

An Ecocritical Reading in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Areej Almutairi^{[a],*}

^[a]Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, University Putra Malaysia, Malaysia.

* Corresponding author.

Received 1 November 2012; accepted 6 March 2013

Abstract

The present study attempts to underscore the significance of re-conceptualizing human values, in order to redefine the ways we have established humanity's relationships to the universal ecologic system. These relationships are depicted in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). By examining the thematic concerns of the novel through the lens of ecocriticism, we can harvest something of the destructive patterns and practices that participate to the contemporary ecological dangers, imbalances, and crisis. Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) depicts the troubled relationships between land ownership, law, justice, and inheritance. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys stimulates us to question the values formed through the historical and legal story lies in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Rhys' story breaks the restrictions of Bronte's fiction by concerning the nineteenth century socio-economic situations that Bronte depicts. Although Rhys depicts a Caribbean setting of the early 19th century, her fiction is obviously related to the issue of colonization in the 20th century. In her novel, Rhys explores dimensions of colonization in terms of its impacts on people stayed in vastly various landscapes. Rhys shows the influence of capitalist interests on females who try to navigate the social and political movements wrought in their communities and environments by appearing universal economic issues, and the ways through them capitalism change the earth. The story offers that we reshape our plan of progress, that we extend our idea of space and time to involve future generations in our present reasoning.

Key words: Ecocriticism; Environment; Identity; Colonization

Areej Almutairi (2013). An Ecocritical Reading in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 7(1), 47-51. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320130701.2606> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130701.2606>

INTRODUCTION

"In a time of crisis" argues Max Oelschlaeger, "a literature culture must reconsider the meaning of its basic stories, be these scientific, economic, religious, or philosophic" (Gregg, 1995, p.7). The crisis that Oelschlaeger points to is the ecologically modern narrative, the ruling ideology and authority that have seriously destroyed universal ecology. Nowadays, it is typical that many scholars and authors concern ecological problems, ecophilosophical questions, or ecocritical debate to reveal the reality that we are encountering a global ecological issue. The immediate ecological issue provokes the reader to think seriously of the problems threatening the nature and the life of human.

Many people are not aware of the ecological damages that threaten the earth. Most people understand the ecological problems and environmental issues via media, books, and the Internet. Our awareness is limited and our experience is confined. Concerning the modern ecological issue provides enough background for many debates of our relation to the environment. It is believed that without the existence of such a crisis, there would be less interest in exploring that relationship, and little reason for discussions on ecocriticism.

We must re-evaluate our relationship to our environment and make some basic changes in our view toward the world. Oelschlaeger states, "If the modern trajectory continues, the likely outcome will be the collapse of our social and natural ecology. Life will go on, but civilization will no longer be a possibility" (1995, p.2). Clearly, Oelschlaeger's has a warning tone for the future generation. Ecocriticism represents this warning tone. It is mainly defined as "the study of the relationship

between literature and the physical environment” (Cheryll Glotfelty, qtd. In Barry, 2002, p.248). Ecocriticism can be defined as an area of literary study that considers how humans relate to nonhuman environment or the environment in literary work. Today, with the rise and expansion of ecocritical studies, any link between human and environment has basically blurred. Therefore when subjected to ecocriticism, literature of all eras is regarded in relation to place, time and nature. As a fast rising theory, ecocriticism appeared out of the traditional literary theories via them, scholars and critics explore the local, universal, physical, natural and historical perspectives in literature. As Barry declares, “Theory in general tends to see our external world as socially and linguistically constructed, as ‘always ready’ textualized into ‘discourse’, but ecocriticism calls this long-standing theoretical orthodoxy into question, sometimes rather impatiently, as Kate Soper’s frequently-quoted remark (in her seminal book *What is Nature?* p.151) that ‘It isn’t language which has a hole in its ozone layer’” (Barry, 2002, p.252). Ecocriticism concerns the criticism of the environment, as depicted in literature. However, it is not easy to define the environment. Questions are raised such as what are the nature and environment? What is the relationship between human and nonhuman? How much nature is significant for human? Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field of study that includes environmental studies, cultural and social studies and all of which that concern the relationship between man and nature.

Ecocriticism is a socio-cultural consideration, as in *Environmentalism and Cultural theory*, Kay Milton states, “by analyzing the relationships between people’s culture (the way they perceive and interpret the world) and the ecological impact of their activities, we might be able to understand which cultural features become ecologically sustainable” (1996, p.9). Literature is considered as a part of human ecology. What does it mean to be human in the modern time, and how are human relationships formed through our relationship to environment? Furthermore, how does the discourse of power shape both the environment and our social relationship? “Environmental problems” Milton notes “are seen as penetrating all sphere of human activity, so the search for solution has recruited an enormous diversity of expertise” (1996, p.4).

Novel, as literary genre, is a unique form of discourse that represents sensibilities about the way in which we dwell on the earth. Heidegger states:

Dwelling ... is the basic character of Being in keeping with which mortal exists. Perhaps this attempt to think about dwelling and building will bring out somewhat more clearly that building belongs to dwelling and how it receives its nature from dwelling. Enough will have been gained if dwelling and building have become worthy of questioning and thus have remained worthy of thought. (1971, p.161)

Through words we observe the significance of our dwelling. Ecocriticism has a deep concern about the environment where we dwell in.

The present study aims to underscore the significance of re-conceptualizing human values, in order to redefine the ways we have established humanity’s relationships to the universal ecologic system. These relationships are depicted in Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). By examining the thematic concerns of the novel through the lens of ecocriticism, we can harvest something of the destructive patterns and practices that participate to the contemporary ecological dangers, imbalances, and crisis. Heidegger in *Poetically Man Dwell* (1971) declares, “When the poetic appropriately comes to light, the man dwells humanely in this earth, and then- as Holderlin says in his last poem- ‘the life of a man is a dwelling life’” (229).

1. ECOCRITICISM

In a 1989 Western Literature Association meeting, Cheryll Glotfelty forced literary scholars to build an ecological approach to literature, one that would concentrate on the cultural aspects of humans’ relationship to the nature. At the same meeting, Glen Love presented a lecture entitled “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism”.

Also, Glotfelty Cheryll and Fromm Harold published *The Ecocritical Reader* that establishes a central point for scholars working in literary studies and those who wish to follow research in literature and the environment. This started a growing trend to the extent that in their book *ISLE Reader*, Scott Slovic and Michael Branch found every literary work having the potential to be read from green perspective (xix). This opens the doors to analyze works based on their environmental background.

In the 1970’s many books were produced addressing the intersection of literary and environmental issue. Glotfelty states that the term “literary ecology” was first used in 1972 in *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* by Joseph Meeker. Meeker states that literary ecology has two simultaneous aims: the “study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works...and an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of species” (1972, p.9). Meeker argues his aim was to “identify patterns in art and thought that hold promise for a relationship with diverse and stable natural ecology” and he tries to explore the “possible correspondence between cultural creations of mankind, especially literature and the requirements of a balanced natural ecology” (1972, p.xv). In *The Comedy of Survival* Meeker discusses that “[...] survival depends upon man’s ability to change himself rather than his environment” (39). Meeker endeavors to link literature and environmental issues launched fertile interdisciplinary discourse.

Another remarkable book is *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and Environment* edited by Michael Branch et al., which includes essays concerning different approaches. The essays in Fiona Becket and Terry Gifford’s useful collection *Culture*,

Creativity and Environment: New Environmentalist Criticism concentrates on the politics of natural crisis. In their research of environmental issues, the contributors observed texts from Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* to the animal fiction of German writer Otto Alscher and ask: what are the aims of ecocriticism generally?

From the 1960s to 1970s, a number of significant resources can be found on what later existed as ecocriticism. Two works are particularly significant in the development of ecocriticism: Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* and Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City*. Marx regards the machine as the rise of technology in what was considered by many to be America as the virgin land. In this regard, ecocriticism emerges in American literature. Also, Williams plays the same role for Britain, and his work is widely honored. He concentrates on the city life that competes with the rural life. In *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*, Karl Kroeber paves the way for scholars, inspiring perspectives for blending the interests between the arts and the sciences. Basically, Kroeber considers the British Romantics. He focuses on the effect of the natural world and poetic process. In a similar manner, Jonathan Bate concerns natural laws in his *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, which goes along Buell's work on American Romanticism in *The Environmental Imagination*. Eventually, Bate determines the condition for man to listen to the environment, the song of the Earth, not in lieu of but in addition to themselves in their environment. In his following work, *The Song of the Earth*, Bate extends his ecocritical concern on the Romantics to Coleridge, Byron, Keats, and others Romantic poets. Reading literature in relation to "nature," weather, sightseeing and sublime, *The Song of the Earth* considers the social freedom of Enlightenment thinking.

Totally, the history of ecocriticism shows that it is a vast field of study that concerns human in relation to all his surrounding and environment.

2. A READING OF ENVIRONMENT IN WIDE SARGASSO SEA

Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) depicts the troubled relationships between land ownership, law, justice, and inheritance. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys stimulates us to question the values formed through the historical and legal story lies in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Rhys' story breaks the restrictions of Brontë's fiction by concerning the nineteenth century socio-economic situations that Brontë depicts. As Veronica Marie Gregg suggests, Rhys started writing *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the late 1950s, when movements against colonization started in several Sargasso Sea islands and in her work "impinges upon and elucidates the England and West Indies of the 1950s and 1960s"

(1995, p.114). Although Rhys depicts a Caribbean setting of the early 19th century, her fiction is obviously related to the issue of colonization in the 20th century. In her novel, Rhys explores dimensions of colonization in terms of its impacts on people stayed in vastly various landscapes.

Rhys shows the influence of capitalist interests on females who try to navigate the social and political movements wrought in their communities and environments by appearing universal economic issues, and the ways through them capitalism change the earth. The story offers that we reshape our plan of progress, that we extend our idea of space and time to involve future generations in our present reasoning.

The novel concerns the history of British colonization in the West Indies, the end of the slave labor system and the influence this had on both the slaves and the sugar plantation owners, and on the position of white Creole women in 19th century British culture. Rhys produces a novel form of answer to *Jane Eyre*, explaining the Creole "Bertha's" total socio-economic system and physical displacement, in the procedure convincing readers to concern the outcomes of the British colonization that Brontë explores its legacies. By concerning the relationships between British laws and justice, Rhys poses the questions about individual rights to the land and the ways in which laws of inheritance form not only socio-economic and political landscapes, but also ecosystems. Rhys reinforces Brontë's critiques of justice, presenting what takes place when the right is disregarded or violated in the name of that which is legal. Eventually, she describes the restrictions and risks of traditional concepts of legitimate inheritance for humans and the land they inhabit. Through her portrayal of Antoinette's displaced body, her attempt to survive within the narrative of colonialism, Rhys concerns the connections between various interpretations of sharing, of legal justice, and the impact of global economics on particular people in particular places. By examining the ways in which Rhys connects the forces of nationalism, laws of inheritance, and their impact on local ecologies, we can distinguish the ways in which laws, which are often unconnected to local experience in both the form of individual human bodies and the body of a community, have shaped and continued to shape current ecological problems.

In the process of challenging imperialist constructs of history, Rhys implicitly creates a history of environmental change, revising not only concepts of power, race, and nation, but also revising the ways in which we imagine human relations to nature. Rhys compels readers to question the values of socioeconomic systems that view land and its inhabitants as expandable resources. *Wide Sargasso Sea* depicts the destructive impacts of legal and economic systems in which reciprocity is understood severely in monetary terms, in which personal narratives are not attended to, in which the silent presence of nature

is transformed into man's ground. Rhys writes of the relationship between woman and the land she loves in which the value of place is not defined in economic or political terms, but in relation to individual bodies and the process of their dwelling. The displacement of the female protagonist mirrors the loss of value ascribed to the relationship between a person and the land. In "The Dialectics of Enlightenment", Horkheimer states that as a result of "reducing nature to an object for domination, a raw material" (1972, p.21) culture has "denigrated" the human body and defined it, too, as a thing that can be possessed. Rhys depicts a woman who goes against the forces trying to alienate her from her body and the place she dwells as she is engaged with her male lover and the society dominated by masculine power.

Ellan Freidman in "Breaking the Master Narrative: Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*" states, "Rhys succeeds in breaking the quest narrative that shapes Bronte's novel. Rhys delegitimizes this master narrative, and by implications, master narratives in general" (1989, p.122). Using Barthes as a reference, Freidman suggests that Rhys' "grafting" of "alien" materials between the two texts creates a space in which the canonical and subversive "edge each other." Rhys "edges 'Same' with 'Other'" writes Freidman, and the "shifting points of view prevent the reader from settling into any privileged or comfortable narrative site [which] thus aids in de-stabilizing master narrative and its facilitating conventions, in this case the authoritative narrator" (1989, p.123). By using the terms such as "alien" and "Other", Freidman considers the two texts as antagonists, which is important to his postcolonial feminist reading.

In terms of this reading, it is likely more productive to concern how Freidman explains a creation of "space" that bans "settling". The relationship between the two stories is similar to an environment in which two different ecological systems merge into each other, each affecting the entirety of the other because of the contact between them. In the material environment, these spaces are often the site of tremendously responsive physical, biological, and chemical activity.

Environment takes an important role in learning about a culture since the place where people are born or have brought up for some time shapes their cultural and national identities, their expectations of other places they have never seen, and what meanings they relate to a place based on their personal experiences with the place. Walter states, "A place has a name and a history, which is an account of the experience located in that position" (1988, p.117). Also Tuan believes an individual can ascribe a deep meaning to a place "through the steady accretion of sentiment" or "the quality and intensity of experience" (1977, p.33). A place can arouse different kinds of feelings in individuals depending on their experiences. People want to link places with feelings and events, especially past events influence a big part of this personal association. People might get attached to places easily as well as get

distanced or alienated from them. Ryden observes that individuals try to identify themselves with places most of the time, based on the geographical conditions of the place: "Part of the sentiment which people feel for places derives from the feelings of identification that they form with those places. [They] commonly and casually identify [themselves] in terms of geographical labels" (1993, p.39). For example, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette sees herself as the warmth of the sun, the bright colors in nature, whereas Rochester mirrors the cold, gloomy, and rainy weather of England in his distanced personality. The environment that people are born into shapes their expectations and definitions of how a place should be, and it expands and affects their identities because special traits of their identities are almost related with their sense of place. In fact identity is shaped through gathering information from the environment and so one knows the true self in the mirror of the environment, be it the place one was born or grew up or where one travels to. But, people might adapt themselves to new environment as they get to different destinations. Moving to a new place is challenging for some people in the sense that how a new environment should look like according to the people's individual definition of a place. It could be both a positive and negative experience. On the other side, various geographical labels might permit them to adapt themselves to new traits unless they tend to reject them. But they believe new environments; experiences and elements can simply help them develop a new sense of identity. This is what has been stressed by Susan Clayton in her book *Environmental Identity*, "to constitute an important part of their identity, the natural environment must influence the way in which people think about themselves (49).

Most critics of *Wide Sargasso Sea* regard the concept of place as a reference to colonialism. Alan Dundes states, "Most individuals... do define part of their identity with respect to 'place'" (1989, p.12). Both Rochester, associated with British colonialism, and Antoinette, identified with a mix of ex-slave owner and the colonized white Creole identity, come from an island. However, as Dundes discusses, "it is much more complicated than simply being from a particular state or province" (1989, p.12). In spite of this affinity, their experiences with their own islands and their expectations and perceptions of each others' homelands are obviously different. As Edward Relph (1976) believes, people have their own individual associations with places, especially related to their memories of that place, which forms their identities as well as their views of new places. Thus, when people face with traits against their expectations, they might feel failed by the unfamiliarities and differences, which can lead to the lack of safety. Kent C. Ryden (1993) observes that when people's self-definitions of places are challenged by differences, they tend to feel threatened, and "This sense of identity may be one of the strongest of the feelings with

which we regard places: when our meaningful places are threatened, we feel threatened as well” (40). Hence, when Rochester is not able to make sense of his environment, he is not only disappointed, but afraid of the unknown elements in the West Indian environment.

This feeling of fear and danger can be produced by the changes or differences in the environment and can also take place even if the people are in their own land, where their initial experiences with nature and definitions of a place are settled. The first reflection of the idea of a place becoming threatening occurs in Coulibri, where Antoinette lives with her disabled brother, Pierre, and her mother, Annette. The first portrayal of their garden sounds like the Garden of Eden, which has transformed into wilderness, “Our garden was large and beautiful as that garden in the Bible – the tree of life grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell...All Coulibri Estate had gone wild like the garden, gone to bush” (Rhys, 1966, pp.4-5). Antoinette’s alienation from her environment in relation to the changes in nature and her self-identification with these changes might depict how identity—especially the female identity—is closely related with nature.

CONCLUSION

Sense of place and home not only reflects the self-identification of a local group or individuals, but also illustrates how outsiders view the differences based on their initial expectations, where they come from, their personal experiences in the new place, local narratives they hear, and how they interact with the place and the local people. If one fails to read the nature and become familiar with the place, they fail to identify themselves and the others, which might gradually lead either to denial or hatred. As in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, individual experiences and the expectations not only influence how Rochester and Antoinette feel about a place, but about each other as well. Sense of place is almost related with self-identification as much as how outsiders identify the others. Depending on each individual’s personal experience, one can have different feelings towards the place.

The novel has strictly been assessed as a postcolonial novel, showing how colonialism has ruined minority groups not only economically, but physically and spiritually. It has been largely acknowledged that the major characters of the novel symbolize both sides of a colonial relationship: Antoinette is claimed to be the colonized Creole woman, who ends up going insane, and Rochester, representing Great Britain, is the colonizer. This common presentation of the novel, however, confines other alternative approaches to raise new questions to re-evaluate the novel from different views. The merging of folkloric approach in understanding cultural, racial, social, and gender-based differences depicted in *Wide Sargasso Sea* has resulted to new research questions as well as a fresh interpretation of the novel, stripped off solid postcolonial declarations.

REFERENCES

- ____ (2000). *The song of the earth*. Harvard, (CH, Feb’01, 38-3176).
- Barry, Peter (2002). *Beginning theory*. Manchester University Press
- Bate, Jonathan (1991). *Romantic ecology: Wordsworth and the environmental tradition*. Routledge, (CH, Jan’02, 28-2544).
- Branch, M. P., & S. Slovic (2003). *The isle reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003*. University of Georgia Press.
- Bronte, Charlotte (1847). *Jane Eyre*. NY: Nelson Doubleday, Inc.
- Clayton, S. D. (2003). Environmental identity: A conceptual and operational definition. In S. D. Clayton (Ed.), *Identity and the Natural Environment: The psychological significance of nature* (pp.45-65). MIT Press.
- Dundes, Alan (1989). Defining identity through folklore. *Folklore Matters*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.
- Freidman, Ellan (1989). Breaking the master narrative: Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Breaking the sequence: Women’s experimental fiction*. Princeton University Press.
- Glottfelty, Cheryll, & Fromm, Harold (1996). *The ecocritical reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. The University Georgia Press
- Gregg, Veronica Marie (1995). *Jean Rhys historical imagination: Reading and writing the creole*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Heidegger, Martin (1971). Poetically Man Dwell. In Albert Hafstadter (Trans.), *Poetry, Language, Thought*. NY: Harper Colophone Books. Harper and Row Publisher.
- Horkheimer, Max, & Adorno, Theodore (1972). *The dialectic of enlightenment*. John Cumming (Trans.). NY: Seabury Press.
- Kroeber, Karl (1994). *Ecological literary criticism: Romantic imagining and the biology of mind*. Columbia (CH, Jul’95, 32-6062).
- Marx, Leo (1964). *The machine in the garden: Technology and the pastoral ideal in America*. Oxford.
- Meeke, Joseph (1972). *The comedy of survival: Studies in literary ecology*. NY: Charles Scinber Sons.
- Milton, Kay (1996). *Environmentalism and cultural theory: Exploring the role of an anthropology in environmental discourse*. NY: Routledge
- Oelschlaeger, Max (1995). *Postmodern environmental ethics*. Albany: State University of NY Press.
- Relph, Edward (1976). *Place and placelessness*. London: Pion.
- Rhys, Jeans (1966). *Wide sargasso sea*. NY: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Ryden, Kent C. (1993). *Mapping the invisible landscape*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu (1977). *Space and place*. St. Paul, Minnesota: University of Minnesota. Print. Wallace Iain, knight David (1996). Societies in space and place. In Fen Osler, & Judith Reppy.Earthly (Eds.), *Goods: Environmental change and social justice*. Compell University Press.
- Walter, E. V. (1988). *Place ways: A theory of the human environment*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press
- Williams, Raymond (1973). *The country and the city*. Oxford