

An Ecoготic Reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Abstract

As an emerging critical paradigm, the ecogothic integrates ecological concerns with the Gothic tradition's dual critical consciousness, and finds a profound articulation in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Through oppressive imagery of the tropical rainforest, the alienating force of climate, and nature's intrusion into the human psyche, the novel reveals the entangled predicament of colonial ecology and gender oppression. Taking ecogothic theory as its central framework, this paper conducts a cross-analysis of Rochester's ecological fear of the Caribbean environment and Antoinette's gradual "monstrification." It argues that Rochester's fear of nature is essentially a projection of colonial anxiety over power, while his construction of Antoinette as a "mad monster" results from the collusion of colonialism and patriarchy in the process of othering nature, women, and racial others. Through this narrative, *Wide Sargasso Sea* not only exposes the psychological roots of environmental destruction embedded in anthropocentrism, but also offers a literary lens for understanding the power structures underlying contemporary ecological crises and for rethinking a symbiotic ethic between humans and nature.

Keywords

Wide Sargasso Sea; ecogothic; ecophobia; othering.

1. Introduction

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* constructs a Gothic world suffused with ecological anxiety and colonial trauma through its intertwined depiction of the Caribbean tropical landscape and the figure of the "madwoman," Bertha. While existing scholarship has extensively explored racial and gender oppression in the novel, the role of the natural environment as a medium of "othering," and its complicity with colonialism and patriarchy in the production of monstrosity, remains underexamined.

Drawing on the framework of ecogothic theory, this paper pursues three objectives. First, it analyzes Rochester's fear of the Caribbean environment as a narrative manifestation of ecophobia, interpreting his aversion, disorientation, and desire for control as structurally homologous to colonial anxieties of power. Second, it closely examines the process through which Antoinette is "monstrified," revealing how the parallel alignment of nature, femininity, and racial otherness translates ecological othering into practices of gendered and racial discipline. Third, it cautiously proposes a structural analogy—rather than a direct causal relation—between ecological fear in literature and real-world environmental degradation, supported by ecocritical and postcolonial scholarship.

The theoretical and practical significance of this study lies in its demonstration that the novel constructs nature, women, and racial others as a shared field of othering. Ecophobia emerges not only as a projection of colonial discourse but also as a psychological foundation for environmental exploitation, thereby offering a critical literary framework for understanding contemporary ecological crises.

2. The Distorted Caribbean: Rochester's Ecophobia

According to Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland (2019), the ecogothic is a critical lens that reveals the instability of human social systems, particularly by foregrounding “our fear of the dissolution of boundaries between the human and the nonhuman.” As Simon C. Estok further argues in “Theorizing the Ecogothic,” ecogothic analysis reinterprets threatening natural imagery through the concept of ecophobia—defined as an irrational fear, anxiety, and aversion toward the natural environment, which signals a disordered relationship between humans and the nonhuman.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette and Rochester exhibit radically different responses to the Caribbean environment. From the outset, Rochester repeatedly expresses disgust and hostility toward the landscape, describing it as “not only wild but menacing.” His sensory experience is preconditioned by imperial epistemologies. His depiction of Jamaica echoes the colonial discourse of the eighteenth-century travel narrative, which constructed the tropics as a “fallen Eden” (Pratt 1992).

Rhys's use of a restricted first-person narration prevents access to an “objective” tropical landscape; Rochester's perception of menace reflects not only physiological discomfort (humidity, dense vegetation), but also epistemological anxiety—the collapse of his classificatory framework rooted in British picturesque aesthetics. His inability to assimilate Caribbean ecology produces a sense of disorientation that intensifies his alienation.

This imbalance in his relationship with nature profoundly shapes his perception of Antoinette, whom he associates with the unfamiliar land. As he learns more about her background and her mother's history, his unease deepens into fear, particularly regarding her “potential madness.” Consequently, the natural environment itself becomes increasingly grotesque in his perception. Rochester projects his ecological fear onto Antoinette, construing her as mysterious and incomprehensible—much like the dense, humid, and seemingly animate jungle he cannot comprehend. His ecophobia is intertwined with a paradoxical desire for nature (Parker 2020), as Antoinette appears both alluring and dangerous, an “other” that must be named, disciplined, and conquered.

This fear does not originate from nature itself but from Rochester's loss of control as a colonial subject in an unfamiliar environment. Linguistic barriers, climatic discomfort, and shifting power relations compel him to displace his anxiety onto the feminized and racialized body of Antoinette. His demonization of her thus constitutes an ecological projection of colonial ideology, exposing the dual impulse of empire to dominate both land and women.

3. The Product of Colonial and Patriarchal Oppression: Antoinette as “Monster”

David Del Principe (2014) redefines the “monster” in ecogothic studies as a figure that challenges anthropocentric boundaries. However, this perspective must be situated in dialogue with postcolonial critiques. As Gayatri Spivak (1985) argues, the “monster” in colonial discourse is often a construct of imperial imagination—fabricated to embody nonhuman alterity while simultaneously exposing the ethical violence of its creator.

Antoinette's “monstrification” must therefore be understood within a dual framework: she is both an ecogothic hybrid and a product of colonial-patriarchal power structures. Her tragic fate does not stem from inherent madness but from a gradual process of being constructed as a “monster.”

Her identity crisis originates in her position as a Creole woman in post-emancipation Jamaica. She belongs neither fully to British culture nor to local Black communities, resulting in a

condition of double exclusion. This marginalization is not merely cultural but deeply material, rooted in shifting systems of land ownership, labor, and racial hierarchy.

Her childhood experiences—being called a “white cockroach,” having her dress stolen, and being physically attacked—constitute embodied violence that shapes her self-perception. Her retreat into the garden, described as an “Eden,” signals her turn toward nature as a refuge when social belonging is denied.

However, this attachment to nature should not be romanticized as an expression of authentic ecological consciousness. Rather, it represents a trauma-driven reconfiguration of identity: when social structures collapse, nature becomes the only available site of belonging.

Antoinette’s eventual “madness” is never directly narrated; it exists only through Rochester’s interpretation. Her self-description—“I am like this place, cursed”—reveals an internalization of colonial discourse. Rochester’s renaming of her as “Bertha” exemplifies the operation of discursive power (Foucault 1973), stripping her of self-definition by imposing a pathological identity.

Her final act of arson cannot be reduced to a singular meaning. It is simultaneously an ecogothic return of the repressed, a manifestation of colonial violence, and an eruption of suppressed female rage. To interpret it solely as ecological revenge risks reproducing the very epistemological violence that postcolonial theory seeks to critique.

4. Conclusion

Wide Sargasso Sea employs a mirrored narrative structure to expose the colonial trauma obscured in Victorian romantic discourse. Antoinette’s fire not only destroys Thornfield but also illuminates the silenced history behind *Jane Eyre*. Yet this “fire” resists reduction to an allegory of natural revenge.

Rochester’s ecophobia reveals the epistemological collapse of the imperial subject in an unfamiliar environment. When language, climate, and sensory experience exceed existing classificatory systems, anxiety is projected onto the hybrid figure of “woman-nature.”

This mechanism is not merely fictional. By drawing on ecogothic theory, this paper traces how fear is historically structured within specific power relations. Antoinette’s fate demonstrates that when nature is constructed as an “other” to be conquered, its resistance often first impacts those already marginalized—Creole women, indigenous knowledge holders, and hybrid identities.

The ruins of Thornfield thus symbolize both the failure of anthropocentrism and the impossibility of simplistic ecological reconciliation. Rhys refuses to offer a redemptive narrative, and it is precisely this refusal that constitutes the ethical force of her work.

For contemporary ecocriticism, the novel suggests that even the call to “listen to nature” must be critically examined: who speaks for nature, and whose voices are excluded? Only by situating ecological crisis within the historical matrix of colonialism and power can a meaningful ethic of coexistence emerge.

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