
**DIS-HARMONY BETWEEN NATURE AND CULTURE IN HERBERT DE LISSER'S
JANE'S CAREER**

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ABSTRACT: *This article explores the broad ecocritical perspectives represented in De Lisser's Jane's Career (1914). The study is located in the environmental and cultural histories of the Caribbean. It evokes the interrelationships between nature and culture based on the broader view of the concept of 'environment' by the second wave ecocritics to make the theory applicable to urban setting. It enables ecocriticism to place human culture in relation to the urban natural world as it goes beyond the nature-culture divide to the ways man and nature are harmoniously constitutive in an environment (built and unbuilt). This is, the environmental thoughts and actions of the characters are interpreted in relation to the exploitation of nature and women, and also, the harmonious coexistence of man with nature. It is discovered through the examination of the nature-culture interrelationship that environmentality is a feature of urban settlement. The analysis done using that lens touches issues of colonialism, environmental, ecofeminism and identity formation in the Caribbean*

KEYWORDS: Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Nature, Environment.

INTRODUCTION

An ecocritical approach to the study of Caribbean literature seeks to interpret the process of identity formation, cultural domination and exploitation by probing the variegated relationships between man and the natural world. This is because colonial and post-colonial Caribbean is fraught with environmental crisis. It becomes therefore necessary to examine socio-cultural values in relation to the environment. The significance of taking ecocritical approach in an age of environmental degradation cannot be wavered. Its relevance and multidisciplinary posture to the analyses of ecological issues has in the words of Barry "turned criticism inside out" (248). The current plethora and complex environmental crisis make the case for a critical theory that brings ecological issues to the forefront. However, the field was often attacked for not having a theoretical basis as it was more or less issue driven, using thematic approach. "Its methodology", according to Junguera, Gifford and Oliva, "is eclectic, which often makes it seem dubious as a critical method" (14). Lending credence to Junguera, Gifford and Oliva, Barry posits that the multidisciplinary nature of ecocriticism is explained to be:

diverse and eclectic, not hidebound by a single issue...but having a methodological balance and openness which allows it to build from a wide range of materials, not restricting itself, in the way that most critical approaches do, to single type of evidence (259)

The purpose of this work is to make an ecocritical interpretation of the extent of environmental exploitation, the destruction of the ecosystem the resultant displacement, double consciousness and how these motifs are represented in De Lisser's *Jane's Career* (1914). It is important to note at the outset that ecocriticism disciplinary development has expanded its gamut of texts for examination beyond nature writing which was the purview of first wave ecocriticism. This prompted ecocritical scholars to reconceptualise and broaden the perception of "environment" in the second wave of ecocriticism. According to Ambruster and Wallace (2001), the enlargement of the term includes "cultivated and built landscapes, the natural elements and aspects of those landscapes, and cultural interactions with those natural elements" (4). Natural and built environments are inextricably intertwined and social issues are often linked to environmental issues, emphasizing issues of environmental justice. This would allow for a proper evocation of the connection between the impoverishment of the environment and humanity as a result of human culture.

An ecocritical interpretation of *Jane's career* therefore is a rethinking about the representation of humans in relation to their natural environment. Instead of the human-centred approach that was traditionally the preoccupation of critical thinking of literary scholars, ecocriticism shifts the focus to the one that situates man within a mutually reliant system where human and nature influence each other in the ecosystem. Ecocriticism goes beyond reflecting the nature culture divide to evocating the place of nature in the vagaries or vicissitudes of human condition. That is, how human culture can be understood by reference to the natural environment and; natural environment by reference to human culture.

Dis/Harmony between Nature and Culture in *Jane's Career* (1914)

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” (*Jane’s Career*, 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 as though they were of rubber” (*Jane’s Career*, 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. (Jane’s Career, 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. Another form of exploitation which attracts ecofeminist critical sensibility is defined in terms of spirituality. Ecofeminists who are spiritually inclined take a holistic view of women and nature interconnectedness “as a source of strength, power and virtue” (Sydee and Beder 281). Women, according to spiritualist ecofeminists, in their essentialist self are endowed with the capacity to maintain life through their social and domestic labour. “Women and nature”, Shiva asserts “are associated not in passivity but in creativity in the maintenance of life” (47) which is used to exploit them in return. This accounts for the materialist ecofeminists perspective on the weakness of the spiritualist ecofeminists). Jane’s parents are farmers who maintain relationship with nature through labour. Jane seeks identification with the land when ‘she had left school some two years before, and been assisting her mother to ‘work’ the piece of land they owned’ (*Jane’s Career*, 5). The pleasure and satisfaction which Jane derives with her mother from nature is defined through work and production. This type of intimacy developed by the Burrells to the earth is akin to “the type of closeness with the land represented in early ecofeminist writing on the body and spirituality (Mount, 2011)

Inextricably tied to De Lisser’s focus on the particular aspiration of Jane and her parents is the environmental underpinning of her becoming independent. The idea of growing up and its relation with environment are brought to sharp relief in the presentation of Jane’s stay with Mrs. Mason and lady Sathyra. Jane, faced with infavourable, though motivating adults, embodying experiential environmental knowledge tended to frustrate and provoke anger in her. She displays her status as a negro peasant capable of spontaneity, and responds to the environment based on her strength of thoughts and feelings. Jane’s integrity and endurance is portrayed in relation to nature as exemplified in her moral rectitude when sent to buy fish and other soup ingredients from the market. She does not cheat her mistress. Yet, Mrs. Mason is always over meticulous to find faults with the prices of the items bought in relation to what she considers the value of the items. She also heeded the” rule of Mrs. Mason’s establishment that her school girls should not

leave the yard after nightfall except on errands, he having strong objections to their “carrying on” with the youth of the neighbourhood, who, according to her, seemed to have nothing to do but “carry on” with the girls with, sometimes, lamentable results” (*Jane’s Career*, 51).

However, Sarah exploited the docility of Jane’s mind to defy Daddy Buckrams admonition before her departure for Kingston, thereby making her an accomplice as they breached Mrs. Mason’s rule. Sarah uses the cover of the night with other environmental elements – moon, bright lit shops – that illuminated their path in breaching the order to welcome a male visitor:

She and Sarah passed through the side gate of Mrs. Mason’s yard and went out into the street. To Jane, accustomed to darkness relieved only by the glow of the moon, the lighted street, with the brightly lit shops on either side of it, represented a very wonder of illumination... (Jane’s Career, 39).

They were viciously reprimanded for the offence. Mrs. Mason’s attitude of not paying her servant girls the pittance as at when due, and sometimes non-payment at all because of flimsy excuses made the servants transient. Jane leaves in pursuance of independent and ideal life under the protection of the night: ‘at about eleven O’clock, when the streets were almost entirely deserted, the girl might have been stealing consciously out of Mrs. Mason’s yard with a bundle under her arm’ (*Jane’s Career*, 95). The prevalent maid-mistress relationship cannot be wised away from the understanding of the historical development of the Caribbean as a result of the need for the deprived majority to survive.

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...” (*Jane’s Career*, 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 (Jane’s Career, 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 two-roomed 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... (Jane's Career, 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 "(Abdoulmalique 18).

The interpretation of nature in an urban setting appears to be complex and problematic. That is, to define nature in urban habitat, we are faced with what provides a fertile ground for the development of ecological consciousness. The built environment that predominates the city tends to eliminate the gulf between man and nature that was a problem to man-nature harmonious coexistence in the first wave of ecocriticism. Ashton Nichols conceptualized "urbanature" to

collapse the imaginative schism between urban life and nature, to locate the sense of place in urban experience. He gives a critical and indepth reconceptualization of nature to reveal that the built artifices that constitute urban environment are mere transformations of the objects of nature into different shapes, sizes, colours and tastes. But, that the natural content elements are not totally lost to scientific and technological intervention. Mount (2012) attests to the ‘urbanature’ conceptualization of cityscape and nature:

Urban ecocriticism cannot simply be about blurring the boundaries between urban, rural and wilderness spaces, but instead must involve examining the unique experience of living with cityscape. The urban draws people and their environments closely together through the mediator of culture (rural, too, does this, however the highly visible built environment makes this fact more easily apparent in a city) (129).

Kingston city can therefore, always be called to “placeness” in De Lisser’s *Jane’s Career*. He describes how Mrs. Mason’s living room, using built artifices common with the urban areas is:

Furnished with three American yellow cane-seated rocking-chairs, four black Austrian stream-bent chairs, a small Marble-topped table (which stood in the centre), two small mahogany tables which were arranged opposite to each other against the walls, and a horse hair sofa of uncertain age... (Jane’s Career, 29).

It is obvious that these items are named based on the plants and animals from which they were made. In urban environment, nature is transformed in response to human needs and culture to enhance the constitutiveness of man and nature in the ecosystem. Jane’s entry into Kingston is a ‘forceful’ change of environment onto the threshold of city life marked with increased economic activities. She is out to harness the city opportunities. She threw away some aspects of the past rural experience which she thought have no bearing to the present urban life and struggles. However, she does not forget what Daddy Buckram told her, and the cautionary words that pertain to her family integrity which her parents expected should be her watchwords. De Lisser employs the image of nature through the words of Daddy Buckram to caution Jane a day penultimate her departure for Kingston: “Satan goeth about like a roaring lion in Kingston; seeking who he may devour. Don’t stay out in de street in de night, go to church whenever you’ employer allow you” (*Jane’s Career*, 2).

At the end of Daddy Buckram’s admonition, it appears he has said it all as Jane’s mother asked him if he would have “some sugar and water and some fruit...” (*Jane’s Career*, 3). The image of Mr. Burrell’s hut as encoded in De Lisser’s words is symbolic of how nature is imbued with timelessness and durability over science and technology in its value to man:

The hut was wattle and plaster, and thatched with plaited branches of some native palm. It had once been coated on the outside and inside with a layer of whitewash; but the walls had faded and so the hut was mud-coloured ... in appearance (Jane’s Career, 5).

The weather-beaten appearance of the hut is moreso a caricature of the outcome of the harsh realities faced by the exploited larger segment of the society and nature as a result of exploitation. In spite of the harsh realities of the socio economic condition of the peasants, they are not estranged from nature. The mutually constitutive interaction of man with animals and plants in the ecosystem is so harmonious, such that:

Every hut was surrounded by a field in which yams and potatoes and coffee grew, and sometimes sugarcane, and always bananas and breadfruit. Fowls and one or two goats were kept by the better off peasants, and wandered about at will. Some of the people own donkeys. Even the poorest seemed to have a starving dog (Jane's Career, 8).

These indicate that man is naturally good, especially the savage man, in peace with nature and cordial with all his fellow creatures: "hardly anyone built without providing for a flower garden in front of his house, and sometimes for a vegetable garden behind; and the pride of the householders is to keep their house clean" (*Jane's Career, 191*). The love and value of nature also come to play as Jane's mother pays courtesy visit to Mrs. Mason in Kingston. In appreciation of Mrs. Mason's possible kindness to Jane, Jane's mother offers a generous gift of natural food stuff to Jane's Mistress. Mrs. Mason, as a mark of good gesture "glanced at the small heap of yams, potatoes and ripe bananas which still lay at the threshold of the door; stooped down with reckless generosity broke off two of the bananas and handed one each to the girls" (*Jane's Career, 74*)

De Lisser further, clearly highlights the connection between the subordination of women and animals in terms of physical reality. This is traceable when against her expectation. Jane was "turned off like a dog". However, her boss is oblivious of the fact that "fortune had so arranged it that she should leave a poor situation for a good one" as the dehumanizing attention ironically turned to fruition in Jane's life (*Jane's Career, 99*).

Necessary also to point out is the trait of ecofeminism which looms large in the text. The theory is predicated on the belief that the domination and exploitation of nature and women share sameness in most characteristic. It is in other words concerned with the exploitation and degradation of the well-being of women found in the destructive and selfish economic enterprise of man vested on nature. Women are resourced by the imperatives of the ceaseless and inordinate economic drive as outworkers, domestic and casual labourer. Sydee and Beder observes :

The work the women fill is largely part-time or casual, with little status, low pay and little security. This is compounded by the stigma associated with domestic labour and motherhood, leaving women with the welfare 'handouts' due to the low valuation of the daily labour (286).

Women labour attracts whimsical pittance as a result of the increasing feminization of poverty. Women found in this condition are mostly young, valued for their docility. Apart from Sathyra, Sarah and Jane who variously fall in this category, there is also a case in point: "Mary and Elizabeth went towards a small coffee plantation where they had arranged to spend the rest of the

afternoon in cleaning coffee, thus, earning three pence each” (*Jane’s Career* 13). This is a consequence of desperation of abject penury and high exposure of women population to exploitation and subjugation in the Caribbean. Jane’s co-casual worker insistently makes apothemic comment on their plight in the prevalent harsh condition that unless for economic gain “them don’t count people in displace, them treat y’u as if y’u was a stick”. She further notes her bewilderment to Jane with rhetorical remark at Mr.Charley s departure: “y’u mean to say Mr. Charley couldn’t even say, “Good-bye dog”, when him was going away on Saturday night?” (*Jane’s Career* 143). With this metaphorical depiction of Jane, and nature, it is obvious that the close connection which ecofeminists have established between women and nature qualifies them to free women and nature from exploitation and subjugation.

De Lisser’s consciousness of the increasing exploitation and destruction of nature by man, and the fear of the possible vengeful act of nature warns in the voice of Sampson: “when in a temper or in a jocular mood, never talk lightly of sacred things like earthquakes, which he looked upon as being of an extremely revengeful nature” (*Jane’s Career* 121). Meanwhile, Russell had earlier made reference to Rousseau as he expressed equanimity over the fear of earthquakes in the disharmonious existence of man with nature:

Rousseau, for his part, saw no occasion to make such fuss about the earthquake. It is quite a good thing that certain number of people should get killed now and then. Besides, the people of Lisbon suffered because they lived in houses seven storeys high; if they had been dispersed in the wood, as people ought to be, they would have escaped injured (664).

When Jane left her friend’s house, the suspicious virago, the interpersonal contact between them was conspicuously severed. It was father Daniel that took advantage of his harmonious contact with nature as he “brought the news of the separation between Sampson and his intended to Jane one evening. He gave it through the fence, about six weeks after Jane had set up as an independent tenant “(*Jane’s Career*, 140).

Moreso, as the Burells take their dinner, certain things happen that confirm their identity and harmony with nature. Mr. Burrell’s children that eat their food in the open air substantiates Maszewska’s claim: “lack of protection of house during sleep hours provides for an intimate contact with nature” (68). Another level of intimacy with nature is found in the contact with the “earthenware plates” from which Mr. Burrell and his son eat and the “clay pipe” through which he leisurely puffs after the dinner to digest the food. However, ambivalent to Burrell’s harmonious contact with the “clay pipe” is the smoke that is not ecofriendly. The toxic effect of the smoke from the “coarse tobacco” including other perilous variables can cause ecocide.

The evocation of Kingston tinged with environmental racism confines the blacks especially to the ghettos and it accounts in part to their sensitivity to the possession of items. In Jane’s flight of fancy, she wished to have a piano which she sees with the white people. She questions the exclusivity of the musical organ to the whites in her dialogue with Jim’s mother: “you fly high, ‘your head really big!’ You want piano too! Why not? asked Jane half apologetically, but

swiftly coming back to earth again. ‘Why can’t we black people have piano too?’ (*Jane’s Career*, 137)

CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to give a broad based examination of De Lisser’s *Jane’s Career* using ecocriticism as a theoretical framework to guide its thought process. The explication of the ordinary rural and urban experiences have been calibrated using ecocritical approach to evocate man’s harmonious coexistence or otherwise with nature; and the impact of nature on human culture. In other words, in the interpretation of urban and rural life as recreated in the text I was able to show the interconnectedness of environmental exploitation to human culture and the ambivalent harmonious interaction between man and nature in the process of identity formation in the Caribbean. The representation of nature is portrayed in relation to the various experiences of the characters. It expresses physical and emotional link to nature as it depicts the connection that exists between the filth of Kingston and its relation to the metropolis. Jane and her parents are depicted in their mutual relationship with nature especially in their rural base, using their preoccupation with farming as a means of identifying with nature. The urban conceptualization of nature is woven round Jane’s transient life style, in search of better condition of living. Through her interaction with the environment, we are able to assess what impact it has on the fulfillment of her expectation.

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