

Green Shadows: Exploring Tropes of Ecophobia in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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ABSTRACT

E. O. Wilson commented that phobia is not innately present but acquired. The article highlights how the fear of nature shapes the cultural and social behaviours of Man. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, written by Jean Rhys, primarily portrayed as a postcolonial response to Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, is replete with gothic imagery. Fear and anxiety of nature are commonly found as the centre of Gothicised texts throughout literary history, wreathing concerns of ecophobia, a term used by Simon Estok to define this irrational traumatic response to the natural. The article aims to explore tropes of ecophobia, fear of nature, through the two main protagonists of the novel- Rochester and Antoinette. The EcoGothic reverberations in the text highlight intersections between the biophilic human psyche and the contrasting colonial upbringing that develop into an aversion towards Nature and its subjects. The article draws from concepts of colonialism and Gothic shifting focus towards EcoGothic, ensuing the ecological destruction. Further, it discusses tropes of ecophobia which is also a trajectory of the related aversion to *otherness*. Ecophobic tendencies tune themselves into destruction, manipulation and domination, hastening climate degradation. The world in contemporary times suffers from anxiety related to the altering changes in the environment, and the article attempts to briefly decode the reasons for this disconnect while also putting the theories of ecophobia at the forefront in attempt to re-analyse postcolonial texts.

Keywords: Ecophobia; Post-colonialism; Ecocriticism; Biophilia; Caribbean Literature; Jean Rhys

INTRODUCTION

Landscape plays an important role in establishing Man's relationship with the ecosystem. Instances of this symbiotic relationship have been observed cultural depictions and knowledge of the indigenous population who pay high reverence to the balance of nature. However, in the modern world, environmental studies illuminate myriad ways this connection is severed, owing to the disconnect between colonial invasions and the portrayal of the colonised as savages and trickling to form a perception of monstrosity of nature (Guha, 2016; Ghosh, 2016; Ghosh, 2021). This monstrosity is viewed as a threat to the power of the colonials and, thus, is replaced with fear of nature, leading to absurd ways to seek dominion. This article uncovers how environmental perceptions of nature and essentially control can surface as ecophobia towards the non-human. Re-reading Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, while implementing Simon Estok's theory of Ecophobia,

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the paper further unravels how colonial origins evoke fear of the unknown and uncanny, potentially threatening the façade of control in man. Parker (2016) writes, plants cannot be considered passive. They possess energy to play a role in man's psyche, and any harm towards it will be retributed. Parker's thought forms the crux of the discussion in the paper. The 'Othering' of the marginalised is an element of discussion extended by the environmental focus on the novel.

THE POSTCOLONIAL AND GOTHIC

Postcolonial works essentially de-centre the widely popular colonial narratives and perceptions. Bringing back the 'Other' under the spotlight, postcolonial narratives voice the lesser-known stories of those oppressed by the colonisers. This process involves many deconstructions of the generational oppression, suppressed and normalised violence, and psychological trauma that flows inadvertently. The postcolonial Gothic narratives, in turn, become a medium to de-centre the normalised colonial violence and othering of the natives. Imperial Gothic rose from the need to purport the demonisation of the 'Other'. Sarah Ilott (2019) writes, that the postcolonial Gothic does what the imperial Gothic does, i.e., "appropriate[ing] the language of the Gothic and abrogates its ideologies, while displacing the central concerns of imperial Gothic by centralising those who were once marginalised and made monstrous." (p.20). Postcolonial Gothic thus, becomes an outlet for "re-engagement of the lived realities" (p.22). EcoGothic is a trajectory that borrows from postcolonial Gothic and places the non-human in the narrative centre along with the natives. Deckard (2019) calls this "greening" of the Gothic as a representation of "cultural anxieties about human relationship to the non-human world through uncanny apparitions of monstrous nature" (p.174). This article especially writes about the tropical Gothic, as it explores "monstrous and disturbing narratives situated in a location usually associated with sunlight, warmth and richness of natural resources" (Ibarra, 2019, p.267), making Rhys' adaptation of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, a perfect ground for exploring both tropes of tropical EcoGothic as well as the colonial aversion to the 'Other' leading to ecophobic propensities.

Jean Rhys was born in 1894 in the West Indies. Her father was an Englishman and her mother was an English Creole much like the character in the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*. One of her most popular works, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, was published in 1966, primarily being under observation as a text that has voiced the barely mentioned mad creole in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, while also addressing the postcolonial issues that were ignored in Brontë's work. The novel unravels in the early nineteenth-century West Indies and has in the centre the protagonist Antoinette Cosway, who is the 'madwoman in the attic' discussed in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, extending the narrative to her past life. Rhys draws parallels to the formulation of Antoinette from experiences from her own life as she briefly recalls being called "a Savage from the Cannibal Islands" (Seymour, 2022) and has written novels in the past representing psychologically suffering women characters. The protagonist of this novel, Antoinette Cosway belongs to a family of ex-slave owners who are in a dilapidated state post the Emancipation Act. After the death of her father Mr Cosway, she, along with her mother Annette and brother Pierre are seen living in their dark, disturbing estate in Coulibri, Jamaica. Antoinette grows up in isolation as the Black people disliked their creole status and are often seen being referred to as the "white cockroaches" (Rhys, 2000, p.9) due to her British lineage. Soon her mother remarries an English man Mr Mason, but tragedy strikes as their Coulibri home is set on fire by the black people and Pierre dies in it, pushing her mother, Annette, further into her solitude and melancholy and eventually passing away. Antoinette later marries Edward Rochester, who is never named in the novel. Their swift marriage is due to the handsome dowry

of thirty thousand pounds that Rochester is to acquire post marriage. Displeased with the place, his wife Antoinette, Rochester decides to leave for England with his wife. Readers assume this to be Thornfield Hall as the plot catches on to the trajectory of the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte. Antoinette is seen spending her last days juggling bouts of sadness and episodes of madness that she usually does not recall.

Borrowing from its inspiration of the works of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Emily Bronte's *The Wuthering Heights*, this book has often been read as a postcolonial gothic theme as it borrows themes like the 'villain Byronic hero', the consistent imagery of dark and the decayed, and the gothic tropes of the forest and the supernatural (Roszak, 2014). *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are replete with postmodern gothic tropes, which move away from the gothic themes that had originated in the nineteenth century. Yet gothic has been written differently from most novels of the western origin in Jean Rhys' novel. Roszak writes that the first point of divergence arises from its setting. The novel is based on and is heavily influenced by the African-Caribbean traditions and beliefs in the Obeah, a religious practise in the Caribbean, often understood as black magic. Anthony Luengo in his article *Wide Sargasso Sea and the gothic mode (1976)* termed Rhys' novel as a neo gothic work. Landscape is a characteristic in both types of gothic works, providing an aura that is "overpoweringly beautiful and mysteriously menacing" (Luengo, 1976, p.231). Though the book has been looked at through lens of postcolonialism and psychoanalysis, it is yet to be decoded through environmental analysis. The relationship between the stark gothic imagery and the purported madness of Antoinette, also takes a dive at Rochester's irrational confusion and fear of the wilderness and civilians of the island. The Caribbean literature allows for an in-depth exploration of the colonial violence inflicted, causing major alterations to the land. The novel is set in the vibrant Dominica, which allows a re-reading into the psyche of the characters which in turn helps readers understand the "processes of appropriation and the recognition of the cultural construction of the tropics in colonialist terms" (Ibarra, 2019, p.268). Caribbean literature makes for a place replete with horror (of colonialism, mono-agriculture, suppression, and violence) and beauty (lush green beauty, the sea, and the wildlife). Lizabeth Paravisini- Gebert (2002) mentions some of the gothic elements of the Caribbean, "symbolic of the islands' threatening realities, of the brutality, bizarre sacrifices, cannibalism, and sexual aberrations that filled the imagination of authors and their audiences with lurid, terror-laden imagery" (p.234)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

ECOCRITICISM

As the analysis of the novel takes an ecological perspective, it is essential to briefly understand the ecocritical lens. A rhizomatic literary theory, ecocriticism denies a single and conclusive definition. However, the most accepted definition of ecocriticism would be:

A study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies.

(Glotfelty, 1996, xviii)

Ecocriticism as a literary movement is nascent one, and many critics and scholars are bringing the environmental narrative to the forefront, unearthing perspectives away from the dominant literary critical narratives. David Mazel (2001) wrote that the environmental concept

takes an earth-centred approach to existing literary perspectives. Though the movement towards a green approach began rather with singular intention, the field has since then evolved to include conversations ranging from green crime, posthumanism, neo-materialism, non-human agency, eco-activism, environmental feminism and so on (Slovic, 2015). The combination of environmentalism and literary analysis allows for a deep exploration into the non-human agency of texts. When read with an environmental lens, the book offers myriad other ways to understand the interrelationship between human and non-human. The book is deeply steeped in environmental and animal imagery and tropes with vibrant images of the colourful Dominica to frequent connections and comparisons with animals to describe situations and characters. Landscape plays a very important role in the lives of the protagonists- Antoinette and Rochester. It moves beyond being a mere backdrop and shapes their behaviour and thinking. The deep lush forest of Coulibri provides Antoinette solace and safety when she couldn't seek it from home and human beings. The mossy wall of her garden then becomes an important part of her life. Such is the influence of her homeland, Antoinette finds the move to the new place disorienting as the old forest, and her garden with the overgrown bushes are no more a part of her life. Towards the end, she is seen on the brink of madness as she is locked away in the attic by Rochester in Thornfield Hall. At this difficult time, she resorts to her memories and imagination of the lush wildlife of Dominica, of home. It is to be noted that Rhys' narrative and postcolonial rendition of the Brontë's Bertha Mason, allows for an alternative voice into the picture. At the same time, as Mardirossian (1999) stresses, Antoinette does not receive a lot of space in the book, "the nameless husband's narrative voice dominates two thirds of the novel, his values do not represent the authoritative ideology of the text" (p.1086). Instead, it does the job of critiquing his views of the landscape and in turn the colonial thought.

The environmental lens provides an interaction with the varying landscapes and their cultural association is evident throughout the novel. Thomas Loe (2007) in his article *Landscape and character in Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea* promptly remarks that in Rhys' novel, both the characters have distinct responses to the environment they cross paths with which in turn shapes their character, showcasing "a characteristic interdependence between characters and their perceptions of their landscapes" (p.49). Loe also refers to Edward Said's theory of *contested spaces* and how cultural perceptions affect a person's perception. (p.52). As articulated by Edward Said (1994) in his influential work, *Culture and Imperialism*, contested spaces are those that reflect colonial power struggles as it attempts to establish their own set of ideologies and narratives onto the colonized space.

Paravisini Gebert in her article, *Who Writes for the Trees?: Wide Sargasso Sea, the Dominican Forest, and Its Parrots*, recounts Rhys' personal observations as the author penned the *Wide Sargasso Sea*, helping readers understand the difference in response between the two characters,

In the Dominica sections of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the melancholic, wondrous delight in nature will belong to Antoinette—who shares with her creator an identity anchored weakly in society, but strongly in a nonhuman forest and animal presence—while Rhys conjured the nightmarish, lurking menace as the means to textually "magic" Rochester, whose own identity is so keenly anchored in British society and its rules.

(Paravisini-Gebert, 2020, p.104)

THE GOTHIC AND ECOPHOBIA

Gothic fiction is categorised by the feeling of fear and apprehension that it evokes in the readers and the characters in the work. Nature has been expounded in gothic theories, and be portrayed as character rather than a setting (Parker & Poland, 2019). This concept has had a long history of being able to narrate trauma. Imperial or colonial Gothic gave way to normalise and naturalise the binaries between the colonials and the indigenous (or the Other). The postcolonial Gothic took to utilising the tropes set by the west, but placed the ‘Other’ at the centre of the narratives, allowing them to voice. As Gothic allowed the readers to transgress the realms of normal and abnormal, postcolonial Gothic employed the same, however it extended it through varied angles of trauma raising from colonial violence and othering (Khair, 2021).

Andrew Smith and William Hughes in their volume *EcoGothic* (2013), were the very first scholars to look extensively at the rise of the ecogothic readings of literary texts and write that gothic has always been ecologically aware. Keetley and Sivils (2017) in their *Introduction to Approaches to the EcoGothic* explain the significance of the “Gothic ecocritical lens” via which we can study the “unsettling aspects” of our relationship with the non-human, coloured with “fear, anxiety and dread” (p.1). While ecophobia and the gothic are intersections that are only recently popularized and being explored, both the literary fields are closely interrelated to each other. Tom J Hillard, post Simon Estok’s ground-breaking article on the need for theorizing the ecocritical space and discussion of ecophobia, published an essay interacting with the increasing depiction of this *phobia* of the deadly turn of nature rampant in the contemporary world and its correlation with fear. He traces the need to apprehend the depiction of fear itself. Thus, he wonders, “what happens when we bring the critical tools associated with gothic fiction to bear on writing about nature?” (Hillard, 2009, p.688). Gothic fiction and ecophobic representations have similar thematic properties. Hillard (2009) opines that gothic fiction makes an appropriate lens to understand the “fears and anxieties about the natural world” (p.689). While ecophobia is the denial of accepting the “common, biological origin of life” (Del Principe, 2014, p.2), Estok (2019) writes that “EcoGothic is at core ecophobic.” (p.39). EcoGothic texts challenge the rigid anthropocentric world view in the literary texts, demanding “a serious shift in perspective... to “ecocentrism” (Parker, 2016, p.218). Over all the EcoGothic scholars and critics have establishes analyses three-fold, as Keetley and Sivils (2017) delineate:

Thus far, then, critics have established the ecogothic as (1) a repository of deep unease, fear, and even contempt as humans confront the natural world; (2) a literary mode that uses an implacable external “wilderness” to call attention to the crisis in practices of representation; and (3) a terrain in which the contours of the body are mapped, contours that increasingly stray beyond the bounds of what might be considered properly “human”.

(p. 4)

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, this correlation wreathes itself into the narrative of both the protagonists, Antoinette and Rochester, as they travel through their contrasting opinions about nature-human relationships. Colonialism plays a major role in this exploration as we see the impact of the haunted land on Rochester, the poster child of the colonial vehicle. Khair (2021) points out an essential detail in Rhys’ dealing with the postcolonial Gothic. Evidently, the narrative of the self suddenly faces[ing] the secret and repressed other” (p.136). Though, the novel has been read in multiple perspectives of repression, the article takes the less explored route of ecophobia to showcase that anything that threatens the agency of man adds to this illusionary “contempt and fear we feel for the agency of the natural environment” (Estok, 2009, p. 207). Biophilia, as defined

by Edward O. Wilson is “the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms” (Kellert & Wilson, 1993, p.31) is the opposite of ecophobia. According to Estok (2018), ecophobia is the other end of the spectrum of biophilia. The novel stands as a representation of this very spectrum. Rhys’ love for her land has been articulated through Antoinette who represents this element distinctly in the narrative. The colonial oppression of the land haunts the colonial counterparts, throwing light upon correlations between “racism and ecophobia, ethnocentrism and ecophobia, and sexism and ecophobia” (Estok, 2019, p.41), glimpses of which will be evident in the analysis of this novel. The otherness is frequently distinguished throughout the novel, and the EcoGothic aids in decoding how we perceive “social and environmental Otherness”, “the control-freak aspects of humanity”, and “entanglement of ontological and existential matters with the environmental ethics” (Estok, 2019, p.2). Nature here holds strong agency over the human as it “becomes a character, often embodied in spirit-form” (Deckard, 2022, p.174).

ECOPHOBIA: THE FEAR OF THE NON-HUMAN

Ecophobia is an off-shoot of ecocriticism that is still in its nascent stage. Scott Slovic and Adamson in their Introduction to the MELUS (2009), talked about the emergence of the third wave of ecocriticism, which “explores all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint” (Slovic, 2010, p.4). Simon C. Estok’s Ecophobia is one such lens unique to environmental analysis. He defines Ecophobia as an “irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism” (Estok, 2009, p.208). Further, he states that ecophobia’s basic premise is about “fear of a loss of agency and control to Nature” (Estok, 2005, p.112).

Tom Hillard (2009) suggested that fear is the component that ties ecophobia with gothic texts. This irrational fear of the loss of dominance comes from the fear of losing control that places humans in the prime spot of evolution. Recent developments in the current age are a testament to such instances of dominion- from the vital extractive industry to attempts at sustainable cityscapes. Ecophobia manifests itself in its exercise of power over the ‘Other’ (the landscape and the indigenous people) and the voiceless. This innate need for power is not new, however, with prompt discoveries and progress came changing views and relationships with nature, sheering the symbiotic relationship shared with the earth. The advent of the Industrial Revolution made this disconnect worse as man was able to alter and control nature at will. Estok expounds why ecophobia is relevant in contemporary times, thus, creating an essential correlation between ecophobia and the white man’s power play:

Control of the natural environment, understood as a God-given right in Western culture, seems to imply ecophobia, just as the use of African slaves implies racism. Similarly, misogyny is to rape as ecophobia is to environmental looting and plundering. Like racism and misogyny, with which it is often allied, ecophobia is about power.

(Estok, 2005, p.113)

The colonial’s fear of the foreign land and its natives, trickles other forms of fear inculcated domination such as of land, the people and of their religious practices. The colonials instead resort to measures taken to suppress the voiceless which are usually violent. The colonizers’ fear of this unfamiliar space of nature of the colonized pertains to their misconceptions and lack of understanding of the colonized. Essentially this sub-genre of ecocriticism dissects the two major

facets of nature. First, the image of the nurturing mother, the provider for life. Second, the more violent image of being the malignant and the destroyer. The second image of nature is becoming increasingly widespread in contemporary media today (Hillard, 2009). Being empathetic to the non-human, man is able to extend it towards understanding the human 'others', in this case, the colonized. The intersections between these themes make it important for discussion as it possesses pedagogic benefits- educating the readers about ecological crises and environmental issues (Jain & Harris Satkunanathan, 2021). The article foregrounds attitudes of nature destruction, facilitating an attitudinal shift to evoke empathy.

Imperial Gothic fiction rose from xenophobia, invoking fear of the indigenous cultures. The tropical Gothic is essentially the sub-genre that will be discussed in relation to Rhys' text as it is replete with Gothicised imagery that rises in contrast to that of imperial Gothic. Enriquez Ajuria Ibarra (2019), briefly explains that:

Tropical Gothic is enshrined within a complex cultural and historical frame of reference that is born out of violence, acculturation and transculturation: European colonisers brought forth a mythical vision of the conquered lands that haunts the region under the guise of a colonial past and of more ancient systems of belief that are always in the process of being unearthed, recognised and remembered with detachment, fear and awe.

(p. 268)

Thus, these narratives help to overcome "cultural fears over social, political and even religious discourses in tropical zones around the world" (p.268). The wild landscape and the rampant "vines and vegetation" add to the perceived and Other's "monstrous fecundity that threaten human civilisation" (Deckard, 2019, p.174). Gothic tropes of the monstrosity of the plantation workers, Obeah or black magic practitioners, the madness of natives and so on are dealt with in literary colonial texts (Lundberg 2019). The article deals with similar tropes of the tropical zones, the garden, the forest and the flowers, which are frequently addressed in the novel to show the varied ways it is perceived, which could be considered as a contrast to imperial Gothic tropes, which imagine the "environment's supposed malevolence as a threat to colonial order and the regimented organisation of the plantation system" (p.176). The tropes discussed below are of the wounded landscape, as it displaces the colonial centre. The land remembers the violence and Rochester simply comes to terms with the reality of the majestic and vibrant 'Other', through his fear. The selected tropes bring out the fundamental, attitudinal and perceptive binaries in finding the roots to the fear of the non-human Other. It is to be noted that a lot of these tropes come from a vibrant and colourful island landscape, whose plurality may "provoke fear and anxiety towards subjects, as well as further developing the tension that exists between civilisation and nature." (Ibarra, 2019, p.268). The analysis deals with the text in two steps. First, the tropes are discussed to show their influence on the lives of both the protagonists. Secondly, Rochester's character is dealt with in depth to present his ecophobic mindset that drives him to respond with fierce domination.

ANALYSIS

THE GARDEN

The book begins with very elaborate descriptions of Antoinette's Garden, "Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible—the tree of life grew there" (Rhys, 2000, p.6), consists of appreciation of what is natural. At the same time, her narrative also develops a cautionary air:

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.

(Rhys, 2000, p. 6)

Her account of the garden informs the readers of how the space is very personal and intimate to her. Elements of beauty and decay are simultaneously mentioned and yet, she does not show signs of any disgust or hatred towards it. Instead, her narrative displays an acceptance of nature as a whole and approached it with reverence. It is also important to note that despite the *garden* being an image of obsessive dominance by man over nature and a sign of artificial beautification of nature for pleasure, Antoinette's Garden is overgrown and unkept. The garden is a sign of revolt against institutions of dominance and hierarchy- be it colonisation, man, and patriarchy. Rhys' style of portraying nature is well balanced between appreciation and caution, conveying both facets of the wilderness. The gothic descriptions of the garden incite an eery air of terror in the reader, however, this is natural and common to Antoinette, and is compared with the gothic trope of the 'lost Eden' and the 'fallen Eden' as it signifies defeat and ruins. Having said that, this is also the most instinctive response of nature, and is far from being a sign of devastation.

Rhys' use of vivid imagery is running throughout the novel. The pond where Antoinette and Tia play is also described with images that spark an aesthetic beauty:

...I lay in the shade looking at the pool- deep and dark green under the trees, brown-green if it had rained, but a bright sparkling green in the sun. The water was so clear that you could see the pebbles at the bottom of the shallow part. Blue and white and striped red. Very pretty.

(Rhys, 2000, p.9)

The narrative then turns grim as this peaceful array is broken for Antoinette when Tia steals her clothes and a few pennies that she had carried with her. At this moment, Nature seems more ruthless towards her, or so is perceived by Antoinette as she remarks that the "sun couldn't warm" her and the soothing sun is now "blazing" making her feel "sick" (Rhys, 2000, p.10). Rhys' depiction of this malignant side of nature is crucial to understanding the relationship Antoinette shares with nature. The earth is in no way favourable to her, rather shows its indifference towards human beings.

On being teased and threatened by the people around them, Antoinette is seen finding solace and support from this psychological torment from the same garden, it shows that the stereotypical decaying and unkept garden is a safe space for her. It provides her relief as she allows herself to submit to nature:

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, 2000, p. 9)

In this positive view of the wilderness, Antoinette shows signs of biophilia, by receiving both comfort and being vulnerable in the midst of it. It is to be noted, that this relationship and understanding of the natural world is rather *normal*. Man was made to have a healthy cyclic relationship with the non-human. The binaries of the savage vs civilised are man-made (Newbury, 2023).

FLOWERS: AN IMAGE OF THE EARTH

Flowers, often are described in vibrant detail in the Wide Sargasso Sea. Savory (2015) opines that Antoinette feels an “emotional lift” from observing their delicate features as, “She associates the pink and red hibiscus around Christophine’s house with hope when she seeks help to restore her husband’s love” (p.95). The flowers and the colours deduce the basic elements of the earth, that consistently provide Antoinette with the dash of courage and solace she craves. Locked up in the attic in Thornfield Hall, she connects the memory of the intoxicating smell of the flowers with their bright colours calling them “fire and sunset” (Rhys, 2000, p.120). Throughout Antoinette’s narrative, Rhys effectively uses the element of fire in close relationship to Antoinette’s character development. First, with fire engulfing her Coulibri home and having lost her brother and Coco, the parrot; and, when imprisoned in a foreign land, she imagines “the tree of life in flames” (Rhys, 2000, p.122), urging her to take action as she burns the house, freeing herself akin to her parrot, Coco.

Rochester’s aversion lies in stark contrast to Antoinette’s character as he displays a crude carelessness towards them when he steps on the beautifully wrought wreathes of frangipani flowers in Granbois, their honeymoon house. The article through elements of emotions felt through nature, it explores how the protagonists relate to their environment. It helps us to “understand the sublime better” and regenerate a healthy “relationship to nature and their social responsibility to climate crisis” (Jain & Harris Satkunanathan, 2021, p. 258).

FOREST: A SAFE HAVEN

Gothic text tropes usually include characters in the deep forests and their sinister vibe in their narrative. Although we do encounter the stereotypical tropes of *fear* and *evil* when discussing Rochester, the opposite holds true for Antoinette. Her mother’s annoyance and negligence towards Antoinette continue to disturb her deeply. On having nightmares, she soothes herself by thinking of her room, the garden, mountains and the sea:

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.

(Rhys, 2000, p.12)

The wilderness becomes a friend and a mother figure to Antoinette. This also expands on her own disconnect with her mother, who could not be an appropriate mother figure for her. The forest is narrated in a way that evokes feeling of fear in the reader. It is dangerous and malicious creatures roam its ground, however for Antoinette this is better than people as they do not try to diminish her identity, and do not harm her:

I went to parts of Coulibri that I had not seen, where there was no road, no path, no track. 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.

Better. Better, better than people.

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, 2000, p.12)

The physical damages mean nothing to Antoinette, as they do not agonize her as much as human beings.

With her mother's remarriage to Mr Mason came the changes done to her home estate. The alterations did make it look the same, but something was missing, "...it was clean and tidy, no grass between the flagstones, no leaks. But it didn't feel the same" (Rhys, 2000, p.14). The place lacked the Caribbean-ness that was part of its identity- the well-groomed garden was just another recreational English project.

Rochester and Antoinette's varied perceptions also depend on their cultural and national acceptance of what is natural. Elaine Savory (2015), in her *Jean Rhys's Environmental Language: Oppositions, Dialogues and Silences*, quotes Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, who in their introduction to *Postcolonial Ecologies* argue that biotic and political ecologies are intertwined and postcolonial ecology reimagines this displacement between people and place. Antoinette, despite belonging to a family of ex-slave owners, does not show signs of dwelling in any form of hierarchy. Rochester however, is constantly disturbed as he cannot effectively oppress the people and the surroundings. He thus, becomes the emblem of imperial fear of the uncivilised (or wild) Other. The wild becomes ground for exploring trauma, anxiety and fear of the transgressive nature of the tropical landscape (Daimari 2022; Devi & Daimari, 2023).

ROCHESTER: A COLONIAL WINDOW INTO ECO-PHOBIA

This section discusses the altering responses of Rochester as he faces his inhibitions on the vibrant land of Dominica. On encountering him for the first time we find him comparing Amelie, a maid, and island as soon as he meets her "A lovely little creature but sly, spiteful, malignant perhaps, like much else in this place" (Rhys, 2000, p.39). Everything seems disturbing to him here as the rain adds to this "melancholy" he experiences (p.40). Rochester's prejudice against the place and its people attests to air of superiority he possesses. His thoughts and actions are overpowered by his colonial status constantly, allowing him no space to cherish and admire the beauty he is surrounded, free of judgement. The monstrosity *imagined* by Rochester becomes a null statement here, as Nature does not specifically target or haunt anything. The article dives into Rochester's reactions and his way of expressing his apprehension and phobia of the Other. It is important to note that this process of Othering of the green also partially draws itself from their fear of being overpowered by the colonials or natives (Daimari, 2022).

FEAR AND APPREHENSION

Rochester's narrative allows readers to see the beautiful visions of nature on their way to Granbois, their honeymoon home. However, he does not receive it with appreciation, instead grows tired of its vividness and is overloaded by its majestic features, "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" (Rhys, 2000, p.42). On this, Paravisini-Gebert (2020) opines that Rochester is a character who is "not open to awe" and never overcomes his confusion and remains on the "boundary of fear" (p.105). This *fear* becomes evidence of his lack of emotional response and connection to the place and later with Antoinette. The apprehension against the landscape reflects further as we see Rochester at the bathing pool with Antoinette, "It was a beautiful place—wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness" (Rhys, 2000, p.54). However, Antoinette is able to let go of her worries and bask herself in her

surroundings despite having a tragic event associated with the place as Tia stole her belongings here earlier in the novel.

Rochester's apprehension does not stay limited to his surroundings as he soon finds nuances of the foreignness in Antoinette. The landscape terrifies him and the readers often find Rochester showing signs of ecophobia, the fear of the natural which extends to the common people he interacts with. Estok highlights that "ecophobia is often a response to the perceived inscrutability of the natural world. The inability to understand what is being communicated results in suspicion. From suspicion grows resentment, and from resentment, violence" (Estok, 2019, p.42). Both the character's reactions to the landscape are in extremes- in "its hostility and alien forcefulness, and its accommodations and comforts" (Loe, 2007, p.53), setting another extreme set of dualities in the novel. Establishing Rochester's fears as illusionary, one may wonder why he feels this fear overpower him. The mysteriousness of the island and the sternly rooted stereotypes regarding the colonised aside, he may feel the burden of the atrocities taking place on the very land he stands upon. Sharae Deckard (2022) points out that the conversion of these lands into plantations involved multiple facets of ecocide. The destruction of native forests, rampant deforestation, and violence inflicted on the locals due to slavery and indentured labourers materialise before him in the form of the *Gaia*. Gaia can be observed as the hyperobject that is the planet and is believed to be alive, allowing life to exist.

Dishevelled by the dominance of nature in Granbois, Rochester remarks, "How can millions of people, their houses and their streets be unreal?" (Rhys, 2000, p.49) when Antoinette questions about the claustrophobic feeling that England exudes. She asks with childlike innocence if it was like a "cold dark dream" (Rhys, 2000, p.49). When pressed, he answers that he also feels cornered amidst wilderness, "...that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream" (Rhys, 2000, p.49). For Antoinette, who has grown up with nature and its benevolent forms, England is a foreign and overcrowded place filled with artifice. It is evident that Rochester and Antoinette's origins deeply have an impact on personalities, which characterises them as embracing or doubtful of their surroundings. The environment they have grown up in deeply effects their ability to distinguish between the natural and the man made. This argument between the two, set the foundation to explore a few distinct binaries advocated throughout the novel- that of natural and man-made, "Caribbean and English", "colonized and colonizer" (Loe, 2007, p.50), which simultaneously adds into the narrative of biophilia and ecophobia being part of the same spectrum. For Rochester, anything wild is something that needs to be dominated and tamed, that would help him feel at home and in control. The social and cultural construct of colonialism plays its part here.

DENIAL AND HATRED

Rochester's account of the landscape is twofold- though he experiences the fear majority of the times during his encounter with the wilderness, there are instances where the readers find him unable to appreciate the beauty that unfolds in front of him fully. His instinct refuses to let him be completely vulnerable in its presence. He further explains the lack of the ability to express his feelings:

How old was I when I learned to hide what I felt? A very small boy. Six, five, even earlier. It was necessary, I was told, and that view I have always accepted. If these mountains challenge me, or Baptiste's face, or Antoinette's eyes, they are mistaken, melodramatic, unreal (England must be quite unreal and like a dream she said).

(Rhys, 2000, p. 64)

The bright and vivid Caribbean landscape is overbearing to Rochester to the point where it seems hostile and evil to him. He imagines nature as a “menacing threat”, a trait quite commonly present in ecogothic representations. Thus, Rochester sees the wilderness as an “agent bent on vengeance” (Estok, 2019, p.41; Paravisini-Gebert, 2002). Rochester in a way is dealing versions of dominance and violence within himself as he walks through the forest (Mardorossian, 2018).

The road climbed upward. On one side the wall of green, on the other a steep drop to the ravine below. We pulled up and looked at the hills, the mountains and the blue-green sea. There was a soft warm wind blowing but I understood why the porter had called it a wild place. Not only wild but menacing. Those hills would close in on you.

(Rhys, 2000, p. 42)

The landscape that provides comfort to Antoinette is deemed evil by Rochester and all he can bring himself to mutter is “What an extreme green” (Rhys, 2000, p.42). Rochester’s “self-absorbed claustrophobia” and “an illogical fear” brings forth gothic renderings but the visions contradict the traditional nuances of a gothic setting. The reader is made aware of this psychological trepidation that is often seeing budding within him (Roszak, 2014, p. 58).

The fear of being watched by the tall trees haunts him the whole time he is in the woods. The overbearing green surrounding Rochester is perceived as hostile as his authority does not extend to Nature. Savory (2015) points to this, “Like so many white men in the tropics, wanting to impose their own will, he seriously fears what he cannot control.” (p.100). It becomes detrimental to his beliefs and his understanding of the idea of power and who holds the reins to it. Being beyond his control, it ignites in him phobia like tendencies. In his narrative he explains, “I began to walk very quickly, then stopped because the light was different. A green light. I had reached the forest and you cannot mistake the forest. It is hostile.” (Rhys, 2000, p.65). This baseless terror originates from the incomprehensible potential of the trees to “obliterate architecture and civilization”, i.e., the man-made structures of power that Rochester has grown up believing, making him realise that his existence means nothing to the forces of nature (Paravisini-Gebert, 2020, p.106). It lies in contrast with Antoinette’s perception of her surroundings despite having spent her childhood among the towering wilderness. In a conversation, Rochester voices that the place feels “unknown and hostile” and that it is his “enemy” but it is favourable to Antoinette (Rhys, 2000, p.82). To which Antoinette calmly talking about Nature remains detached for the most part.

It is not for you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us. That is why you are afraid of it, because it is something else. I found that out long ago when I was a child. I loved it because I had nothing else to love, but it is as indifferent as this God you call so often.

(Rhys, 2000, p. 82)

Strolling through the forests we find him terrified of the trees, thinking “I was lost and afraid among these enemy trees” (Rhys, 2000, p.66). Later when Baptiste finds him, he breathes a sigh of relief despite not having a preference for him, Rochester is grateful and feels like Baptiste had put on a “service mask on the savage reproachful face” that he usually adorned. Antoinette in the same situation, would be comfortable in the midst of nature. “I am safe”, she declares (Rhys, 2000, p.12). Rochester expresses a vital wing of ecophobia: the fear of loss of human agency. Estok (2019) supports this by stating that, “the thought of being taken over by nature is horror, and this imagined threat is potentially ubiquitous” (p.46)

Rochester comes to the realisation that he can never dominate and suppress the wilderness and foregrounds his dominion by acting on his “wife’s vulnerability” (Paravisini- Gebert, [quoted Carol Margaret Davison] 2020, p.106). “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that’s Obeah too” (Rhys, 2000, p.94). Antoinette has never seen anyone perform Obeah, and any encounters with it have only been imagined. At Christophine’s house, she relates things with signs of Obeah –

I was certain that hidden in the room there was a dead man’s dried hand, white chicken feathers, a cock with its throat cut, dying slowly, slowly. Drop by drop the blood was falling into a red basin and I imagined I could hear it. No one had ever spoken to me about Obeah—but I knew what I would find if I dared to look. Then Christophine came in smiling and pleased to see me. Nothing alarming ever happened and I forgot, or told myself I had forgotten.

(Rhys [1966] 2000, pp. 14-15)

And yet, here, she claims confidently that Rochester’s renaming is a way of trying to *magically* change her, to destroy her entire identity and her connection with her homeland. By this process of renaming, Rochester roots his own discomfort and denial of superiority in this foreign land. In calling her mad, he proceeds to project his own disturbances with the Other. Estok (2019) expands on this and writes, “associations of the disturbed Other and madness with monstrosity and threatening nature” is one of the oldest ways of showcasing ecophobia (p.43). Fears about madness represent the fear of “the intrusion of the undomesticated natural world into the controlled spaces of the human civilisation” (p. 43), however, here, it would read into the fear of the nature itself, or of the hyperobjects that is wilderness, upon which, Rochester could not exercise any control.

Antoinette is able to foretell the future as she predicts that she will scarcely remain the same person once she travels to England. She knows that England is set completely apart from her homeland. Stanley (1979) describes the land appropriately for this situation, “It is cold, menacing, isolated, dead” (p.112). Nature and solitude have the power to make a person understand their own self,

I will be a different person when I live in England and different things will happen to me. ... England, rosy pink in the geography book map, but on the page opposite the words are closely crowded, heavy looking. Exports, coal, iron, wool. Then Imports and Character of Inhabitants. Names, Essex, Chelmsford on the Chelmer.

(Rhys, 2000, p. 70)

Rochester’s hatred only triples as we see him prepared to leave for England with his wife. We find him triggered by “their laughter and their tears, their flatter and envy, conceit and deceit” and the whole place, including its beauty. It is as if his senses were being numbed by the vibrancy and the life of the place.

...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. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness.

(Rhys 2000, p. 111)

By removing her from her home, and renaming her as Bertha, Rochester tries to sever her ties from this place, displacing and dissociating her from this ‘loveliness’ by exerting his dominance over the last thing he has right over, via patriarchy. “It is a strategy of negation and subjugation

through spatial dislocations meant to create a state of self-inexpressibility.” (Loe, 2007, p.59). His tendency to ‘own’ is reflected in his conversation with Christophine, as she begs him not to take Antoinette to England so that she could have a chance at a happy life and marry someone else. He can feel his jealousy run through his veins, depicting that he cannot fathom her having a happier life on her own. A concept that is completely out of his comprehension. Through this *amputation* of her identity, Rochester hopes that he can untie her from the oikos (Ağın, 2022). For Antoinette, her life in Jamaica is what keeps her alive and sane. Asking to see her old red dress, she is reminded of her old life.

The scent that came from the dress was very faint at first, then it grew stronger. The smell of vetivert and frangipanni, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering. The smell of the sun and the smell of the rain.

(Rhys, 2000, p. 120)

The landscape grounds Antoinette in the final stages, highlighting “vital connections between place, memory and human identity” (Loe, 2007, p. 49). This recalling of her home, provides her the strength to “rouse herself into purpose and action” (Loe, 2007, p.59), as she sets the house on fire, writing her name metaphorically in “fire red” (Rhys, 2000, p.29). In the burning of Thornfield Hall, the ‘Other’ gains its power back. Antoinette, the child of the tropics, and mothered by Nature herself, acts as a medium by seeking vengeance over facets of multiple oppressions faced by the ‘Other’.

CONCLUSION

Ecophobia as a theory is able to highlight attitudes towards nature that can be categorised as hostile and character defining. However, it is important to note that ecophobia is not exclusively limited to projections of fear of the natural. In the current epoch of ecological crisis, manifestations of ecophobia can be in many forms and is yet to be discovered. This article not only looks at instances of ecophobia present throughout the novel but also how protagonists draw from their ideologies that reflect on the ways they perceive nature. As Loe states in his article, Landscape is defined by man and culture, but the identity works both ways as it succeeds in “suggest[ing] character by revealing a particular cognitive mind-set, a subtle interaction of psychic condition and external phenomena” (Loe, 2007, p.59). Rochester’s narrative is able to highlight how ecophobia originates from colonial upbringing, challenging the foundation of his belief. Identity becomes attached to the ways his psyche has forced him to think so far. The fear of nature translates to deep-ridden ideologies and cultural roots of domination in him. Antoinette’s narration sets a stark contrast by showcasing her love and connection to everything nature provides. She is presented not just as a woman of nature but signifies the ecological cycle of life. Her trust and reliance on nature is a pure connection that recognises that these non-human entities possess an aura of power that varied from that seen in mankind. Madness here forces her to be portrayed as the Other, “the human alien” (Iovino, 2020, p.55). It stands still, but its presence is stronger than anything man-made to the point where it can make one uneasy. As Lisa Kröger (2013) denotes, “nature is always reclaiming its space...it will always be victorious in the end” (p. 26). The ecogothic images replete in the text are analysed as a manifestation of the grotesque violence that continues to instil fear in their minds. Rochester actively made attempts to de-root this Caribbean-ness from her body by associating her roots to savagery, or madness. Antoinette is in short, an embodiment of everything related to the unfamiliar and demonic ‘Other’ (Muste, 2017).

Wide Sargasso Sea has been read by scholars for its postcolonial roots, its critique on Bronte's portrayal of the *mad creole*, but through EcoGothic lens, we find manifestations of ecophobia. The triggers and stimulations of ecophobia can be traced to the colonial ideologies and mindset, which in turn have been seen to develop into major vehicles ecological crisis generators. The ecophobic traits are not limited to the merely fear and anxiety, and myriad of manifestations remain yet to be unearthed. Rochester's demeanour when studied from ecophobic lens, helps unearth the reasons behind his fear of the place, Dominica, hence giving insight into the colonial origins of ecophobia.

Further, this article would encourage researchers to look towards intersections of the human psyche, colonial impact and xenophobic tendencies explored through literary fiction to unearth the roots of the mindless destruction of the environment and lack of empathy towards non-human life.

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