to trust nature more than human beings, who are always trying to hurt her in one way or another:

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 (Rhys, 1966, p.24).

Antoinette somehow seeks a reassertion of identity in her connection with nature. Being hurt and rejected by both black and white people in the West Indies, unable to belong anywhere, Antoinette establishes her main connection with the only thing that seems to be static and ever-present, that is nature, as she confesses: "I love it more than anything in the world. As if it were a person. More than a person" (Rhys, 1966, p.74). Antoinette is constantly giving human qualities to nature in order to remark its agency. She regards nature as a real friend that never ignores or betrays her. She prefers to have nature as a companion: "Watching the red and yellow flowers in the sun thinking of nothing, it was as if a door opened and I was somewhere else, something else. Not myself any longer" (Rhys, 1966, p.24). The beautiful scenery of nature can only comfort and cure her. Like Antoinette, Tia, Antoinette's friend, seems to be very close to nature despite its harshness as "fires always lit for her, sharp stones did not hurt her bare feet. I never saw her cry" (Rhys, 1966, p.20). Women and nature are just like two intimate friends who gain help and comfort from each other.

Rhys does not miss any chance to show the relationship between women and nature and how each is connected to the other. Antoinette has been sent once to the convent where she spends a long, peaceful time, though she does not like it at first. Later, she thinks of the convent as her refuge: "This convent was my refuge, a place of sunshine and of death... The long brown room was full of gold sunlight and shadows of trees moving quietly" (Rhys, 1966, p.47). The "sunshine" and "sunlight" light up this dumb convent and make it alive. Once again, it is the power of nature that makes the convent a refuge full of life, peace, and quietness that Antoinette is attempting to regain.

Many ecofeminists link the violent treatment of women with violence against animals that are seen as part of nature. Both women and animals are gathered in the same category as "Others" since both are oppressed, exploited, and treated as inferiors. This is evident in Annette's harmonious relationship with a parrot called Coco. Annette is Antoinette's mother and is married to an English man, Mr. Mason. The arrival of white men like Mr. Mason interferes with this harmony. Mr. Mason is so tyrannical to the parrot that he clips his wings, and after he "clipped his wings, he [the parrot] 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" (Rhys, 1966, p.35). The parrot is known to be the national bird of Jamaica, but curiously enough, in this case it is linked to Annette whose wings were cut by Mr. Mason just like Coco's. After being clipped, Coco is afraid of everyone except Annette. When the angry black people attack Antoinette's family and set their house on fire, Annette struggles to go back to the disabled parrot: "He made an effort to fly down but his clipped wings failed him and he fell screeching. He was all on fire" (Rhys, 1966, p.36). Annette treats the parrot as one of her family, so she is willing to save him regardless of danger, an action that is seen insane in the eyes of Mr. Mason. It is the friendliness and tenderness in women towards all natural things that stand in sharp contrast with men's willingness to destroy and dominate nature and, by extension, women. Philips & Rumens argue (2015) that:

Closely linked to the debates on dualism and overlapping oppressions are ecofeminist contributions to our understanding of human relations with non-human animals. In early works, some claimed that women's social practices of care mean they are more likely than men to oppose practices of harm against animals; or that women may empathize with the suffering of animals as they have some common experiences (p. 39).

Through this reading of women's intimate relationship with animals, it could be said that the naturalization process of women turns into an animalization, comparing and categorizing them with animals as one group. Therefore, the way that Antoinette is othered and categorized with nature is by "animalizing" her. Rochester describes Antoinette as Jane Eyre does when encountering her as a rabid animal with hair uncombed, laughing hysterically, and unable to articulate words: "Her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes which were inflamed and staring, her face was very flushed and looked swollen" (Rhys, 1966, p.120). Antoinette's only possible identity is to be relegated to the role of the "madwoman" and locked away as an animal.

The environment in which people are born has a significant impact on shaping their cultural identities. Therefore, one knows his/her true self in the mirror of the environment. However, adapting to a new environment is a challenge for some people as it could be both a positive and negative experience. This new environment may help one develop a new sense of identity that is different from his/her true self. This is what has been thought by Susan Clayton, in her book *Environmental Identity*, that "to constitute an important part of [peoples'] identity, the natural environment must influence the way in which people think about themselves" (as cited in Almutairi, 2013, p. 50). While Antoinette feels at ease surrounded by the natural environment that helps her to overcome her past traumatic syndrome, it is the evisceration of her heaven, or, in other words, the transition to and incarceration in England, a dark, cold, and alien place, that causes her to break. The cold jail, that is, the metropolis, and the separation from the warmth of the Caribbean sun as well as the tropical landscape instigate the deterioration of her true identity and, as a result, her mental state. Mental stability is, sometimes, tied to the environment since nature is able to mitigate one's trauma and aid in recovery. Therefore, Antoinette's separation from her sole protector, the tropical landscape, into the dark jail signals the end of her journey.

In order to eradicate what has been subjugating her, Antoinette draws power from nature as if she is in communion with it, and so it comes to aid her. She lights up the house and finds peace in the big fire. With the help of nature, she makes the last sacrifice that will end her suffering and a turbulent history of abuse and slavery. She unites herself with her only faithful friend, nature, to end the patriarchy and oppression of which she is a victim:

I dropped the candle I was carrying and it caught the end of the tablecloth and I saw the flames shoot up. As I ran or perhaps floated or flew I called help me Christophine help me and looking behind me I saw that I have been helped. There was a wall of fire protecting me but it was too hot, it scorched me and I went away from it (Rhys, 1966, p.154).

The fire acts as her source of power which protects her and awakens her from her dream-like state:

"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, 1966, pp.155-56).

All her life, Antoinette never stops wondering, "who I am and where I belong" (Rhys, 1966, p.85) which finally finds the answer: she is a spirit and belongs to nature.

Antoinette seems to be in tune with nature, not only because she is a woman but also she has established a close relationship with it over the years, which is what grants her the feelings of protection and security. Nature is the only thing capable of consoling her in a cruel place where everyone and even the story itself seem not to be on her side.

## Conclusion

The significance of harmony between nature and humans, both colonizers and colonized, is one of the most important themes of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It shows how nature and its elements can play vital roles in the life of a character as Rhys endows them with power to protect her female character. While men regard nature as a thing to be controlled and exploited for personal interest without showing any concern to it, women render nature as a living entity that is worth fighting and spare no effort to reduce damage to it. Ecofeminists believe that women are naturalized, meanwhile nature is feminized. In other words, women are meticulous nurturers of nature while nature serves as women's shelter. Jean Rhys highlights the unique value of nature as one's spiritual sanctuary through Antoinette's experience. As a woman, Antoinette is more connected to nature since both have man as their enemy. She is subjected to patriarchy and tyranny of culture. Since she is subjugated, exploited and treated as "Other", she finds refuge and peace in nature alone. In agreement with the ecofeminists' belief, the novel suggests that the solution to the problems of

both environmental abuse and power inequality requires a shift to a way of thinking that goes beyond binary oppositions and hierarchies of privilege and power.

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