

Exploring the Symbiosis of Nature and Culture in Caribbean Literature through Ecocritical Prisms: Insights from De Lisser's *Jane's Career* and Selected Poems of Derek Walcott

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ABSTRACT

This research examines Claude McKay De Lisser's novel *Jane's Career* and selected poems by Derek Walcott in the context of Caribbean cultural history, contemporary situations, and environmental contexts using ecocritical methods. This study investigates the effects of the second wave of ecocritics, who expanded the definition of "environment" to encompass urban landscapes, drawing inspiration from Caribbean peoples' deep connection to their surroundings. This study uses ecocriticism to examine how humans and nature influence the urban environment, including built and undeveloped spaces. Human culture is contextualised within the urban natural environment to examine characters' environmental views and behaviours. This study covers a range of nature attitudes, from exploitative to pro-nature. Ecocriticism clarifies Caribbean literature's complex relationship between nature and culture. This scholarly investigation invites readers to better comprehend and appreciate these literary works by examining their motifs of environmental exploitation and harmonious cohabitation. Thus, this work enriches ecocritical studies by offering new insights into Caribbean literature and ecological challenges.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Nature, Environment, Caribbean, Landscape

INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism, a relatively late addition to the literary criticism canon, has quickly gained recognition as a respected methodology. Cheryll Glotfelty's introduction to "The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology" acknowledges that the application of ecocriticism to Caribbean literary output is a recent development, arising from the adoption of ecological thought by literary critics in the 1990s (xviii).

Ecocriticism, akin to Marxist and feminist criticism, adopts an earth-centred approach to literary studies, exploring the connection between literature and the natural world (xviii). While primarily focused on highlighting the dangers of modern civilization's impact on the natural world, ecocriticism also addresses the urgent task of preserving the remnants of a dying environment in contemporary society.

"The Ecocriticism Reader" serves as a foundational work on ecocritical ideas, redirecting attention from human psychology to geology and from existential dilemmas to pressing ecological issues such as ozone layer depletion, melting icebergs, rising sea levels, and ecological destruction.

This article aims to examine the Caribbean region's natural environment and how human interactions with nature have influenced its various elements. Utilising the works of Caribbean authors De Lisser and Derek Walcott, this study employs ecocriticism as a theoretical framework to explore the portrayal of the environment in literary works and the symbiotic relationship between literature and ecology.

The term “ecocriticism” encompasses various related names, such as “green cultural studies,” “eco-poetry,” “environmental literary criticism,” “green poetry,” “eco-literature,” and “eco/environmental studies.” It stems from the combination of “eco” and “critique,” signifying a “house judge” who seeks to maintain the environment’s pristine condition (Rueckert 107).

Prominent ecocritics like Scott Slovic, Harold Fromm, Simon Estok, Lawrence Buell, and Cheryll Glotfelty contribute to the field’s advancement. Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of the interaction between literature and the natural world (xviii). Similarly, Simon Estok emphasises that ecocriticism is not limited to the study of nature in literature but extends to analysing the functions of the natural environment represented in documents, such as literary works, to effect change and influence cultural practises (220).

This functional approach to ecocriticism identifies parallels between ecosystems and literary works, suggesting that literature may serve as a generative force within the cultural system (223). Thus, this article aligns with the functional perspective of ecocriticism, seeking to explore and uncover the dynamic relationship between Caribbean literature and its natural environment.

The Poetry of Walcott and its Ecocritical Temper

Caribbean literature exhibits a profound involvement with the historical experiences of human and plant diasporas, resulting in the portrayal of a multifaceted cultural ecosystem and a dialogic imaginative framework. According to the writings of Sir Wilson Harris, a renowned author from Guyana, individuals from the Caribbean region engaged in a discourse with their surrounding natural environment. Rather than perceiving the landscape as an inert entity subject to manipulation and the imposition of equations, we engaged in a reciprocal conversation with it (75).

The examination of the historical process of colonisation, with its emphasis on the interplay between the physical environment and political control, is essential when considering the representation of Caribbean ecosystems in literature. The landscape is characterised by an abundance of traumas resulting from conquest (8). Similar to Buell, Harris cautions that the significance of landscape beyond our current understanding. The significance of this observation should not be overlooked, as it is very common in the field of Humanities to assume that landscape is inherently passive (75). Harris’s cautionary statement proves to be very accurate, given the multitude of environmental hazards that the region currently confronts. These hazards encompass seismic activities like as earthquakes, as well as meteorological phenomena like hurricanes. These occurrences are a direct consequence of the dynamic nature of the region’s geography, which is undergoing significant transformations in response to global climate change (Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre).

In Derek Walcott’s poem “Forest of Europe,” which is dedicated to Joseph Brodsky, the portrayal of nature frequently takes on the perspective of European artists, resulting in the objectification of nature as a desirable entity. This objectification allows colonised individuals to establish a connection with the perceived pinnacle and norm of global standards.

The landscapes of Europe, well recognised and frequently encountered, hold a significant allure for rising artists from the Caribbean. However, an increasing awareness of the deteriorating condition of Europe’s forests and cultural heritage complicates their reverence for these spaces. The poem portrays the cultural development and eventual decline through the metaphorical representation of European woodlands. The poet does not perceive the onset of death as a source of dread; rather, they find a delicate and melancholic beauty in its initial stages, imbued with a sense of tragedy. This expression can be interpreted as more of a poignant farewell rather than a mere expression of dissatisfaction. The excerpt below is instructive:

The last leaves fell like notes from a piano

and left their ovals echoing in the ear
with gawky music stands, the winter forest
looks like an empty orchestra, its lines ruled
on these scattered manuscripts of snow. (38)

Within this poetic composition, the immense stretches of untamed nature assume an eerie presence as one traverses the region described as having the capacity to engulf Oklahoma akin to a grape (line 38). The poet finds themselves compelled not solely by the existence of prairie adorned with trees, but more by the sheer breadth of space. The level of desolation is so profound that it effectively ridiculed the concept of destinations.

The renowned European landscapes currently elicit a profound sense of admiration and fascination, accompanied with a subtle sentiment of compassion. For individuals who have experienced colonisation, the extensive forests of Europe serve as poignant reminders of historical power dynamics characterised by exploitation and torture. Rivers, which have historically been linked to spiritual significance, are now perceived as devoid of meaning by post-colonial writers. Rivers like as the Thames and the Neva, which were previously essential components of the commercial and imperialistic framework, are presently experiencing a state of near abandonment, metaphorically described as “rustling like banknotes” (38). The presence of an alone infant prompts the narrator to inquire:

Who is the dark child on the parapets?
of Europe, watching the evening river mint
its sovereigns stamped with power, not with poets,
the Thames and the Neva rustling like banknotes,
then, black on gold, the Hudson’s silhouettes? (39)

The perception of Europe is shaped by its natural phenomena. This response adopts a postcolonial perspective, highlighting the historical dominance of Europe over the Orient and other regions, wherein the latter were often reduced to their natural attributes rather than recognised for their distinct cultural identities. Non-European cultures are often perceived as lacking intellectual sophistication and being primarily rooted in their relationship with the natural world. The ability to utilise language, particularly written language, is perceived as a characteristic associated with Europe that necessitates protection. In his seminal essay titled “Nature and Silence,” Christopher Manes asserts that within our culture, and more broadly in literary societies, nature is regarded as quiet due to the prevailing belief that the ability to communicate through speech is a privilege reserved just for humans (15).

The poem being discussed in this analysis is regarded as Derek Walcott’s exploration of the interconnected domain of language, exile, and art. This notion is emphasised by Seamus Heaney, a renowned contemporary poet, in his essay titled “The Murmur of Malvern” found in the book *Derek Walcott: Bloom’s Modern Critical Views*. Heaney asserts that the poem “Forest of Europe,” which is dedicated to Joseph Brodsky, focuses on the core themes of Walcott’s work, namely language, exile, and art. Heaney further describes the poem as being composed with a surge of ambition that distinguishes Walcott as a significant literary voice (10).

The trees not only serve as a symbolic representation of Europe’s decline, but also provide insight into the

oppressive regime that seeks to suppress artistic expression and compel intellectuals like Brodsky to see refuge in foreign nations. According to Walcott's perspective, the woodland is characterised by its darkness and the presence of branches resembling barbed wire. Once more, it transforms into a sinister territory, a nocturnal woodland where apex predators reign supreme.

Despite the considerable influence of the sombre historical legacy and even bleaker prospects of European heritage, the poet remains resolute in resisting the nihilistic abyss, refusing to fall helplessly. The enduring influence of Europe's cultural heavyweights remains steadfast. The concept of redemption is vividly portrayed through the depiction of mastodons in motion. The excerpt below gives more perspective:

but now that fever is a fire whose glow
warms our hands, Joseph, as we grunt like primate
exchanging gutturals in their winter cave
of a brown cottage, while in drifts outside
mastodons force their systems through the snow. (41)

This image of mastodons as opposed to the dinosaur is oversized, bulky and wonder of the world. In *Abandoning Dead Metaphors: The Caribbean Phase of Derek Walcott's Poetry*, Patricia Ismond writes: The giant minds of the European past are virtually being identified with the formidable dimensions of the oversized mastodon (80).

Thus, it is clearly manifested that for the modern Caribbean writer, nature must come in the context of man. Unpolluted nature-nature that is virgin- is not possible in the islands. Man and nature, through their long association had become one and they must be depicted with one another. The nature in the postcolonial Caribbean invariably becomes postcolonial nature. The hybridity is the gift of the colonial rule and if the reality comes through the medium of language, then the delineation must be a patchwork of nature and postcolonial culture. Bearing this in mind Graham Huggan's remarks:

Modern Caribbean writing, in this context, involves a history of ecological and reclamation- less a history that seeks to compensate for irrecoverable loss and dispossession than a history re-won. As the term 'ecology suggests', this is a history of place as much as it is a history of people, and the Caribbean writers have played a major role in re-establishing it, both for their kinsfolk and themselves (111).

The art of Derek Walcott, then, applies the elements of nature as a multipurpose tool. Even though it never becomes the primary concern in his poems, it gives a rich texture and a powerful sense of identification of the Caribbean existence with the natural objects.

Sometimes it may appear as a signifier of passions and nonhuman existential crisis or even something opposed to intellect but never has it become totally evil, a binary of man's goodness rather it becomes a no man's land where long standing feud can be solved. Shabine feels himself freed of the burden of past after nature comes to the aid.

So nature changes its significance throughout the poems of Walcott. It is multilayered and of many dimension. In forming a new identity, which Walcott sees as the only way to be free from the epic memory of torture, and the consequent literature of violence and revenge, as the only way of living in this postcolonial world, nature is unique – it not only gives a native flavour but lends the possibility of a marriage between instinct and reason, intellect and emotion, the brain and the heart, the colonizer and the colonized.

Nature and Culture in Jane's Career

De Lisser's *Jane's Career* is an exploration of Miss Burrell's Labyrinthine search for success in Kingston. It

demonstrates the environmental forces which give her the strong determination to attain the projected success with integrity for herself and the Burrells at large. Jane's parents are aware of the life lived in the Pre Columbus Caribbean. However, after the encounter period, Western education added to Jane's knowledge of the expected pattern of human development and the challenges before her.

Through the metaphorical depiction of Jane, the author sets our intellect in motion to know how she pursues her career with decorum and her eventual marriage with Vincent Broglie. Jane, according to Xue "is the novel's frame, the window onto the landscape that the narrator looks out upon when he wishes to conjure up that deeply felt connection with the land that is beyond language" (32).

She is portrayed to experience immersion instead of confrontation; challenge in the stead of problem reflecting the Caribbean sense of struggle for survival after Caribbean environment has been made to exist in distant relation to the Caribbeans. This recreation of Caribbean experience is achieved based on the knowledge of history as imaginative matter. Landscape and cultural experiences together constitute the Caribbean sensibility.

The Burrells are caught on with the harsh realities concomitant with the imperialists' exploitation of the land, labour and reproduction, thus compelling them to live in their homes as such and allowing Jane to accompany Mrs. Mason to Kingston in search of greener pasture.

The novel has its central character, Jane, to be a Negro whose thoughts and feelings are deeply explored to showcase Caribbean post Columbus experience. Jane is to leave her rural life for a city, Kingston, to work as a house girl to Mrs. Mason. The flight of fancy in her ignited elation, despite the fact that she has not for once before seen Kingston.

The expository tales which she heard from her friends and parents whet her expectation: "Kingston presented itself to their imaginations as a wonderful city where life could be enjoyed and wages were good, and where one did not have literally to grub in the earth for a living" (De Lisser 10). In describing her excitement, De Lisser draws comparison from nature based on the way Jane "danced rather than walked, her strong legs and bare feet springing off the hard white limestone road although they were of rubber" (De Lisser 3). De Lisser's consciousness of the change taking place in Caribbean society is apparent in the portrayal of the male village dwellers that indulge in immigrating to the cities such as Costa Rica, Panama and Kingston, to exchange labour, for money:

It was a decaying village this, the men had left their properties to be looked after by the girls and women, and had migrated to such flourishing parishes as Portland and St. Mary, where millions of banana were grown and where labour was better remunerated than in the little village they had lived so long. (De Lisser 6).

Here, De Lisser gives a capitalist representation of the high degree of dehumanization meted on the rural men so as to find it difficult to survive unless they sell their unquantifiable labour for paltry pecuniary value.

The manifold declaration of the connection between nature and human culture is exemplified in De Lisser's evocation of Jane's rural base to her stay in Kingston, to forge another culture in consonance with urban nature. As Jane goes to Kingston, comparably with the same expectation like Francis in Michael Anthony's *The Year in San Fernando* (1965) she is bewildered and marveled by "the numerous little shops, the houses standing close to one another, the bustle of the street..." (De Lisser 42). These bustling and hustling of life in the city is unlike what Jane experienced back home in the village:

When y'u go down king street y'u see de store all full up of people buyin, tings; and on Sunday night the church are full an' y'u can go to Rockfort Garden for a drive an' see moving pictchure Show (De Lisser 4)

The urban nature of Kingston, with its attendant capitalist economy compelled the deprived city dwellers to think of how to make ends meet, especially Sathyra, Sara and Jane's class, who constitute the larger segment of the society. They engage in menial jobs to pay rent, afford food and clothing. The exploitation of the environment is at the detriment of this class of people. The entrenchment of capitalist mercantilism polarised Kingston into a class society, such that Abdoulmalique observes:

The majority of the residents live without adequate income and access to some form of stable assets, shelter, and safety nets. They live without access to clean water, sanitation and power, and enjoy highly limited protection rights and political voice (7).

To substantiate Abdoulmalique's claim, De Lisser depicts how the moonlit night reveals the extent of poverty and its effects on the slum yard where Jane sojourned with Sathyra in her course of searching for improved standard of living:

The moonlight streamed down upon the yard, throwing into relief every part of it, revealing the dilapidated fence, ramshackle range of rooms, the little superior tworoomed cottage on the other side of the yard, the odds and ends of things scattered about. The poverty of the place stood confessed, and Jane, seated on a box by the threshold of her friend's room, had before her eyes the material evidence of the sort of life which most of her class must live. Not improbably some of them had dreamt dreams such as hers; their fancy had been free... (De Lisser 137-8)

The orientation and life of the slum dwellers is captured in their relation with the squalid environment and individualistic struggle for survival. The individualistic philosophy is entrenched by the free market economy of the colonial, extended by the Caribbean middle class to the post plantation period. Robert, Rovets and George acknowledge unequivocally: "the physical environments are increasingly segregated and privatized, so that the wealthier will buy their way into environment quality, by passing the risk and insecurity "represented by other social groups" (65)

The resultant effect is the frustration and dehumanization of the inner city residents, subjected to risky environmental conditions. It is instructive to point out that Kingston, a colonial city did not develop from a rural background. This was as a result of historical circumstances of plantation economy:

The internal structure of cities was based on inner defense strategies. Taking into account the possibility of revolts and riots of slaves and later the subjugated working classes, colonial planner sought to enforce a distinct social and class separation within the city (Jaffe 5).

There exists similarities; it seems among colonial cities in the Caribbean consequent upon the legacy of colonialism. There was destruction of natural environment and exploitative intention manifest in the structural underdevelopment of colonial cities as: "colonial authorities rarely invested in the planning and governance of cities under their jurisdiction as coherent entities, because they were primarily interested in the extraction of resources and the affordable control and mobilization of urban labour" (Simone 18).

CONCLUSION

The ecocritical approach employed in this study has enabled a nuanced analysis of the impact of nature on human culture and the intricate portrayal of nature in relation to the experiences of the characters in the novel *Jane's Carrer* and the profound message conveyed by Walcott's poet persona. Throughout this research, the physical and emotional connections to nature are carefully explored, unravelling the profound interplay between human beings and the natural world within the Caribbean literary context. By employing ecocriticism as a test tube for this literary experiment on Caribbean literature, this study successfully engages in a comprehensive exploration of the region's literary landscapes and their ecological

underpinnings. This investigation offers an insightful and powerful academic endeavour that sheds light on the significant role of ecocriticism in understanding Caribbean literature's intricate relationship with the natural environment. The findings illuminate the complex interdependence between human experiences and nature, emphasising the need to foster sustainable and symbiotic interactions with the natural world. Furthermore, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on ecocriticism and its relevance as a valuable theoretical framework in the analysis of literature from diverse cultural landscapes.

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