

**“He didn’t come to the West Indies
to dance – he came to make money
as they all do”: Ecofeminism and
Conquest in Jean Rhys’s *Wide
Sargasso Sea***

Cella Pop

Abstract: This essay examines Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) through an ecofeminist and post-colonial lens, arguing that Antoinette and Rochester’s marriage symbolically enacts a dynamic of colonial domination. Through reference to ecofeminist theory as outlined by Margot Lauwers and historical analyses of Caribbean colonialism, this paper contends that Antoinette’s alignment with the natural world represents the shared exploitation of women and nature under patriarchal power. In contrast, Rochester embodies the ecofeminist “logic of domination” as demonstrated through his economic extraction and imposition over Antoinette’s identity, establishing their relationship as a metaphor for violent colonial conquest.

Madness and marriage intertwine in the colonial Caribbean as Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) gives voice to the story of Bertha Mason, the madwoman in Rochester’s attic from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). In Rhys’s unofficial prequel, Bertha becomes Antoinette Cosway while Mr. Rochester retains the same name, an obvious allusion to Brontë’s original novel. The tumultuous marriage between Antoinette and Rochester is tested and ultimately shattered by their contrasting cultural backgrounds. Ecofeminism was first coined by Francois d’Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Feminism or Death*. At the core of ecofeminist theory, understanding the simultaneous oppression of women and nature under patriarchal culture is key (Lauwers 106). Throughout the text, Antoinette is frequently aligned

with the natural landscape of the Caribbean Windward Islands. In contrast, Rochester represents the domineering colonial force that opposes the feminine and environmental connection. Seeing as the novel is set shortly after the British Emancipation Act of 1833, the Windward Islands are still very much in the throes of colonialism. Thus, by using an ecofeminist lens, and considering the colonialist contexts of their relationship, the following analysis demonstrates how Antoinette and Rochester symbolically enact the dynamics of colonialism.

In *Rethinking Nature*, scholar Margot Lauwers frames ecofeminist theory as the “domination of women by men and the exploitation of nature by humanity,” which is the same “logic of domination” found within patriarchal culture (Lauwers 106). Before Lauwers’s work, during the 1970s and 1980s, initial research into the concept of ecofeminism was published, situating the theory into academic canon. As ecofeminist theory has become more widely accepted into scholarly fields, a dual understanding of the movement has formed: conceptual and empirical.

Firstly, the relationship between women and the natural world can be understood on a theoretical level. The core of this connection “lies in the hierarchical mode and binary thinking applied in Western societies or societies under Western influence,” which divides the world into implicit dualistic categories (108). Ecofeminist theory asserts that this compartmentalization aligns the feminine gender with the earth, sexuality, emotion, carnality, and the body. Contrastingly, masculinity is identified with the sky, power, mind, reason, culture, and intellect. This thought structure clearly divides men and women, and most importantly, highlights how women and femininity are aligned with nature. However, it is important to note that the ecofeminist movement has faced backlash alongside support in academia. Critics have argued that the movement promotes Eurocentrism and divisiveness. Lauwers addresses these concerns, stating that while ecofeminism does highlight an implicit duality within Western society, ecofeminist theory “can [still] help to broaden our critical

minds in order to move away from the dualisms upholding these ideas” (111). Despite these criticisms, ecofeminism continues to be included in academic discourse.

Lauwers argues that women suffer more from environmental degradation because of the gendered division of labour within patriarchal societies (108). Empirical evidence of ecofeminism has highlighted the increased health risks for women and children from radiation poisoning, pesticides, and toxic waste (108). Women, typically placed in charge of collecting food, water, and wood, are required to travel further to find resources because of degrading environmental conditions (108). Lauwers discusses the empirical link between the oppression of women and the environment, stating that “the economic and postcolonial behavior of industrialized countries ... might directly affect the economic difficulties experienced mostly by women in developing countries” (108). Following the link that Lauwers identifies, Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* belongs within the ecofeminist canon.

Alongside ecofeminist theory, an understanding of the novel’s colonial context is required to fully comprehend the colonial implications of Antoinette and Rochester’s marriage. In her book, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Margaret Atwood offers a partial definition of a colony: “it is a place from which a profit is made, but not by the people who live there ... That’s what colonies are for, to make money for the ‘mother country’” (35). Social anthropologist Harry Sanabria discusses the colonial economy of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) in his book *The Anthropology of Latin America and the Caribbean*, examining how rural landed estates, plantations, and mines were central to colonial wealth (80–81). LAC colonies suffered greatly under colonial rule; the land and people were subjugated to intense exploitation (Delle 22–25). The natural landscape of LAC was exploited for the benefit of foreigners, and the use of African and Indigenous-American forced labour fueled the production of these sites for colonial profit (Sanabria 80–81). The disturbance and ecological abuse that LAC suffered under colonial rule led

local and imported slave populations to attempt resistance and rebellion; violence and uprisings were common and threatened the European dominion over LAC (82–83). Paired with Cuba's reign over the sugar industry and newly gained independence, other countries, particularly those within the Windward Islands, faced economic decline. Additionally, as a result of the British Emancipation Act of 1833, which marked the end of slavery under the British Empire, the political landscape of LAC was further forced into a period of upheaval and change (Gibson 200–201).

Furthermore, Sanabria explains how sexual relations before marriage were encouraged and accepted among Indigenous populations. Embracing sexuality was considered a sign of maturity and sometimes viewed as a first step before a formal marriage in some LAC cultures. Christian and Catholic ideals brought by European colonists emphasized chastity and monogamy in relationships. These imported religious ideals shifted the cultural landscape of LAC to one centering masculinity and heterosexuality (Sanabria 88–90). Gendered colonialism can also be found in the context of Antoinette and Rochester's relationship. Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, while written in a post-colonial context, does not take place within one. Antoinette and Rochester's relationship mirrors the colonial landscape in which their marriage and narrative are situated. Before her marriage to Rochester, Antoinette is alluded to having had a dalliance with another young man: her half-nephew, Sandi. Rochester, hailing from Victorian England, brings with him a colonial perspective toward marriage and chastity. Antoinette's potentially sexual relationship with Sandi may not have mattered to the local inhabitants of the Windward Islands, but it becomes a point of tension in her marriage to Rochester.

By considering the novel's colonial post-emancipation landscape alongside ecofeminist theory, Rochester and Antoinette's marriage is further emphasized as metaphorically representative of colonial conquest. As a white English male, Rochester represents the dominating colonial power within his marriage. Throughout the novel,

Rochester expresses disdain for the natives of the Windward Islands, regarding them and their practices as savage and unusual. Rochester does not view Antoinette as his English equal and compares her to an “alien,” saying, “I watched [Antoinette] critically ... At least it shadowed her eyes which are too large and can be disconcerting ... Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either” (Rhys 44). As the narrative progresses, so does Rochester’s growing dislike of the Caribbean landscape and his apprehension toward Antoinette, seeing both as “[n]ot only wild but menacing” (47). Upon arriving at Grandbois, Antoinette makes an initially charming observation about Rochester: “You look like a king, an emperor” (50). Antoinette’s remark aligns Rochester with the image of a conqueror, foreshadowing his domination over her. Rochester also claims that he was “bought” by Antoinette and her stepbrother, Richard (47). From Rochester’s perspective, his marriage is a burden, but as his father’s youngest son, he is left with few other options to attain wealth. While he believes he is the one suffering in the arrangement, Rochester has become thirty thousand pounds richer, now owning a collection of Caribbean estates, a young bride, and household staff. In contrast, Antoinette loses her freedom, and eventually, her home. When Antoinette observes her stepfather, Mr. Mason, at a celebration early in the novel, she thinks, “[h]e didn’t come to the West Indies to dance – he came to make money as they all do” (13–14). Antoinette’s observation heralds her own fate: despite her love for Rochester, she was always destined to be colonized and used as a source of income. Rochester went to the Windward Islands and made a profit through his marriage to Antoinette; he acted as a colonizing country, reaping the resources of the conquered territory and taking his profits back to England.

Later, Rochester slowly warms to Antoinette despite his initial struggles. When Rochester and Antoinette visit a secluded bathing pool, Rochester notes that “[it] was a beautiful place – wild untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness” (62). Here,

Rochester emphasizes the “untouched” quality of the land, seemingly echoing and emphasizing chasteness (62). The adjective “untouched” is closely followed by “alien,” a clear reference to Rochester’s earlier observation of Antoinette, further aligning her with the landscape (62). Rochester’s opinion of Antoinette shifts after he is given a letter by Antoinette’s half-brother detailing Antoinette’s scandalous past. Recalling Sanabria’s discussion on gendered colonialism, Rochester’s views on marriage and fidelity corrupt his ability to reason with this newfound information. Rochester seeks to lay claim and establish dominance over Antoinette much like how a colonist would upon arriving in new “untouched” lands (62). While strolling through the Grandbois estate, Rochester comes across a flower:

I pass an orchid with long sprays of golden-brown flowers. One of them touched my cheek and I remembered picking some for [Antoinette] one day. “They are like you,” I told her. Now I stopped, broke a spray off and trampled it into the mud. (72)

Rochester equates Antoinette with an orchid, an element of nature, which he then “tramples,” seemingly foreshadowing their relationship (72).

Later, Antoinette begs her former maid, Christophine, to help her persuade Rochester into loving her again. Christophine suggests that Antoinette should leave Rochester, but Antoinette explains to Christophine why she cannot, saying, “you must understand I am not rich now, I have no money of my own at all, everything I had belongs to him ... That is English law” (81). These rules are foreign to Christophine, highlighting a difference in cultural marital practices. Rochester’s enforcement of English marriage law is a form of gendered colonialism. When Antoinette returns to Grandbois and speaks with Rochester about her past, he again states his displeasure for the West Indies, saying they are a “damned place,” and later to Antoinette, “I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side” (95, 97). Rochester’s statements articulate his discomfort in the West Indies and reaffirm that Antoinette

and the Windward Islands are deeply connected. In this section of the novel, Rochester has also shifted to calling Antoinette “Bertha” (83). Antoinette expresses discomfort at being called Bertha and asks Rochester why he does this. Rochester replies, “Because it is a name I’m particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha” (101). Antoinette has been claimed by Rochester, the symbolic colonist, and renamed “Bertha,” echoing the colonial practice of retitling Indigenous places. Even after Antoinette asks him multiple times not to call her Bertha, Rochester does not respect her, saying, “Of course, on this of all nights, you must be Bertha” (102). When the pair fight over the use of Caribbean black magic, obeah, Antoinette seemingly identifies Rochester’s implicit act of domination, exclaiming, “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” (111).

After the couple’s fight, Christophine attempts to barter with Rochester for Antoinette’s freedom. Christophine addresses the dominative and colonial attitude with which Rochester treated Antoinette: “Everybody know that you marry her for her money and you take it all. And then you want to break her up” (116). Christophine highlights how Rochester has extracted resources from Antoinette and broken her in the process, explicitly drawing a parallel to colonialism. Christophine continues to expose Rochester’s wrongdoings by pointing out to him, and subsequent readers, that “[Antoinette] don’t come to your house in this place England they tell me about, she don’t come to your beautiful house to beg you to marry with her. No, it’s you come all the long way to her house – it’s you beg her to marry” (121). When Rochester orders Christophine to leave Grandbois, she tells him that the estate belongs to Antoinette, but Rochester replies, “I assure you that [Grandbois] belongs to me now” (122). Rochester has claimed the estate from Antoinette, effectively taking her home. After deciding to leave Grandbois and travel to England, Rochester observes Antoinette as they prepare to depart, thinking to himself, “I was tired of these people ... And I hate the place. I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain ... Above all I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness” (132). Rochester articulates his hatred for the Caribbean alongside his disdain

for Antoinette, thus placing both in similar implicit categories; to him, Antoinette and the West Indies are the same terrible entity.

In England, Antoinette is confined to the attic of Rochester's estate, where she is left to descend into madness by her ill-matched husband. Antoinette is disoriented but occasionally recalls snippets of her past: "Names matter, like when he wouldn't call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass" (139). Antoinette's memories highlight how Rochester's dominion has contributed to the loss of her sense of self. Rochester has claimed not only Antoinette's wealth, but also her identity, further mimicking colonial consequences.

Through the lens of ecofeminism, understanding the novel's colonial context, and evidence from the text, Rochester and Antoinette's marriage stands as a metaphor for colonial domination. Lauwers outlines ecofeminist thought, highlighting how the movement has identified an implicit connection between women and the natural world and their shared oppression within patriarchal society. As the novel progresses, Rochester's disdain towards the landscape parallels his growing hate for Antoinette, seeing both as barbaric. The period in which the novel is set further highlights the colonial dynamic within Rochester and Antoinette's relationship. In his book, Sanabria outlines the destructive consequences of plantations, mines, and landed estates, and outlines how gendered colonialism functions as another form of conquest and assimilation (80–83). Antoinette's previous relationship with Sandi is a point of tension in her marriage to Rochester, and Christophine expresses confusion about English marriage laws when speaking with Antoinette. These cultural misunderstandings demonstrate how Rochester has enacted gender-based conquest over Antoinette. Furthermore, the novel offers sufficient evidence that Rochester came to the Caribbean to profit from his relationship with Antoinette. His extraction of Antoinette's home, assets, and love all contribute to the decline of her wellbeing. Rhys's novel not only grants Antoinette her own perspective in the context of *Jane Eyre* and its surrounding literary discourse, but also draws

attention to the debated theory of ecofeminism through its examination of a metaphorically colonial relationship.

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. House of Anansi Press, 1972.
- Delle, James A. *The Colonial Caribbean: Landscapes of Power in Plantation System*. Cambridge UP, 2014.
- Gibson, Carrie. *Empire's Crossroads: A History of the Caribbean from Columbus to the Present Day*. Grove Press, 2015.
- Lauwers, Margot. "Ecofeminism." *Rethinking Nature*, edited by Isabelle Hajek et al., 1st ed., Routledge, 2017, pp. 106–13, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315444765-13>.
- Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Penguin Random House UK, 1966.
- Sanabria, Harry. *The Anthropology of Latin America and the Caribbean*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2019.