



Anthropocentrism vs. Ecocentrism: A Reading of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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Anthropocentrism places human beings at the centre of the universe and postulates nature as a simple product to be consumed for the interests of humanity. Anthropocentrism comes directly from the biblical account of the creation and the story reads that God gave absolute power to man 'over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth' (The Book of Genesis) Almost all Judeo-Christian Abrahamic faiths and modern western ideologies uphold this view. Throughout history, religion, and later on, industrial development adversely affected the relationship between human and non human world. Religion gave so much importance to humans that they ventured to destroy nature to have more and more power over it and industrialism estranged man from nature to such an extent that now nature and culture or civilization for all practical purposes have become altogether two different realms. Ecocentrism places ecosystem at the centre and says that nature has its own agency and is an end in itself. As opposed to the biblical myth, ecocentric belief looks at nature as a sacred space and teaches respect for all forms of life. Physical nature is holy and each living being has a special bond with the particular physical place that it inhabits and there is absolute interdependence and reciprocity. Questions related to Anthropocentrism and ecocentrism are part of a larger ecocritical debate and worldview, and literary texts that present themselves to ecocritical readings are at the center of this debate. It is the environmentally oriented literary texts that challenge the nature/culture divide and call for the resolution of the crisis. Lawrence Buell, who in the words of Richard Kerridge 'has done more than any critic to give ecocriticism an explicit method' has made a list of themes and subthemes that makes a literary text 'environmentally oriented' and these are the principles that can help a text to overcome the mad and greedy norms of the anthropocentric world.

1. The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant given is at least implicit in the text.(Buell 7-8)

Jean Rhys's novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a classic text that foregrounds nature as a living presence. The non-human environment is not a mere setting but possesses a character and a soul. The protagonist of the novel remembers her interactions with the non human world in her formative years of childhood and comes across as a nature mystic. "Everything was alive, not only the river or the rain, but chairs, looking-glasses, cups, saucers, everything." (Rhys 19) *Wide Sargasso Sea* is at the center of the debate whether Anthropocentrism is the way forward or Ecocentrism guarantees a more mature, satisfying and purposeful life. The very language of the text reflects on the symbiotic relationship between the human and the non human in the Caribbean. The novel is divided into three parts. The story is set partly in Jamaica, in Dominica and in England, where it ends. The first part is narrated by the protagonist, Antoinette who doesn't see herself separate from the surrounding nature. Her vision is ecocentric and she seeks solace and protection in nature and it is this relationship that accounts for her naive, innocent, compassionate and selfless persona. She is a loving and respectful individual confident about the goodness of human nature and it is this very naivety that is responsible for her ultimate tragedy. The second part is narrated by the young unnamed husband as he describes his arrival in the West Indies, his marriage and the disaster that ensues. He comes from an industrialized urban anthropocentric world of England and upsets the balance that the protagonist has maintained with the mother earth. It is the years of training and upbringing that sets these two characters apart in their appreciation of nature and its hidden mysteries. He does not understand the bond that his wife shares with nature and wild life. He is not able to unravel the mystery because there is no mystery hidden in an innocent and simple relationship that Antoinette has with the forests and the mountains. When Antoinette as if without any care in the world fulfills the basic need of quenching her thirst in the lap of raw nature in the Caribbean, the man from England is intrigued and kind of thinks of west Indian people as exotic and mysterious creatures: "She dismounted quickly, picked a large sham-rock –shaped leaf to make a cup, and drank. Then she picked

another leaf, folded it and brought it to me. ‘Taste. This is mountain water.’ Looking up smiling, she might have been a pretty English girl and to please her I drank.” (Rhys 43) “It was a beautiful place – wild , untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I’d find myself thinking , ‘what I see is nothing – I want what it hides – that is not nothing.’” (Rhys 54)

Antoinette and her husband are a living example of the division created by the warring forces of civilization against wilderness and there is a voice within the narrative that calls for a resolution of such divisions. The authorial voice calls for a proper balance between the two seemingly distinctive spheres of nature and culture. According to M H Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Prominent in ecocriticism is a critique of binaries such as man/nature or culture/nature, viewed as mutually exclusive opposites. It is pointed out, instead, that these entities are interconnected, and also mutually constitutive.” (Abrams and Harpham 99) *Wide Sargasso Sea* foregrounds all those binaries that act as a wedge divorcing nature from culture and vice versa. There are characters who champion the cause of nature and actively promote that the environment is to be respected and revered and appeal for the better treatment of the earth and the natural resources that it harbors in its bosom. The tragedy that falls on the innocent world of the protagonist comes about because of the hatred that the unnamed husband has against nature and its indifferent ways. It is his distrust of nature that makes him selfish, greedy, materialistic and at times outright evil. The protagonist, Antoinette, advocates her island home and the unnamed husband shows disdain for the environment and eventually uses violence to abuse nature and hurls insults at those who feel one with nature. He perceives the environment and his wife as one entity, and attacks both through his words as well as his actions. “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 111) *Wide Sargasso sea* shows us how the agent of civilization and culture exploits and dominates Antoinette, the agent of nature because he lacks the required sensibility to see mutual reliance between humanity and nature, being a native of an industrial country like England. He even ruins and corrupts the relationship that the protagonist has with her physical surroundings. “The sky was dark blue through the dark green mango leaves, and I thought, ‘This is my place and this is where I belong and this is where I wish to stay.’ Then I thought, ‘what a beautiful tree, but it is too high up here for mangoes and it may never bear fruit...’” (Rhys 68)

Rhys gives nature a role in each scene and advocates that nature should be preserved for its own sake and not just because it provides a habitat to human beings. Nature has an intrinsic value of its own. This philosophy is put forward in the following dialogue between Antoinette and her uninitiated husband: ‘I feel very much a stranger here,’ I said. ‘I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side.’ ‘You are quite mistaken,’ she said. ‘It is not for you and 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 on so often.’(Rhys 82-83)

Even if nature seems threatening at times, it is indifferent and has a life force and an agency of its own: “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. Underneath the tree ferns, tall as forest tree ferns, the light was green. Orchids flourished out of reach for some reason not to be touched.”(Rhys 6)

The environment is personified and speaks of the mistreatment meted out to it. The environment portrays its own unique likes and dislikes for the beings that inhabit it. It is protective and nurturing to those who are native and respectful and apprehensive and hidden to those who are foreign and threatening to the land. For Antoinette nature is caring and giving like a selfless parent: “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.” The only place where she feels safe is the lap of nature whether in its domesticated form or in its wild manifestation: “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 12)

And because of her experiences in the human society she holds nature in high esteem as compared to humans: “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.”(Rhys 9)

On the other hand the unnamed husband feels insecure because of his anthropocentric worldview. He feels claustrophobic as he encounters life in a remote rustic corner away from his urbanized home. This is how he reacts when he visits one of the islands in the West Indies for the first time “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. Those hills would close in on you. ‘What an extreme green,’ was all I could say.” ‘... 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.” (Rhys42)He further narrates, “I had reached the forest and you cannot mistake the forest. It is hostile.”(Rhys 65)“ . . . I found that the undergrowth and creepers caught at my legs and the trees closed over my head. . . . I was lost and afraid among these enemy trees...” (Rhys 66)

A powerful cry for help comes from the heart of nature and makes itself heard through the powerful connection the environment has with Antoinette. The central theme of the novel is the relationship between Antoinette and the land she loves, in which the value of a place is not defined in financial or political terms, but in relation to humans and the way they interact with nature making it their home. The unnamed husband with his anti nature urban world view forcefully displaces the female protagonist from the center she has been holding on to from her childhood and that results in the loss of value attributed to the relationship between a person and the land.

The reality of how the environment is treated today is also revealed through the actions of the unnamed husband of Antoinette. Thus the environment agenda radiates through the pages of this novel and demands a change in how nature should be treated and looked at. The unnamed husband is the chief cause of the madness and psychological damage that the protagonist has to go through because he claims ownership over her person and considers nature as a mere object to be exploited and used to further his own selfish ends. “In the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*”, Horkheimer states that as a result of “reducing nature to an object of domination, a raw material” culture has ‘denigrated’ the human body and defined it too, as a thing that can be possessed (Areej 150) *Wide Sargasso Sea* teaches us the importance of reconceiving human values, in order to redefine the ways we have established humanity’s relationship with the universal ecological system. We can go to the root of the malaise and understand the destructive patterns and practices that participate in ecological imbalance and crisis. “In a time of crisis” argues Maz Oelschlager, “a literature culture must reconsider the meaning of its basic stories, be these scientific, economic, religious, or philosophic.” (Postmodern Environmental Ethics) He further 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.” (Postmodern Environmental Ethics)

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