

An Ecofeminist Approach to Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Ecofeminism, the intersection of the ecological and feminist analyses and movements, arrived in Europe and North America in the early 1970s stemming from the rise of social consciousness and activist efforts pertaining to equal rights for women and fair treatment of the environment. Although there are many different entry points into ecofeminism, the key idea that ecofeminists share is the recognition of a connection between the domination of nature and the domination of women by a patriarchal, usually Euro-western, society (Eaton 11). There are four main pathways into ecofeminism: activism and social movements, academia, religion, and global ecofeminism (12). For the purposes of this paper, I will take an academic approach, analyzing Jean Rhys's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, through an ecofeminist lens.

Rhys's story of the now three-dimensional white creole woman from Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Bertha, whom Rhys renames Antoinette, is set in post-emancipation Jamaica and the Windward Islands. Published in 1966, it is both of its time and ahead of it, tackling contemporary issues prevalent in 1960s culture 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 woman and nature, but also the patriarchal desire to dominate both. Rochester's initial reaction to the beauty of the landscape and to Antoinette is one of uneasiness, which briefly shifts to a feeling of awe, then to indifference, and finally to hatred, which, to him, justifies his abandonment of both the island and his wife. In this paper, I will trace this male behavioral pattern using Rochester as the point of reference in regards to women and the landscape, thus forming a meaningful connection between the treatment of both by a domineering, power-hungry patriarchy. A subsequent topic to be investigated is the problem of assuming difference and binary opposition to exist inherently, and the consequences of doing so.

In *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James describes the lush natural landscape of the island of San Domingo and the European emigrant's response to it, which successfully sets up the connection between male attitudes toward women and the environment, a pattern which is symbolized throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea*:

San Domingo is an island of mountain ranges rising in places to 6,000 feet above sea-level. From the innumerable streams coalescing into rivers which water the valleys and not inconsiderable plains lying between the hills. Its distance from the equator gives an unusual lusciousness and variety to the natural exuberance of the tropics, and the artificial vegetation was not inferior to the natural [. . .]. The traveler from Europe was enchanted at his first glimpse of this paradise, 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 the year. (28)

This passage succinctly illustrates the same behavioral pattern that Rochester exhibits toward the natural environment of the Windward Islands, which he transfers onto Antoinette. In fact, whatever his current feeling toward the island corresponds to his feeling toward his wife.

Keeping in sync with James's observation, upon first arriving to the West Indies, Rochester is overwhelmed by the wild beauty of his surroundings, but instead of being charmed on first impression, he is taken aback and somewhat irritated by the extremity of the colors and the utter 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, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me" (Rhys 70). As he is annoyed with his surroundings, he is equally annoyed with his wife. As Antoinette is a stranger to him, so is the place, suggesting that Rochester lumps them both into the same category, one entity inseparable from each other.

It is fitting to point out that soon after James's illustration of San Domingo's landscape and the white emigrant's initial awestricken reaction followed by boredom, James asserts, "As soon as they could afford it they left the island, if possible never to return [. . .]" (29), an action that Rochester eventually takes which will be discussed later. Ironically, James follows this statement with a passage about the treatment of the women by European settlers and the description is similar to how the land is regarded. In both cases, the value is measured in proportion to if and how much they can be used.

The women were subjected to the same evil influences. In the early years of the colony they had been imported like slaves and machinery. Most of the first arrivals were the sweepings of the Paris gutter, bringing to the island "bodies as corrupt as their manners and serving only to infect the colony." Another official, asking for women, begged the authorities not to send the "ugliest they could find in the hospitals" [. . .]. (30)

Clearly, the women were imported for the use of men who seemed to live by the philosophy held by Robinson Crusoe that something is good only if it can be used. Picky about the quality of women being sent, it is suggested that they were just as easily sent back if they were uncultivated or not as attractive as might have been expected, which harkens back to the boredom that it is bred by being spoiled by too much of a good thing. In her book on developing ecofeminist theory, Erika Cudworth raises the concern that much of the problem with human domination as well as ecological domination is that we do not think of people, animals, or natural objects as possessing value outside of what they can do for us. She writes, "The most common

basis for an environmental ethics is an argument for 'intrinsic value,' according to which natural objects and species are seen to have value in themselves rather than having value in terms of their functions for other things" (19). This may seem like an oversimplified solution, but based on the evidence presented by C.L.R. James and Rochester's dismissive attitude toward not only the landscape, but his wife, it is clear that there is a western tendency to value both nature and other humans, particularly women, as good only in proportion to the good they can do for you.

Antoinette and the landscape continue to meld together as Rochester begins to see physical beauty in both and slowly becomes spoiled by having full access to them. He observes, "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" (70) similar to his description of Antoinette's "sad, dark, alien eyes" (67). He is slowly taken in by all he has at his fingertips and appears awed when noticing Antoinette's smile while he simultaneously notices the naturally pretty 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. (71)

Here, the connection between Antoinette and the natural world is as clear as the water she gives Rochester to drink as the observation of a natural detail helps shape his opinion of his wife, thus feminizing nature and naturalizing the feminine. He formulates an image of her which is the one he desires and expects from a wife, that of a chaste, innocent, and poised English girl, closer to the ordered beauty of agriculture from James's binary opposition, rather than the island Creole

woman who is as wild as the overgrown jungle from which she comes. Rochester admits to visualizing her as “any pretty English girl” when she smiles and the water she drinks reinforces his “Angel in the House” image of her – “cold, pure and sweet,” presumably untasted by any man but him. He is emphatic 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 loveliness. And it kept its secret” (87), suggesting that the intense beauty hushes an awful secret, presumably the violent history associated with slavery. All of these observations can be applied to Antoinette herself: the presumed virginity, her alien eyes, her occasionally disturbing character, her loveliness, and her secrets.

The connection Rochester makes between Antoinette and the landscape partly arises from his imperialist nature to impose his Englishness on her and the island and his endeavors to make “English sense” out of them. The passage where he notes she could be “any pretty English girl” comes from a contrived image of a chaste English woman, but his attempts at fashioning her this

way ultimately end up failing. In her article, “Navigating the Wide Sargasso Sea,” Laura E. Ciolkowski asserts that Rochester “is determined to resolve Antoinette’s ambivalence into the singular tones of English womanhood” (342), recapitulating on my observation that he tries with great effort to imagine her as English, at least in the beginning stages of their relationship. She then remarks that Rochester’s attempts fail stating, “Once his failure to cast Antoinette as the chaste mother of English sons is clear, [she is cast] into the equally singular tones of savage Otherness” (343). Ciolkowski’s key message is that the English empire is dependent on denouncing “female self-indulgence and sexual appetite” because of their dependence on female bodily management as an element of control and production of power. Therefore, when Rochester sees, or rather assumes, that Antoinette is wild like her surroundings, not a proper Englishwoman who can restrict sexual activity, he “Others” her and casts her as a savage.

It is the recognition and the naturalizing of difference that leads Rochester to “Other” Antoinette, and he may symbolize the entire British empire which sees in terms of male/female, white/black, artificial/natural, rich/poor, civil/savage. The second term in each of these binary opposites represents those which must be controlled in order for the first term to stay in control, so it is easy to see how the theory behind ecofeminism, the association between the domination of women and the domination of nature, works: each is seen as a threat to the hierarchy of the patriarchy and must be restrained and manipulated to the male benefit.

Cudworth discusses the problem of assuming an inherent difference based on binary opposites, conceptualizing domination on three levels of dominatory formations and practices of power which are *marginalization*, *exploitation*, and *oppression*. She claims, “These formations and practices are predicated on difference” (7). In simple terms, she describes *oppression* as “a harsh degree of relations of dominatory power,” *exploitation* refers “to the use of something as a resource for the ends of the user,” and *marginalization* as “the making and conceptualizing of something as relatively insignificant” (7). All of these terms are recognized as referring to humans, animals, and nature and I include their definitions as a reminder since we are about to see how they play out in reference to Antoinette and nature simultaneously with Rochester as the western dominator. We have already seen *exploitation* with Rochester using Antoinette and the resources of the island for his own pleasure.

A false happiness persists between Rochester and Antoinette for a fleeting period, but as James points out, “monotony bred indifference” for the European traveler and this is true of Rochester who briefly enjoys the beauty of his new wife and the lushness of a new place. He even drinks to their happiness, their love, and “the day without end which would be tomorrow.” Commenting on the brevity of this happiness, Rochester says, “I was young then. A short youth was mine” (84), foreshadowing the friction and hostility that is to come. However, before friction and hostility comes the inevitable indifference. It is clear that Rochester’s attitudes toward Antoinette and the environment shift simultaneously, which is the behavioral pattern under

analysis. The next transformation takes place after the novelty of Antoinette and the island have worn off and everything becomes force of habit, from their lovemaking and pillow talk to the nightly rain showers on the island. He confesses his feelings for his wife, or lack thereof:

“You are safe,” I'd say. She'd liked that – to be told “you are safe.” Or I'd touch her face gently and touch tears. Tears – nothing! Words – less than nothing. As for the happiness I gave her, that was worse than nothing. I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did. (93)

Here, Rochester admits his emotional detachment from Antoinette in a very forthcoming manner, emphasizing the fact that he feels nothing. He acknowledges his desire for her, but doesn't love her, which is typical of a patriarchal figure who wants to dominate a woman only to leave her when he no longer has any use for her. However, to give him the benefit of the doubt, he reminds us that he is as imprisoned in this situation as she is. He barely knows her and feels trapped; he implies a feeling of mental disconnection from her that he possibly wishes to change, bemoaning the fact that she doesn't think or feel as he does.

The pattern remains, though, that precisely at the same time he 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 on for ever . . . Rain, for ever raining. Drown me in sleep. And soon” (94). The repetition of “for ever” suggests monotony and the sleepy tune that the rain plays has a hypnotic effect on him. The tone here is neither embracing nor hostile, but neutral, as if he doesn't care one way or the other about the rain because it has become a sort of expected ritual. Nevertheless, he wants a way out of this place and the entire situation, “and soon,” which is emphasized by his wish to be drowned in sleep. At this point, Cudworth's definition of *marginalization* comes into play as Rochester clearly deems the woman and the place as insignificant.

The cycle completes itself when, finally, Rochester's position toward woman and nature turns to hatred after he receives the letter from Antoinette's half-caste brother, Daniel Cosway, which explains the violent slave-owning history Antoinette comes from, calling them "wicked and detestable slave-owners since generations" (95), and also informs him of the presumed mental illness that runs in her family. It seems though, that this letter is just what he has been waiting for, that he has wanted to hate the girl and the place all along, but didn't have a legitimate reason to. The letter justifies his hatred and it is finally clear how he truly feels and he even says, "It was if I'd expected it, been waiting for it." "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" (99), once again lumping Antoinette and nature into the same category as if they are one and the same. The statement he remembers telling her in the past, "They are like you," reinforces his one-track mind that Antoinette is nature, so to speak. It is as if he is realizing that he was once mesmerized by her, and the place, and trampling the flower brings him to his senses that it was all an illusion and can now hate both freely. At the end of Rochester's narration, he is completely over any mixed emotions about the place 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 sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness. Above all I hated her. (172)

Rochester now uses the word “hate” without hesitation and the connection between the woman and the place is now clearer than ever – “And I hated the place” leads up to, “Above all I hated her.” He claims to hate the cruelty of the place, which is part of the beauty, implying that it is an intense, hostile beauty. He transfers this violent loveliness onto Antoinette and her ancestry. She and the entire natural environment are all neatly wrapped up into one package in this passage. It is evident that Rochester follows a pattern in regards to his feelings toward Antoinette and the island and that his attitude toward one changes simultaneously with the other, verifying the ecofeminist claim that the patriarchy views both woman and nature with the same mentality, which places both in a position to be used for personal gain and abandoned when they are no longer of use.

This pattern completes itself when Rochester takes Antoinette, whose name he has changed to Bertha, to his estate in England only to lock her in the attic as he no longer needs her for sexual purposes. It is here that *exploitation* and *marginalization* transition into *oppression*. Once it has been determined that one does not care for another's well being and she no longer has a use, *oppression* comes into play, completing all three stages of Cudworth's conception of domination. It is obvious Rochester still desires to have control over Antoinette, so instead of just leaving her on the island where she would have been happier, he takes her with him so he can abandon and dominate her concurrently. His vindictiveness is clear with his plans to separate her from the island, which is interesting because he seems to acknowledge that the island is her identity, which he wishes to erase completely: “She'll not laugh in the sun again. She'll not dress up and smile at herself in that damnable looking-glass. 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 this place. This is the last she'll see of it” (165).

These words illustrate that even though he doesn't want her anymore, he still desires control over her. He knows that taking her from her natural environment will break her because it is a key part of who she is, therefore forever linking Antoinette and her island as one in his mind.

In this paper, I have aimed to identify Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an early project in ecofeminist thought by tracing the ways in which the male protagonist, Rochester, closely associates Antoinette with her natural environment, often viewing the two entities as one inseparable unit. Not only is he unable to differentiate between them, but he views them with the same mentality, wishing to dominate two subjects which he most likely sees as a threat to the patriarchal English empire which desires complete control. With help from secondary sources by C.L.R. James, Laura E. Ciolkowski, and Erika Cudworth, it is clear that, one, there is a connection between the domination of nature and the domination of women, and two, that Rochester represents the ideal of the Nineteenth Century English Empire and Antoinette represents the "Other" that needs to be tamed, just like the landscape from which she comes. Though it is common for woman to be associated with nature, the domination and exploitation of them is the problem that ecofeminists wish to eradicate. Reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* through an ecofeminist lens proves an effective exercise in making connections between the naturalization of placing women and nature in the same category and the consequences of doing so.

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