

Landscape as Resistance: A Postcolonial Ecocriticist Reading of Oppression and Liberation in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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ABSTRACT

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* delineates the colonial Caribbean landscape as both the space of imperial oppression and a vibrant agency of resistance. This paper examines how the author subverts imperial logic by focusing on nature, specifically on reshaping the vegetation's encroachment and fire's destruction into the rebellion against colonial discipline. The novel discloses the colonists' reliance on monocultural exploitation and cognitive distortion, while the plants destabilize the colonial spacial and psycho orders. The first fire, ignited by black laborers, dismantles the plantation's existence and economic function, while Antoinette's final act of burning Thornfield Hall transcends mere revenge, negotiating contradictions between colonial legacy and indigenous identity. This analysis connects postcolonial and ecocritical studies, highlighting the novel's break-through of the set way of seeking liberation.

KEYWORDS

Wide Sargasso Sea; Landscape; Anti-colonialism

1 Introduction

Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), based on the silenced "mad woman in the attic" in *Jane Eyre*, reconstructs the prequel of the Creole woman Bertha Mason imprisoned in the attic of Thornfield Hall. In this novel, the tragedy of Antoinette starts from and also ends in a fire, and her lifetime witnesses a transnational marriage driven by the pursuit of wealth, the fall of the white Creole family, and the racial strife of the post-emancipation Jamaica. Yet despite the exploration of race, gender, and cultural identity issues, Rhys also creates a quieter but stronger rebellion, which is not written by human speaks and deeds, but "spoken" by the silent landscapes. By integrating colonial exploitation with local landscape, Rhys constructs an aesthetics of disorder that subverts the imperial logic of control, and the novel's true revolutionary force lies not in replacing colonial hierarchies with new structures but in embracing chaos as liberation.

Since the publication of the *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a large amount of scholarship has focused on human-centered themes, including the post-colonial and feminist readings. According to Helen Tiffin, post-colonial literature is not mere continuations of European models but involves a radical dismantling of European codes and a subversion of dominant European discourses, and the anti-discursive nature against the Eurocentric discourse is further acknowledged by Zhang Feng. Postcolonial scholars like Gayatri Spivak critiques the formation of Bertha Mason's identity "produced by the axiomatics of imperialism", and *Wide Sargasso Sea* gives Antoinette humanity and further reveals the imperialist oppression of colonial women. Other scholars study the function of hybridity and mimicry in this novel drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical framework, claiming Antoinette's failure in establishing a new superior authority. Early feminist readings, such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* see Bertha as the avatar of Jane, between whom there are many parallels, and they are framed to "masculine potency, the secret of male sexual guilt", and thus the madness becomes a rebellion against patriarchal and imperial oppression.

Besides the concerns for the colonial repression of human beings, recent scholarship shows the necessity of exploring the neglected natural world in the post-colonial field. A group of scholars emphasize the importance of post-colonial ecocriticism. According to Graham Huggan, there's "a convergence between the interests of postcolonial and ecologically minded critics", and Pablo Mukherjee also finds the importance of the "green turn" in post-colonial studies, for post-colonial transnational fervour needs to be combined with local environmental realities, and the pure pursuit of ecological ideals needs to reflect on its imperialist and capitalist roots. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, "Rhys poses the questions about individual rights to the land" and the impact of laws of inheritance imposed on political landscapes and ecosystems. Kent Ryden pays attention to the landscape in this novel, arguing that some traits in people's identities are shaped by their sense of place. In some scholars' view, the patriarchal exploitation of nature and wildlife is represented in how "Mr. Rochester exploits and dominates Antoinette as an agent of nature", and the novel evokes a sense of fear with

its eco-gothic elements and finally ensues the ecological destruction.

As Nixon Rob claims, "a broad silence has characterized environmentalists' stance toward postcolonial literature and theory", researches on the inhuman world in this novel can be related to social or psychological states and can also be an agent itself as a rebellion force. Based on previous scholarship on colonial oppression and ecology, this paper boldly assumes that the author, while demonstrating imperialist oppression, also makes a violent counterattack by means of natural landscape. The paper will unfold from three perspectives: in the first part, the paper clarifies the colonial discipline on the colonies specifically reflected in the changes of landscape and cognition; the second part deals with the physical and cognitive resistant force against the imperial discipline using vibrant local vegetation; the final part focuses on the cognitive revolution, taking the fire as the ultimate break-through of the colonial cognitive system. By delineating the complexity of the post-colonial landscape, Rhys exposes how the space becomes the stage on which colonial discipline and native power vied for power but the true liberation lies in the hybridity in between.

2 Oppression: landscape as the operative space of the colonial power

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the colonial order is built on the foundations of plantation economics and racial hierarchy, and the oppression and violence of imperialism are not only carved on the Caribbean people and society but also embedded in the local landscape. Though the name of Rochester is erased in this novel, readers can clearly see the transition of the perspective from Antoinette to Rochester, for the latter measures and judges the land with colonial arrogance when he first arrives in Jamaica. He dismisses the exotic landscape as wild and menacing, indicating the surroundings in England are emblems of civilization. Yet this binary perception of the landscape is no mere aesthetic preference but the hidden logic of the colonial economy that reshapes the land into a production line for capital accumulation through monoculture. As Jason Moore claims that "accumulation by capitalization works by simplifying, rationalizing, and reorganizing production—within the commodity zone", the landscape delineation in *Wide Sargasso Sea* reveals the hierarchy of power. The transition of the Coulibri Estate marks the importance of capital input for the maintenance of the plantation landscape and also masks the fragility of colonial capitalism. Besides, the colonial coding of the land is also inseparable from the distortion of natural cognition, which further turns the land into a machine of producing interests.

In this novel, the practice of transforming nature into a monocultural production model, particularly by devaluing the multifaceted roles of the natural world. Moore figures out that all capitalism "creates new Natures as objects of power and production," making nature in service to endless accumulation, but as nature is quantitative, it loses its historical feature and sustainable ability. The capitalistic forces in this novel, represented by the European white like Rochester, are so accustomed to the function of cane plantations that other local plants in their view are useless and harmful. In the quantified geography book map of England, the essential geographical features of each district in the empire are "exports, coal, iron, wool. Then imports and character of inhabitants". In the Caribbean area, from Rochester's perspective, the cocoanut palms are "sad leaning", "those hills would close in on you" and the place is "untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness". This also reveals the colonists' cognition: the only value of nature is the production of quantifiable cash crops, and the rest of the ecological functions are completely degraded.

Besides, he follows the stereotype of the conventional colonizer and makes a complete distinction between nature and civilization: the house would "shrink from the forest... and crane eagerly out to the distant sea". Nor is it the only time Rochester has shown a distaste for Jamaica and nostalgia for Britain across the ocean, which can be seen from his unconscious comparison between the landscape in Caribbean and England. On top of the emotional despise, another practice of colonial power lies in the stigmatization of the local knowledge and customs. When Rochester finds that Christophine's dress is trailing on the floor, he persists it is not a clean habit, regardless of Anto's explanation of respect; in the book introducing "Obeah", the author attributes all sudden and mysterious death to a poison of the negroes. Yet the fact is that Christophine with Obeah is the one who gives Antoinette psychological comfort and tries to lead her to sleep naturally and make her well again. According to Huggan, the production, estrangement and domestication of people, objects, and places as 'others' continues in the imperial exoticist representation. The "privileged" cognition becomes a weapon for colonial oppression.

As the companion of the colonial economy, the physical condition of Coulibri Estate mirrors the fluctuations of the colonial economy. At its peak, the estate was prosperous, but in Antoinette's memory, "all Coulibri Estate had gone wild like the garden, gone to bush" after the Emancipation Act, and then the decayed estate changes a little after Annette's marriage and the servants "smell money". However, the transient revival cannot stop the fall of the imperial hierarchy with the burnt different-leveled house. The grandeur of the estate is built upon the fragility of slavery, and for Rochester,

the only value of the place and Antoinette is her dowry, indicating that colonial economics seized by production can no longer be recovered, just as "the old sugar works and the water wheel... had not turned for years". In conclusion, the colonial practices of imperialism expose the internal contradiction of its economic system. It seeks endless capital accumulation with monoculture and imposing order on nature, but the land is retaken by the local vegetation. Attempts to inculcate a view of "civilization" are also outweighed by entrenched local culture, and the hierarchical order eventually collapsed with the end of slavery.

3 Rebellion of landscape: returning wild as the resistant force against the imperial order

However, on top of the inner conflict of colonial practices, the colonized landscape in this novel also shows resistance: it is not only a passive victim but also an insurgent using chaos and disorder as a weapon against colonial order. When introducing eco-materialism, Mukherjee clarifies "the essential unity of humans and environment, of history and nature... the centrality of material environment in relation to human cognitive processes". In this novel, the landscape is intertwined with the historical condition and human beings. The local plants refuse to be labeled as useless or savage, but instead, they break through the blockage of colonial space with vibrant growth, which is the ecological rebellion against the imperial suppression. Some researches, while acknowledging the novel's environmental dimensions, risk romanticizing plant life in explaining them as metaphors or symbols and in shaping landscape into "a dreamscape of desire and dread", but the growth of native plants itself disrupts the monocultural plantation economy. The vigorous growth of tropical plants through their uncontrollable proliferation, disrupts the colonial spatial control and poses a persistent psychological threat to the colonizers, namely achieving a dual deconstruction of colonial order on material and spiritual dimensions.

When acknowledging the importance of eco-elements in post-colonial field, Huggan and Tiffin appeal to a combination that "preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness". In this interdisciplinary field, the natural elements, such as vegetation and animals, carry their historical significance based on their subjective existence. Prior to the story of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the colonizers attempted to discipline Caribbean land into a capital production machine through sugar cultivation and production. However, tropical plants grow into a counter-force with their vitality: it first struggled to survive when colonial power was strong, living with colonial products; soon as the colonial power declines, the vegetation immediately retrieve their living space. Although Antoinette does not remember the grand scene of the estate, the growth state of the plants can be seen, even when the colonists promoted the plantation and invaded the living space of native plants, tree ferns and bamboos still retain a certain subjectivity, co-existing with the estate. In the Coulibri Estate, "the paths were overgrown...the tree ferns, tall as forest tree ferns", and the bamboos grow out of Pierre's window. Yet the coexistence is not a harmonious one, but a kind of defiance against the colonial power. Antoinette's description of the bamboo reveals this complexity: "the bamboos take an easier way, they bend to the earth and lie there, creaking, groaning, crying for mercy". Although the bamboo, as an indigenous plant, adapts to the colonial space by creaking, groaning and crying, and is even pruned to serve as an ornament of the estate, becoming an appendage of colonial aesthetics, the preservation of its vital force can still be seen as a form of latent resistance against colonial order. With the decline of colonial oppression, the local plants actively disrupted colonial spatial control, retrieving the ownership of the land. For example, the old sugar works and the water wheel is flooded by the razor grass. Compared to the visible return to the natural state, the invasion of odor is more obvious. For example, when Rochester stands on the veranda, he can "smell and cinnamon, roses and orange blossom", giving him sensory shock out of sight. This overgrowth is not mere chaos but a systematic destruction of colonial agriculture and a form of retribution by the tropical ecosystem against monoculture.

While the vegetation encroaches on the former colonial space, it also intrudes on the psycho-space of the colonizers. The former part has discussed the colonial stereotype of devaluing nature, but nature, represented by plants, constantly challenges the imperial authority. While Rochester's arm is broken by Antoinette, he thinks "the trees were threatening and the shadows of the trees moving slowly over the floor menaced me". On the surface, this appears to be a metaphor for the colonized losing control; however, this "threat" is also a projection of the colonizers' illusion of power. It disrupts the cognitive structure of the colonizers, thereby acknowledging that the formerly tamed nature actually possesses agency and subjectivity. Further, in addition to forcing colonists to recognize the subjectivity of nature, local landscape further subverted their existing cognitive system of colonial power. In the forest, Rochester empathizes with the shabby white house as the representative of civilization, thinking that it is desperately calling out of "the black-snake-like forest" and wants to be saved from destruction and desolation. The demonized woods reverse the conventional logic of

colonizers that civilization is superior to the wild, and the shabby house also disposes that the "civilization" without slavery and ecological exploitation will fall into decadence.

In conclusion, the novel portrays the natural landscape as a resistant force against colonial domination combined with the relationship between nature and human history. The vibrant growth of the vegetation, such as tree ferns and bamboos, disrupts the colonial spacial order and reverses the monocultural plantation mode. The ecological rebellion not only undermines the colonial control physically, but also poses a psychological threat to the colonizers, forcing them to confront the agency and subjectivity of the natural landscape. The encroachment of vegetation into both the physical and psychological spaces of the colonizers further deconstructs the colonial order, and reveals the illusory nature of their power and the inherent agency of the natural world.

4 Cognitive reconstruction: the dual nature of fire

If the natural landscapes are avengers at a slow pace, fire in this novel is the violent terminator. It is not only a tool of physical damage, but also a comprehensive deconstruction of the colonial order. Through the two burning events, the burning of Cosway house and Thornfield Hall, the author reveals the fragility of colonial order by offering two paradigms of breaking through. The first relies on the rebellion of the oppressed, and the second needs the disillusion of the hybrid subject. To better illustrate the different intonations of the two fires, here we need to draw on Bhabha's interpretation of the "negotiation of contradictions" connected with his hybridity theory. It refers to the process of addressing and resolving contradictions and oppositions through dialogue, negotiation and dynamic interaction, and the process emphasizes more on acknowledging their existence and seeking possibilities with them. Specifically, in the novel, the Cosway house, as well as Antoinette, represents a colonial hybridity. The two fires signify distinct forms of resistance: the first, enacted by the black labors, while the second, carried out by Antoinette, marks the progression from the rebellion of the totally oppressed to the awakening of the hybrid subject. The anti-colonial liberation is not merely a total rejection of colonial legacies, nor is it a complete reversion to indigeneity. It's not all about violent destruction but more importantly, needs a thorough recognition of the colonial order.

As previously analyzed, the Cosway House is a landscape in which colonial practice and local plants coexist. When black laborers burn down the Cosway estate, their shout "the black Englishman", "the white niggers" mocks the superiority of the colonizer, and also exposes the duality of the colonized that they are both victims of imperial violence and inheritors of its cultural logic. The act of burning estate is not merely an attempt to destroy colonial symbols. Rather, it represents a violent reconfiguration of the land by the colonized, with the aim of returning it to an untamed state, thereby dismantling the plantation's function as a tool for capital accumulation and shattering the order established by the colonizers. However, as a half colonizer, Antoinette hasn't realized the significance of the fire besides its violence. Antoinette calls it " 'There is nothing left now. They trampled on it. It was a sacred place...to the sun' " (120), when she is still in the unconscious internalization of the imperial order. The estate, though built on enslaved labor, remains her only connection to a fractured identity. Rochester's subsequent abuse, like renaming her "Bertha" and confining her to the attic, forces her to confront the imperial binaries of sanity and madness, civilization and savagery. Trapped in the attic, she re-realizes her complicity in colonial hierarchies: as a white Creole, she is both a victim and beneficiary of the plantation system. Her decision to burn Thornfield Hall is not merely revenge but a rejection of colonial binaries. By destroying the space of colonial discipline, she destabilizes the cognitive frameworks that trapped her in-between Caribbean and England.

However, the question is that the burning act reproduces the practice of colonial hegemony, without achieving genuine indigeneity. As Bhabha has noted, "national quests for cultural self-ratification and hence origination replicate imperial cognitive processes". On the one hand, the flames destroy not only the left colonial structures but also the indigenous flora within. Antoinette, in this process, effaces her own existence as a Caribbean subject. On the other hand, the ruins left after the burning of the plantation manor belong neither to the cultural order of the colonizers nor to the natural state of the Caribbean. Instead, they become a "negotiation of contradiction", in which the act of resistance paradoxically engages with the structure it determines to dismantle. It is within this mixture that the contradictions between colonial legacy and indigeneity are negotiated, leading to a form of cultural and political hybridity that is neither fully colonial nor fully indigenous.

As the opposite side of plant growth, fire as the devastator also acts as the rebellion against the imperial order. The fire is not only a physical destruction of colonial order but also a comprehensive deconstruction of the colonial cognitive system. Through Homi Bhabha's theory of the "negotiation of contradictions", we can deeper understanding of the

complexity of this resistance. The fire creates a new transformation, challenging the binary opposition between colonial legacy and indigeneity, and reveals another meaning of liberation. It is not about ascribing to a narrative of a single party, but about transcending the opposition between colonization and indigeneity to find a new possibility.

5 Conclusion

Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* exposes the illusory nature of the imperial logic from the duality of natural landscape as both a victim and a rebel. Through the perspective of colonial oppression, ecological resistance and cognitive reconstruction, this paper argues that liberation does not lie in replacing one hierarchy with another but in acknowledging the disorder that transcends imperial binaries. The colonial order is built on monocultural exploitation and cognitive domination, but is physically and psychologically destructed by the uncontrollable encroachment of the vegetation. Ultimately, fire acts as the radical force that transcends mere destruction, negotiating the contradictions between colonial legacy and indigeneity. By rejecting both imperial binaries and nostalgic purity, Rhys' view is in line with Homi Bhabha: the burnt ruins become a way of negotiation, in which liberation is achieved with the interplay of nature, history and cognition.

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