



Tropicophobia and the ambivalence of imperial masculinity in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*

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ABSTRACT

This article reconsiders Edward Rochester in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* by examining his tropicophobia, a historically and psychologically conditioned fear of and aversion toward the Caribbean tropics, as a symptom of imperial masculinity. While existing scholarship has recognized Edward's psychological complexity, it has not yet identified the specific affective and cognitive structure through which this instability manifests. By combining close reading with Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, this article argues that Edward is not only repelled by, but also unconsciously drawn toward, the Caribbean world he attempts to cast out. This ambivalent structure—simultaneously repulsive and attractive—reveals that imperial masculinity fails to secure the coherent masculine self it demands. In doing so, the article offers a new account of Edward as both an agent of empire and a subject psychologically colonized by it, repositioning him within the novel's postcolonial and feminist field and exposing the constitutive instability of the colonial-patriarchal order from within.

KEYWORDS

Tropicophobia, abjection, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, imperial masculinity

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INTRODUCTION

Literary criticism on Edward Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea* has often emphasized his role as a figure of colonization. In such readings, Edward becomes a colonial representative of imperialism and patriarchy, continually trying to manipulate and understand the Caribbean landscape through a colonial mindset, and “is incapable of seeing people of color as actors in their own history” (Mardorossian, 1999, p. 1076). In “Mimic (Wo)man” or “Abject Subject”: Crisscrossing Glances of Postcolonial and Psychoanalytic Theories in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*,” Shima Peimanfard and Fazel Asadi Amjad (2018) describe Edward's views on the exotic Granbois landscape and Antoinette as “a long speech, loathing Antoinette on both her appearance and homeland” (p. 75). Despite the lack of details about the confinement depicted in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the authors argue that Edward has “chained” and “controlled” Antoinette, leading to her “losing grip on her sanity and identity,” transforming her into Bertha Mason, or “Bronte's famous madwoman in the attic” (p. 76). Such readings remain important in showing how Edward participates in colonial and patriarchal violence, but they do not exhaust other critical possibilities of his character.

Still, a number of other studies have complicated this villain-centered account by showing that Edward is not simply a confident agent of empire but also a man constrained by the very structures he appears to embody. Robert Kendrick, for example, reads Rhys's Edward as a younger son who lacks money, property, and a secure place within the dominant script of mature English masculinity, so that his marriage to Antoinette becomes an attempt to assume a proper social position that never fully coheres (Kendrick, 2014). Similarly, Silvia Panizza emphasizes Edward's complexity, arguing that he is "troubled and multifaceted" rather than a purely negative figure, and further notes that patriarchal law itself becomes a source of suffering for him in the form of an inheritance system that deprives him of a secure paternal and material position (Panizza, 2009, pp. 2–3). Monika Pietrzak-Franger likewise argues that Edward's masculinity in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is fractured by the intersections of gender, class, race, and imperial discourse, so that the novel exposes instability within what would otherwise appear to be a coherent hegemonic male identity (Pietrzak-Franger, 2008, pp. 11–12, 15–16).

However, these accounts do not fully explain the specific form Edward's disturbance takes in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In Part Two especially, his instability appears as a sustained fear of the Caribbean tropics, a colonial environment figured as excessive, sensual, and disorienting. Existing accounts of Edward's psychological complexity have not yet identified the specific form or mechanism of fear through which this instability manifests itself at the emotional and cognitive levels. By adapting Simon C. Estok's concept of *ecophobia*¹, I therefore use *tropicophobia* as an analytical term for this complex structure of aversion. In Edward's case, this structure involves not only fear of and disgust toward the tropics, but also a troubled susceptibility to what the tropical world makes him feel, sense, and desire. By combining 'tropico-' (the tropical world as a historically and geographically charged colonial space) and 'phobia' (a structure of fear, aversion, and psychic disturbance), the term helps clarify how what repels Edward also exerts a disturbing pull, so that his relation to the Caribbean is marked by rejection and, at the same time, by an unstable intimacy with what he cannot master or keep at a distance. This ambivalent structure makes tropicophobia central to understanding the psychic form of Edward's disturbance and prepares the ground for a reading through Kristeva's theory of abjection.

For Kristeva, the abject is not simply filth or the foreign; it is "what disturbs identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, 2024, p. 4). Crucially, the abject is never simply expelled. Although the subject must cast it out in order to constitute a stable self under paternal law², the abject "beseeches and pulverizes the subject" simultaneously, provoking an encounter in which "fascination" and "horror" become inseparable (p. 11). It is this structure—of simultaneous repulsion and attraction, of a boundary that must be maintained yet cannot be—that makes abjection the appropriate lens for Edward's relation to the Caribbean, and for understanding what his tropicophobia ultimately reveals about the imperial masculine self.

This article argues that this symptom of imperial masculinity registers the failure of the colonial-patriarchal order to produce the coherent male subject it demands. Reading this failure through Kristeva's abjective structure and focusing on Part Two³ as the site where

Edward's sustained first-person narration grants privileged access to his interiority, the article shows that Edward is drawn toward the very Caribbean world he attempts to cast out. This drawing-toward discloses both his psychic colonization by imperial ideology and the constitutive instability of the masculine identity he is meant to perform. The article proceeds in four movements. *The first* situates Edward within the ideological economy of imperial masculinity and the paternal law that dispatches him to the Caribbean. *The second* examines how colonial discourse constructed the tropics as an abject space requiring masculine mastery. *The third* traces Edward's tropicophobia as a failure to convert abjective fear into colonial authority. *The fourth* reads his encounters with obeah, zombi, and the Caribbean landscape as an unconscious movement toward the abject.

To prevent him from castration: Imperial masculinity and the colonized self

Although *Wide Sargasso Sea* was written in the 1960s, Jean Rhys's attempt to reimagine Antoinette Cosway from a postcolonial and feminist perspective returns the novel's social world to the early Victorian period of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. During this time, while the condition of slavery in Caribbean colonies was being abolished through the passing of The Slavery Abolition Act in 1833 in Britain, England itself was experiencing the early years of the Victorian period, characterized by a rigid social hierarchy, strict moral codes, and clear delineations of gender roles and race divisions. As Michael Sadleir (1933) suggests, early Victorianism (1837–1850) was a socially and politically unsettled period, a “masculine era” in which “male ideals of conduct and enjoyment had been supreme” (p. 17). Within the orbit of the ‘colonial hunting movement’ that had been growing since the second half of the 19th century, Victorian England was marked by the fervor of imperialism, expansionism, and the belief in cultural superiority absorbed by the Englishmen. In this climate, masculinity and imperialism became mutually reinforcing. While the empire offered Englishmen a stage on which masculine authority could be performed, masculine authority, in turn, justified imperial domination. This order depends upon firm boundaries, as Kristeva notes, a “demarcated” space in which “a repression that one might call ‘primal’” separates “the abject from what will be a subject and its objects” (Kristeva, 2024, p. 11).⁴ Empire depends on precisely this kind of primal demarcation: between self and other, ruler and ruled, masculine and feminine, civilized and uncivilized (Goodnow, 2010, p. 6)—and it is this order that Edward is expected to embody and defend.

The novel makes clear that Edward is drawn to Antoinette's thirty thousand pounds and that his marriage secures his financial future. Yet Part Two also illustrates that his journey to the Caribbean is compelled by paternal pressure rather than chosen freely. That coercive structure becomes most visible in the language through which Edward imagines his position within the marriage bargain. In his imagined letter to his father, Edward writes: “I have sold my soul or you have sold it” (Rhys, 2000, p. 47). This formulation presents him not simply as a beneficiary of the empire, but as one of its commodities. In this sense, Edward is not only ‘the purchaser’ within a colonial marriage economy, but also an object circulated within it, exchanged in order to restore the patriarchal and imperial prestige of his family.

The letter exposes the transactional logic of his marriage, the unequal power relations within his family, and the humiliating position of the younger son who cannot secure masculine legitimacy on his own. In another letter, which he actually sends, Edward obediently admits that “All is well and has gone according to your [*his father*] plans and wishes” (p. 52). His compliance demonstrates that the Caribbean is a colonial assignment onto which his father projects the task of repairing his deficient masculinity. Before Edward ever confronts the tropics, then, his identity has already been organized by an external *law* that makes masculine coherence dependent upon domination.

The 19th-century masculinity in England was a concept constructed by imperial ideology. The development of imperialism during this period recreated masculinity by aligning the sense of masculinity with the sense of imperialism. Victorian Englishmen were expected to be strong, display power, and capable of mastery—qualities modelled on the British Empire’s domination of its overseas colonies in Africa, India, and the West Indies. While ideal women were confined strictly to their homes, colonial endeavors served as competitive arenas for Englishmen to assert their conquering strength and to compete in adventurousness in measures of masculinity. Thus, as John Tosh has pointed out, the discourse on so-called masculine imperialism was fundamentally built on the 19th-century English societal fantasies of mastery and racial violence (Tosh, 2016, p. 49). This discourse also gave rise to the ideology of the ‘white man’s burden,’ which framed the civilizing of colonized peoples as a moral responsibility of the British, and of Europeans more broadly. This emerging knowledge not only justified the dominance of the empire but also created a model of imperial masculinity for the Englishman: decisive, adventurous, civilized, and responsible. To become a true man, he must represent the greatness and arrogance of the British Empire. His body must be equated with the geo-body of England. To assert his masculinity, he must leave Europe and conquer colonies that have been feminized by colonial discourse to be passive and ‘awaiting penetration’ and mastery. Within this colonial discourse, the British colonies must be perceived as feminine, “effeminate and devious” (p. 50).

Thus, Edward’s father and brother’s decision to send him to the Caribbean colonies can be understood as an attempt to remedy Edward’s lack of masculinity and to ensure that the masculine energy of the Rochester lineage was not sterilized in Edward’s generation. Edward’s acceptance and compliance demonstrate that he has been subdued by paternal law: he is expected to meet social and gendered expectations, to become a true Englishman, and to prove himself capable of conquering and dominating the feminized colonies. Here, Edward’s body becomes a network where meanings overlap, where the subject is brought into being by an Other that precedes and possesses it, a being-there of the symbolic which a *father* might or might not embody (Kristeva, 2024, p. 11). That means, on one hand, he represents the imperial ideology and the process of colonization extended from *Jane Eyre*; on the other hand, he is himself colonized and projected by a larger Symbolic order represented by his father and elder brother (primarily his father). In this sense, Edward’s agency is sacrificed on the altar of imperial ambition, so that his sense of self is already divided before he confronts the unfamiliar Caribbean environment. Edward subconsciously absorbs the values of patriarchal and masculine imperialism instilled by his father and the Symbolic

order, then awkwardly projects them onto Antoinette's body and the Caribbean landscape. These interactions demonstrate the extent to which patriarchal norms and stereotypical masculinity dictate his relationships. His efforts to mold Antoinette into a submissive, docile figure also demonstrates that he is guided by cultural scripts that glorify patriarchal ideals in his homeland.

However, this colonized self is also unstable. Because it is founded on imposed hierarchies and fragile distinctions, it prepares the ground for the fear, hostility, and disturbed attraction that will later structure his encounter with the Caribbean. In this way, Edward becomes at once the oppressor and the subject psychologically colonized by the very order he is meant to embody.

Tropics and tropicophobia in colonial discourse: Expectation to be a colonialist

During the 19th century's colonial pursuits, the British Empire invaded and dominated regions outside of Europe, particularly tropical areas. Approximately four million square miles of British colonial territories were situated in tropical zones (Lugard, 1905, p. 817). These territories, however, posed particular difficulties for imperial rule because their climate, terrain, and ecological conditions differed sharply from those of Britain. The unpredictable heat and sudden weather changes in tropical regions were distinct from the cool, temperate climate of Britain. The diverse terrain, which included dense forests, swamps, vast deserts, and rugged mountains, made accessing these colonial areas difficult. Such conditions produced not only discomfort and administrative difficulty for colonizers but also a broader colonial discourse about the tropics as a problem to be managed. As Frenkel notes, the British ruling class, and Europe more broadly, stereotyped tropical nature through "two opposing narratives: positive ones about Edenic paradises, fertile soil, beauty; and negative ones about moral laxity, dangerous landscapes, disease, and the threatening abundance of the jungle" (Frenkel, 1996, pp. 317–318). The tropics were thus imagined not simply as a distant geography, but as a space whose excess and unfamiliarity demanded interpretation, containment, and control.

Colonial discourse transforms fear of the tropics into a demand for masculine mastery. Frenkel's study of the two narratives constructed by colonizers about the tropics is particularly useful for understanding how imperial discourse transformed environmental difference into a problem of masculine authority. In this colonial discourse, tropical colonies were depicted in two starkly contrasting narratives: on one hand, positive images of lush paradises, fertile and seductive with "languid native girls swaying in hammocks [...] surrounded by an abundance of plantains, bananas, mangoes, melons, mame apples, pines, and yellow oranges, fragrant with their mellow odors, and gushing with ripeness" (p. 324); on the other hand, fearful images of morally loose jungles, spaces not only invoking "fears of death and disease" (p. 319) but also harboring "the threat of sudden and horrible destruction [...] the most loathsome and terrible creatures, [...] which had darkened the country in perpetual night for ages" (p. 325). These portrayals emphasized the exoticism and

danger, thereby helping to legitimize colonial invasion and rule (p. 318). However, these two narratives did not remain in balance. As Frenkel observes, the negative narrative gradually became dominant because it more effectively justified projects of organization, correction, and civilization. In this reformulated discourse, the tropics were no longer merely described as dangerous; they were imagined as a space whose perceived excess required control. Such colonial framing suggests that imperial tropicophobia is a collective ordering mechanism that converts environmental difference into ideological threat. Colonial intervention functioned as a way of masking fear through imperial masculinity. The tropical world, and the people associated with it, had to be cast as weaker, inferior, and less masculine than the colonizer so that mastery could appear natural and necessary. Imperial tropicophobia thus otherized the tropics and converted fear into a script of domination, one that Edward is later expected to inherit and perform.

To overcome tropicophobia, colonists were expected to engage in activities demonstrating imperial masculine strength to conquer, manage, and transform tropical colonies. The pattern of a European colonist with the power to suppress and pacify tropical colonies appears scattered throughout postcolonial literary accounts of European and North American conquests of the tropics. Elaine Ognibene (2003) noted in *The Poisonwood Bible* the strength of “masculine Christianity” in subduing and taming the Congo, and the missionary character Nathan’s conversion activities symbolically equated with the manipulative actions of the empire in Congo (p. 21). This made the tropical landscape of Congo juxtaposed with senses of violence, superstition, or primitive degradation through Christian rhetoric resounding with bigotry (p. 26). From the colonial perspective, tropicophobia could be surmounted only when dense forests and local agricultural structures were reorganized, swamps were drained, and infrastructures of modern rule—roads and stations cutting through the jungle, as in *Heart of Darkness*—were installed. In these cases, the colonial power in suppressing the tropical ecosystem was not only clearly demonstrated through violence and economic-political-health strategies but also through cultural transformation practices characterized by imposing European cultural norms and practices on the tropical body as an important part of the civilizing mission. As a result, not only were local customs, languages, and religions reshaped, but the terrain itself, along with the habits of thought belonging to its inhabitants, was eroded and remade.

As a promising next-generation English colonist, Edward was expected to overcome this tropicophobia by applying colonial and imperial scripts to the Caribbean. His journey there thus acts as a ‘rite of passage’ through which Edward must prove his masculine adequacy in order to be recognized as a man by paternal law. However, as the story progresses, Edward cannot transform fear into mastery. The path he takes differs sharply from his father’s expectations and from the script of the ‘robust colonist’ he is supposed to embody.

Edward's tropicophobia

In Part Two, Edward's tropicophobia functions as a failed effort to convert colonial anxiety into masculine mastery, a failure that gradually destabilizes both his authority and his sense of self. Edward's predicament resembles what Kristeva describes when "the fortified castle of the borderline patient begins to see its walls crumble" and the subject is delivered into "that interspace, which is abjection" (Kristeva, 2024, p. 49). His tropicophobia, then, is the fear that leaks through the boundaries of the imperial self it was supposed to secure. From his first encounters with Granbois, Edward responds to the Caribbean landscape and its people with concern, alienation, and fear. He describes his first experiences with the nature of Dominica using almost threatening words: "The rain fell more heavily, huge drops sounded like hail on the leaves of the tree, and the sea crept stealthily forwards and backwards" (Rhys, 2000, p. 43). For Edward, the Dominica landscape does not evoke the exotic allure that it did for his predecessors. Instead, it is filled with secrecy, estrangement, suspicion, and the potential of uncontrollability. This attitude of keeping a distance is also reflected in how Edward interacts with the local people. Through his lens of superiority, the Caribbean people are seen as a degraded version of colonial standards. Here, their local language is not proper French or English but a "debased French patois" (p. 45), the portrayal of the locals shows "a foolish conceited face" (p. 45). Antoinette, too, is registered as a part of this unfamiliar environment, with "eyes which are too large and can be disconcerting" and "long, sad, dark alien eyes" that "never blink" (p. 44).

This defensive distance can be read, from a postcolonial perspective, as a form of scripted othering directed at the Caribbean landscape and its people. Edward approaches the region through inherited imperial assumptions that render what is unfamiliar as alien, excessive, and difficult to navigate. However, the Caribbean has never been a stable or homogeneous object of knowledge; it is a region marked by repetition, difference, and heterogeneity rather than by a single reducible essence (Benítez-Rojo, 1995, p. 3).⁵ For Edward, this matters because imperial authority depends upon the ability to classify and stabilize what it confronts. Faced with a world that appears excessive and resistant to reduction, he cannot translate distance into mastery. Instead, his effort to maintain the Caribbean as an Other only intensifies his estrangement from it and exposes the limits of the epistemological framework that underpins the masculine authority he is supposed to embody.

Edward is expected to continue the masculine tradition of the British Empire after his financially motivated marriage to Antoinette and, following this marriage, to engage successfully in a form of tropical 'cleansing' that would overcome his tropicophobia. Such a script assumes that colonial fear can be converted into mastery through control, classification, and transformation. Yet this expectation relies upon the very possibility that the Caribbean can be rendered legible and governable. If, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo argues, the Caribbean is a "network of codes and subcodes" that is "very different" and "[always] dispersed [...] within the chaos" (p. 18), then Edward's failure becomes evidence of the fact that he cannot perform the imperial masculinity that has been assigned to him. In this sense,

he becomes the Achilles heel of British imperialism, a failed successor who cannot fully enact the authority demanded by European, upper-class masculine privilege. His tropicophobia therefore returns as an unresolved force that threatens both his own identity and the imperial system to which he belongs.

As the story unfolds through Edward's narrative, his aversion to the Caribbean tropical environment intensifies into a sense of sensory excess and estrangement. The nature in Granbois evokes in Edward feelings of repulsion and extremity: "Everything 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. And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me. I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks" (Rhys, 2000, p. 47). The repeated use of "too much" suggests a failure to regulate the landscape perceptually and emotionally. At the same time, his estrangement from the Caribbean becomes inseparable from his estrangement from Antoinette. All the displays in this tropical region, including Antoinette, are roles he realizes he is assigned to and cannot afford to perform faulty ("But I must have given a faultless performance") (p. 53). In this sense, Edward encountered the Caribbean as a world in which his assigned identity begins to fracture. His narrative repeatedly conflates Antoinette with the tropical environment, as when he writes, "It was all very brightly coloured, very strange, but it meant nothing to me. I played the part I was expected to play" (p. 53), and later, "I hated the place [...] I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know [...] Above all I hated her" (p. 132). Readers can see an unstable perceptual and emotional response in which landscape, marriage, and masculine performance become fatally entangled.

Edward's narrative illustrates an emotional sensitivity that runs counter to the expectations of imperial masculinity. His prolonged discomfort with the Caribbean landscape and his tendency to dwell on its sensory excess distinguish him from the disciplined, pragmatic, and efficient archetype of the colonial adventurer. In colonial literature, figures such as Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (and later adaptations like *Apocalypse Now*) embody a form of masculine authority grounded in the ability to bend both environment and people to their will. Kurtz's command over the Congo and his ruthless exploitation of its resources stand in stark contrast to Edward's lack of control. Where the colonial-imperial model demands the suppression of emotion in order to sustain domination, Edward's excessive sensitivity prevents him from fully inhabiting this role. His failure to perform as a disciplined colonial subject not only marks his deviation from imperial norms but also exposes the psychological cost of those norms, which depend on emotional repression and the denial of subjectivity. Unlike the successful colonial figure who adapts and asserts mastery, he remains unable to reconcile himself to the ideological and symbolic framework he has inherited.

Edward's failure to perform the role of the disciplined colonial male leaves his tropicophobia unresolved, increasingly pushing him into a state of psychological instability. Instead of being converted into imperial authority, as the imperial script demands, his fear returns in the form of sensory disorientation, emotional excess, and a growing suspicion toward the landscape, its people, and Antoinette. In Kristevan terms, the Caribbean comes

to function for Edward as an abjective space: something he attempts to cast out as alien, excessive, and contaminating, yet cannot securely keep outside himself. Because the abject persistently disturbs boundaries and unsettles identity, Edward's inability to regulate his distance from the tropics gradually destabilizes his psychic coherence. His emerging paranoia, then, becomes the consequence of a failed masculine and symbolic mastery, one that continually confronts him with "the possibility of his own lack [of the phallus]" (Kendrick, 2014, p. 205).

On Edward's choice: Obeah, zombi, and abject

Because Edward cannot convert tropicophobia into colonial mastery, his trajectory turns instead toward the abject. This movement marks a shift from Edward's imperial performance to his psychic disintegration. In Kristeva's term, the abject is not merely filth, disease, or bodily waste; more crucially, it is whatever threatens the stability of the symbolic order by disturbing the boundaries on which identity depends. Kristeva extends the category to socially and morally disturbing figures—"the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior"—whose presence exposes the fragility of the law itself (Kristeva, 2024, p. 4). In this sense, the abject is summoned because it threatens the system that seeks to exclude it. It works piecemeal rather than through open revolt, covertly undermining structures and classifications with "a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it" (p. 4). In this sense, Edward's relation to the Caribbean is also a crisis of boundaries in which what he tries to cast out as alien, excessive, and contaminating continues to press upon him and draw him back.

Edward's entry into abjection

Edward's attraction to the abject becomes most visible in his relation to Antoinette, zombi, and obeah. First, Edward's explosive reactions to the Caribbean complicate the idea that, for him, the tropical Caribbean is an abject space: "the paths were overgrown and a smell of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living smell [...] One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin brown tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root [...] mass of white, deep purples, [...] the scent was very sweet and strong" (Rhys, 2000, p. 5). For Edward, this place is "menacing," "dark" (p. 47), "abject" (p. 126), and notably filled with immorality and shadiness. The excessive, lush, and wild nature makes it uncontrollable under the umbrella of British law that Edward wields. It overwhelms, threatens, and disrupts Edward's sense of control and stability. Kristeva insists that this expulsion will never complete: the Law "never eradicates" the pull toward what it excludes (Kristeva, 2024, p. 16). The abject therefore remains a repressed but persistent force that continues to unsettle symbolic stability and blur the borders on which identity depends.

The tropical forest plays a crucial role in leading Edward back to a collision with his repressed abject self, most clearly in the scene following Daniel Cosway's letter. Lost in an unfamiliar landscape, Edward enters a space where orientation, reason, and distance begin to fail: "Nothing but the trees and the green light under the trees" remains before him; near the ruins he finds "a beautiful place" so calm that "it seemed foolish to think or plan"; and, as he moves on, "the undergrowth and creepers caught at my legs and the trees closed over my head" (Rhys, 2000, p. 76). The entanglement, decay, and camouflage of the forest register Edward's alienation from the landscape, but they also suggest something more intimate: a movement into a space that encloses, absorbs, and exceeds the rational subject.

Kang-hun Brett Chang (2013) reads this episode as an instance of "the forest phobia of rationalism" (p. 8), arguing that for Edward the tropical forest is too "thick and dense," too mysterious and impenetrable for any objective gaze (p. 10). This proposal is fitting insofar as it captures Edward's fear, disorientation, and inability to master the tropical environment. Yet it overlooks another prominent aspect of abjection: Edward is not only repelled by the forest but also, quite unconsciously, drawn toward it. His narrative repeatedly places him *under* the trees, "round the ruins," and before a tree "covered with fruit," while the vegetation itself clings to his body and encloses him (Rhys, 2000, p. 76). These images of enclosure and attachment suggest a desire to go inside, to be enveloped, and to lose the boundaries that separate self from landscape.

This is why the forest scene matters so centrally to Edward's abjective tropicophobia. The tropical ecosystem here is not merely an object of colonial fear; it becomes the medium through which Edward approaches what he cannot consciously acknowledge he wants. His attraction is not the exoticizing fascination of colonial romance, but a darker impulse to dissolve into what threatens him. When Edward confesses that in this place "it seemed foolish to think or plan" and immediately asks, "What had I to think about and how could I plan?" (Rhys, 2000, p. 76), we sense a fleeting suspension, a moment in which symbolic mastery itself becomes "foolish," and the ordinary structures of planning, classification, and patriarchal control begin to give way. In this sense, Edward's wandering in the forest metaphorically stages his entry into the realm of abjection.

Becoming zombi—Desire for abject self-dissolution

Edward's unconscious desire is to become one with the abject, in this case, a desire to be engulfed by the tropical forest. Essentially, Edward unconsciously moves towards Antoinette to *become* Antoinette (Kendrick, 2014, p. 212), and subsequently, his manipulations to counter his fear of the tropics unconsciously merge him, Antoinette, and the gothic Caribbean landscape into one within the realm of the abject. Thus, in fact, Edward's condition and Antoinette's condition are the same. This is more explicitly demonstrated in the passage where he experiences fascination while reading the chapter about zombies and obeah in *The Glittering Coronet of Isles*. This segment displays Edward's abjective obsession with zombies, "a dead person who seems to be alive or a living person who is dead" (Rhys, 2000, p. 78). Here, zombi and obeah represent the mystique of

Caribbean culture that falls across Edward's body, leaving him simultaneously terrified and erotically drawn to it. A similar logic organizes the Edward-Antoinette relationship: Edward's domination terrifies Antoinette and drives her toward madness, yet her trajectory is simultaneously one of intoxication with that domination and of liberation (through madness) from the Symbolic order and its laws. Therefore, Edward and Antoinette are each other's Doppelgangers in this interpretation. This is further exemplified in the segment about Edward's reaction and interaction after being hit by the "love potion" obeah. What is resisting the toxin of this type of charm in Edward's body is his English Law, which makes him feel like "being buried alive," "was awake the feeling of suffocation persisted," "could not vomit, only retched painfully" (p. 103), yet clearly he colludes with obeah by having sexual relations with Antoinette and then with Amélie. If Edward were genuinely resisting this abjective pull, he would not have allowed it to reshape his actions and desires as repeatedly as he did. This shows that the path Edward chooses is not England-as-his-homeland, but is the strange grotesque garden that had trapped him: "But I found myself at last near the ruin house and the wild orange tree. Here with my head in my arms I must have slept and when I woke it was getting late and the wind was chilly" (p. 105). Even as Edward tells himself to expunge these tropical memories from his identity, he simultaneously seeks out the semiotic register of abjection they carry, returning, almost involuntarily, to the "chilly" sensation of having been trapped there. At this point, Edward not only wants to be close to zombi, not only wants to turn Antoinette into a zombi but also wants to turn himself into a zombi.

Becoming a zombie means transforming into an entity that transcends all definitions of life and death. A zombie is an uncanny Other to humans: it provokes repulsion and disgust, yet humans still feel an attraction to it because it was once human, and even after it has metamorphosed, it still retains human characteristics. At the same time, zombies perform excellently the function of threatening human existence because they implicitly announce a future that humans will inevitably become: death. At this point, zombies are similar to the state of a corpse, which Kristeva describes as having "irremediably come a cropper," an expression of death, or "shit that life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death" (Kristeva, 2024, p. 3). Kristeva emphasizes the disruptive presence of the corpse. But more than a corpse, which lies still and emits the scent of death, a zombie is even more assertive in threatening the subject's existence with its movement and violence. In the zombie state, the subject can transcend all linguistic orders and overturn boundaries and laws. Thus, when Edward willingly transforms into a zombie, he implicitly expresses a desire to shed the identity imposed by his father or English Law. This challenges the identity of "the colonial master" or the imperial masculinity that his father had assigned to him. This fluid state allows him to step to the margins of the central structure, much like zombies that always haunt the periphery of the living world.

The child figures and Edward's failure of the abject entry

Despite all of these 'abjective gestures' above, Edward cannot ultimately break from the structure that has formed him. As Lacan suggests, the unconscious is not simply "a hidden character inside the individual's mind" or "an area in the psyche" (Bailly, 2012, p. 60). Rather, the linguistic structures absorbed from the Symbolic order, once repressed, continue to persist "despite the Subject's antipathy towards them" (p. 60). In the case of Edward's psychological struggle, even when he seems to move against the paternal order, he does so through a psychic structure already marked by it. The tropical forces that draw him toward abjection may momentarily loosen that order's hold, but they cannot undo it. In the end, Edward is reclaimed by the very symbolic structure within which he was raised.

The two children whom Edward encounters in the tropical landscape can be read as figures through which his psychic failure returns to him. They register aspects of a self that he has not mastered and cannot entirely cast out. The first of these appears immediately after he finishes reading Daniel's letter⁶, when, in the midst of his disorientation, he sees "a little girl carrying a large basket on her head." At the sight of Edward's startled face, she "screamed loudly, threw up her arms and ran," ignoring his calls to return; as she flees, "she sobbed as she ran, a small frightened sound," before finally disappearing into the landscape (Rhys, 2000, p. 76). In this scene, the girl's panic seems to externalize and reflect back the very confusion and vulnerability into which he himself has entered. Her abrupt flight, her sobbing, and her disappearance give fleeting form to a psychic state that Edward cannot stabilize or comprehend. In this sense, the girl symbolizes an early projection of Edward's own psychic division, a figure of exposed affect, dependency, and instability that emerges at the very moment when his symbolic confidence begins to falter. The dropped fruit basket reinforces this impression, suggesting an interrupted act of carrying or containment, as though something meant to be borne forward can no longer be held securely. Here, the encounter intimates Edward's incomplete passage out of the semiotic⁷ and into the Symbolic order, since what returns is the unmastered remainder that his imperial role requires him to repress.

This pattern of encounter returns more clearly at the end of Part Two, when Edward prepares to leave Dominica for England with Antoinette and Baptiste. At this threshold of departure, a "nameless boy" appears and "leaned his head against the clove tree and sobbed" (Rhys, 2000, p. 131). The timing of this second encounter makes it especially significant. Edward has nearly reached the end of his stay in Dominica, and his relationship with Antoinette has already collapsed. At this point in the narrative, he is moving away from the realm of abjection and back toward the paternal-English trajectory of imperialism. The boy's appearance therefore stages a confrontation with a part of Edward's self that remains unresolved. If the little girl earlier suggests the first sign of psychic division, the boy renders that division more legible at the very moment of departure.

The nameless boy intensifies Edward's psychic conflict. He appears as both affectively attached to Edward and oriented toward Edward's symbolic world. Antoinette explains that the boy "asked me when we first came [...] if you would take him with you when we left,"

because “he loves you very much” and “he has tried very hard to learn English” (p. 131). This account implies that the child functions as a double of Edward, reaching toward an identity aligned with Edward’s own, one shaped by Englishness, imperial law, and paternal discipline. His crying body, his immaturity, and his attachment to the tropical environment align him with the affective and disorderly conditions that obstruct Edward’s rite of passage into manhood. In this sense, like the girl before him, the nameless boy functions as an ‘abjective split’ of Edward: a figure of the self that remains attached, vulnerable, and insufficiently mastered. This figure, the very self that Edward continually strives to repress, interrupts him at the precise moment when he is attempting to stabilize himself and resume the paternal route laid out for him. The child’s return thus confronts Edward with a psychic remainder that cannot be carried into his imperial future.

Edward’s violent reaction to the boy reveals the logic of repression at the center of this scene. He admits, “I could have strangled him with pleasure. But I managed to control myself,” then adds angrily, “God! A half-savage boy as well as... as well as...” (Rhys, 2000, p. 131). These words expose the depth of his struggle. The wish to “strangle” the child expresses a desire to suppress, or even to kill, the abject self that the boy reflects back to him: the attached, emotional, and disorderly identity that cannot be admitted into the paternal order he is trying to re-enter. In this sense, Edward’s violence is reflexive: he tries to eliminate from the boy the dependency, emotional exposure, and psychic vulnerability he cannot tolerate in himself. Edward’s hesitance and broken phrasing register the tension between his emerging imperial identity and this abject remainder. The order to leave the boy behind on the island reflects Edward’s attempt to cast off the abject self bound up with dependency and castration anxiety. By abandoning the boy, he tries to bury that vulnerable self in the island landscape and move forward under the sign of imperial manhood.

Therefore, ultimately, the encounter with the boy brings Edward’s double failure into sharp focus. It marks his profound failure in attempting to ‘enter’ the realm of the abject through the resistant will produced by his continuous repression. The paternal law continues to command him, yet the suppression of this disturbing self does not restore symbolic coherence or secure imperial masculinity. The figure of the boy therefore reveals Edward’s suspended condition between two incompatible trajectories: he neither remains in the realm of abjection nor successfully fulfills paternal law. This structural impasse ultimately finds its narrative resolution in the events at Thornfield Hall. As the storylines of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre* suggest through the actions of Bertha/Antoinette and Edward’s subsequent injuries, he is far from, or rather never, able to fulfill his father’s ambitions. He has been, both literally and metaphorically, “castrated” in the ghastly fire at Thornfield Hall (Kendrick, 2014, p. 214).

CONCLUSION

As Jean Rhys famously described her project as an attempt to “write [Bertha] a life” (Kimmey, 2005, p. 113), the feminist resonance of the resulting novel has long been recognized. This novel has facilitated prominent feminist readings of Antoinette’s resistance,

including Gayatri Spivak's reading of constructed spaces (Spivak, 1985, pp. 250–251), or the metaphorical interpretation of Christophine's resistance (Walker, 1999, p. 42); however, this novel also invites us to a more complex understanding of Edward Rochester as a subject shaped and fractured by the very imperial and patriarchal order he is expected to embody. Read through the lens of tropicophobia and Kristeva's theory of abjection, Edward emerges as more than a stable representative of colonial mastery; he becomes a figure whose psyche bears the pressure of paternal command, imperial masculinity, and the disturbing intimacy of the Caribbean world he cannot assimilate. This reading contributes to existing scholarship by showing that Edward's violence, paranoia, and emotional disorientation do not merely consolidate his role as Antoinette's antagonist, but also disclose the internal contradictions of the symbolic structure that authorizes him. In this sense, the article repositions Edward within the novel's postcolonial and feminist field as a colonizing subject whose authority is inseparable from psychic colonization.

The psychological splitting that Edward undergoes, symptomatic of his tropicophobia, suggests that a character who stands in for colonialism is compelled by an external imperative to suppress his own abject self. When that repression fails, the fragility of imperial manhood as an organizing ideal comes into view. The significance of this reading, then, lies in its suggestion that Rhys does not simply reverse the moral coordinates of *Jane Eyre* by giving voice to the marginalized woman; she also exposes the damage produced within the male colonial subject by the same structure of domination.

Moreover, the child figures, the forest, and the zombi can be read as recurring forms through which Rhys dramatizes the instability of colonial manhood from within. The figure of the nameless boy, in particular, embodies Edward's abject self: the vulnerable, attached, and emotionally exposed identity that imperial masculinity requires him to repress. His urge to 'strangle' the boy therefore signifies a symbolic attempt to annihilate the part of himself that resists paternal and imperial coherence. Edward's eventual collapse confirms what the figure of the nameless boy already makes legible: the imperial script designed to secure masculine coherence produces instead fracture, loss, and symbolic failure.

NOTES

1. Simon C. Estok introduces ecophobia in "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia" as an "irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism" (Estok, 2009, p. 208). For Estok, ecophobia underwrites the cultural impulse to control and dominate nature, making it visible in literary representations of nature as antagonists. I adapt this concept as tropicophobia because Edward's aversion is directed toward a specific ecological and ideological construct: the tropics as imagined by nineteenth-century colonial discourse, as excessive, sensual, morally disordered, and therefore in need of the masculine-imperial intervention that Edward is expected to perform.
2. Following Lacan, Kristeva uses *paternal law* (sometimes *paternal function*) to name the Symbolic order through which the subject acquires identity by separating from the mother and submitting to the structures of language and prohibition. The abject is whatever this order must expel—but

cannot fully eliminate—in order to maintain its coherence. I retain this term throughout to emphasize its continuity with the patriarchal and imperial structures that organize Edward’s subjectivity, both inside the family and within colonial discourse.

3. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is divided into three parts. Part One is narrated by Antoinette and traces her Jamaican childhood; Part Three, set at Thornfield in England, is narrated by a fragmented Antoinette/Bertha on the edge of collapse. Part Two is the only section narrated by Edward and the only section set in the Caribbean during his marriage. Because tropicophobia is by definition a response to the tropics, and because Edward’s interiority is accessible only here, Part Two is the main analytical center of this study.
4. *Primal repression* (Kristeva, after Freud and Lacan) designates the foundational exclusion through which the subject first distinguishes itself from what is not-yet-self. The “demarcated” space it produces is therefore a psychic topography. However, this article argues that imperial discourse mobilizes the same logic at the level of ideology.
5. For Antonio Benítez-Rojo, the Caribbean’s coherence emerges not from a shared essence but from patterns that repeat with difference across its islands and diasporas (pp. 3–4). This account reframes the region as irreducibly plural and resistant to the totalizing forms of knowledge on which imperial administration depends.
6. Daniel Cosway claims to be Antoinette’s mixed-race illegitimate half-brother. His letter to Edward, delivered during the honeymoon at Granbois, accuses the Cosway family of madness, immorality, and hereditary taint, and urges Edward to distrust Antoinette. This letter converts Edward’s vague unease about Antoinette and the Caribbean into a structured suspicion and precipitates the breakdown of the marriage that Part Two will trace.
7. *The semiotic* is Kristeva’s term for the pre-symbolic organization of experience (rhythm, drive, bodily attachment to the maternal) that precedes the subject’s entry into language and the Symbolic order. It is the anterior register that paternal law must disavow in order to establish itself. What returns in the girl’s sudden appearance is this register, which Edward’s imperial-masculine subjectivity depends on having cast out.

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