



## NATURE AND CULTURE: A COMPARATIVE READING OF SELECTED CARIBBEAN NOVELS

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article titled 'Nature and Culture: A Comparative Reading of Selected Caribbean Novels' examines the depiction of nature in relation to human culture in Michael Anthony's *The Year in San Fernando* (1965), Herbert De Lisser's *Jane's Career* (1972), Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979) and Rene Maran's *Batouala* (1922) to reveal areas where they show sameness in their attempts to evoke human culture with the undercurrent connectedness to nature. The research deploys the insights and poetics of Ecocriticism to the evaluation of the selected texts to demonstrate their signification of the interactivity of nature and culture in their interdependence and mutual constitutiveness in the Caribbean ecosystem. The involvement of man in the exploitation of nature and the effect that it has on the social texture of society is also part of the focus of this paper. The study is situated in the second wave of the literary development of the field, where the purview of Ecocriticism locates vestiges of nature in urban areas. It thus makes for the possibility of analysing works that are not necessarily interested in nature, since the selected texts had been written before the evolvement of Ecocriticism to examine nature-oriented works. In a careful survey of the Caribbean literary works that have been subjected to a comparative lens, the selected texts are found not to have been given nature-oriented attention in a combined form as done in this research. The texts argue that there is a confluence of environment and miscegenation, slavery, identity formation, etc in the understanding of Caribbean literature. This paper posits that writers should reinvent portraying nature, not as a framing device for human culture. This would serve as a stimulus for reorganising Caribbean political thought.*

**KEYWORDS:** Ecocriticism, Miscegenation, Nature, Culture, Environment



## INTRODUCTION

This paper is a comparative analysis of the representation of nature concerning human existence in selected Caribbean novels. The research is inspired by the fact that previous studies of the selected novels have not been given comparative interest to the implication of nature on human culture, in their attempt to create ecological consciousness. The research is also prompted by the assumption that excessive use of science and technology to meet human needs has caused serious destruction to the natural world. From his ecological law of optimum, Dansereau (as cited in Phil-Eze, 2009) gives credence to the assumption: ‘no species encounters in any given habitat (environment) the optimum condition for all its functions’ (p.390). Man attempts to modify his environment to satisfy his needs and desires. In doing this, the ecological balance is affected, thus causing disequilibrium in the natural world.

### Analytical Tool

Several definitions have been given of Ecocriticism, as many scholars have attempted to describe it. From the point of view of Slovic (as cited in Obakachi, Abdulmalik and Aliyu, 2021), it is the ‘study of explicitly environmental texts from any scholarly approach, or conversely, the human-nature relationships in any text, even texts that seem, at first glance, oblivious of the non-human world’ (p. 74). Ecocriticism is a literary theory that takes ‘an earth-centred approach to the study of texts’ (Gerrad, 2004, p.1). In line with Gerrad, Tosic posits: ‘Ecocriticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man’s relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature’ (p. 44). Elaborately, Dobie (2012) views it as:

- The study of the relationship between literature and the environment.
- The study of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view where all sciences come together to analyse the environment and brainstorm possible solutions for the creation of the contemporary situation.
- The celebration of the pastoral and the sublime (p. 239).

From the foregoing definitions, it is discernible that ecocritics argue for priority attention to be given to nature in literature, and that the role of nature in the formation of human culture should not be seen as a passive one. Therefore, Ecotheory accounts for how human culture is connected to the natural world, affecting it and affected by the natural world. The relevant strands of Ecocriticism that would be adopted to examine the ecological implication of Caribbean socio-cultural life are the ones propounded by Buell (1995):

- (i) The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device, but as a presence that suggests that human history is implicated in natural history.
- (ii) Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation (pp. 7-8). Bartens (2008):
  - (i) Social ecology: This is interested in the social cost of environmental problems like pollution and waste disposal.



- (ii) Ecological ecocriticism: It involves the interpretation of literary tropes in relation to nature. In the examination of literary works, attention should be drawn to the 'sense of rootedness in place in a particular ecosystem (pp. 24-25).

### Plot Summary of the Texts

*The Year in San Fernando* is a fictional representation of the author's experience at the age of twelve years while working for a family. This was because his father died and the upkeep of the family became difficult for his widowed mother. The dispossessed Aborigines were left to grope in the dark after the plantation period. This was the difficult situation that Ma faced with four orphans, Francis included. The author is fictionalised as Francis leaving his rural home to become a houseboy to Mrs Chandles in San Fernando. He now interacts with the natural world in the urban setting. It is a recreation of the changing seasons and the effect of the seasonal variation on the activities of Francis, the health of Mrs Chandles and the reverberating effect it has on her negative disposition to Francis and Mr Chandles. It also narrates the destruction of the environment through the burning of the cane field and the heat and smoke that pollute the environment caused by the Usine Ste Madeleine.

*Jane's Career* celebrates the role of the natural world in shaping the historical experience of a girl child, Jane. It 'reveals how Western patriarchal ideologies and a history of violent colonialism exploit and harm both women and the environment and how women's bodies and the land are inscribed with this history' (Fitzpatrick, 2008, p.1). The novel is about Jane's transient journey towards self-actualisation. It involves looking at Miss Burrell's labyrinthial search for success in Kingston, in confirmation of the Edo proverb rendered in the conjoin voices of Adekutu and Ajadi (2019): 'the hare say when he falls, the race becomes doubled' (p. 274). The Burrells are pauperized. They are, hence, compelled to live in their homes as such, allowing Jane to accompany Mrs Mason to Kingston, enduring the vagaries of life in search of a better living standard. It unveils the nature and ecological implications of Jane's story and relates it dialogically to other stories in the novel. She is strengthened by her symbiotic relationship with the environment, to transgress the boundary of wish to reality.

De Lisser's *The Dragon Can't Dance* explores post-plantation socio-cultural experiences especially literary descriptions of the historical root of the ambivalences of Trinidadian custom of carnival celebration, rebellion, prostitution, calypso and poverty with their undercurrent connectedness to the natural world. The novel is an evocation of a Trinidadian slum concerning the characters' experience 'using the festival as both metaphor and form to dramatise its potential as a ritual of regeneration and self-assertion while at the same time exploring its meaning and significance for the deprived characters of the slum' (Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe, 1987, p. 68). The deprived Caribbeans suffered harsh realities of post-plantation socio-economic life. As a consequence of natural determinism, Fisheye, Pariag, Cleothilda, Philo and Sylvia are segregated to occupy the ghetto. The people's eventual consciousness of their sordid condition leads to the character's insistence on regeneration as the thrust of the carnival celebration.

*Batouala* is a parody of Caribbean people's nostalgic feeling of a complex, diverse and fruitful relationship with their environment before colonialism. The incursion of the imperialists disturbed their harmony with nature. It recreates the strengths of Caribbean pre-colonial life, particularly the relationship between the characters and landscape, flora and fauna. Kortenaar (2003) describes the pre-colonial Caribbean as 'an ahistorical, organic whole disrupted and set



upon the path of history by the brutal entry of the Europeans' (p. 39). The influx of colonialists resulted in the split of the spirit of oneness and the erosion of Caribbean socio-cultural life. The novel explores the story of the Ubangui-Shari village in its primitive stage, reinforcing the cordialness that existed between nature and culture through Macoude, Bissibin'gui, Yassingui'ndja, According to Mwangi (2004), 'the novel depicts black man's village life and its richness as an organic self-sustaining forest with almost everything that the West - in its ignorance - claim to have come to introduce' (p. 2).

### The Polemics

The common concern of the texts is instilled by the various environmental and social issues that are consequences of post-plantation through the pre-colonial life of the people of the Caribbeans. The socio-economic life of the Caribbeans after the plantation did not really change for the better because of the intense and protracted devastation of the environment by the colonialists. The liberated slaves were not employable because they did not learn any handwork, trade, or skills to either qualify them for employment in civil service or self-employment. They were therefore not gainfully employed nor could they do anything lucrative because they were ruined by colonial rule. Emancipation was a pivotal change to a harsh condition akin to the colonial period. It is analogous to the situation faced by the deprived people of Ilmorog in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1977), after their exodus to Nairobi to agitate for a change in their poor socio-economic condition. The split between the rich, and poor that constitute a larger segment of society is reinforced by the differences among urban, slum and rural levels of living. The dualism is further heightened by a division on the racial background so that the small enclave of the privileged ones claims superiority.

*Jane's Career*, *The Year in San Fernando* and *The Dragon Can't Dance* are parodies of Caribbean post-plantation life. They delineate Caribbean life after emancipation, using different subject matters in their connectedness to nature. *The Year in San Fernando* and *Jane's Career* celebrate specific periods in the growing up male and female negroes respectively in the process of getting improved conditions of living against their changed rural background to city life. In the two novels, the writers illustrate through their interaction with nature, how children embark on identity development. Nature, in this context, functions to sustain human culture. Francis and Jane make moved from rural to urban locations for the same purpose of getting the improved living condition. The authors depict the natural environment to show that nature is actively involved in the character development of these protagonists.

These texts, as a result of what can now be termed its ecocritical orientation, argue from different perspectives the need for mutual consecutiveness and interdependence of nature and culture. The interactions of these children with nature, divided into rural and urban, enable us to assess the built and unbuilt environment as they affect the attitude of the characters. Francis and Jane, in their city life, are 'far' removed from rustic nature. Jane is depicted to be cordial with nature in her rural setting when she assists her brother in sowing the yam seedlings on the farm. Her interactions with built nature are different in Kingston, especially in Mrs Mason's house, in the street and market. Francis spends one year in San Fernando with the seasonal variation dictating the mood of his relationship with Mrs Chandles, especially in watering the flower plants, going to the market and several other objects of nature. Their labyrinthian search for greener pastures is implicated in natural history.



Francis and Jane had similar experiences as they got to their mistresses' houses on their arrival to the city. Francis is welcomed by the 'blindingly bright light', thus giving him a tip of an urban environment. The connectedness of Francis to the luxurious nature of Mrs Chandles' house is captured in his voice: 'I was reluctant to sit on such fine looking chair, but then I sat down. I could not remember being in any place so grand and rich looking' (p. 13). Francis continues: 'things in this were so many and of such richness. There were nice pictures and nice cabinets and there were new chairs in the drawing room' (p. 35). As for Jane, she soiled Mrs Mason's Mahogany table, exposing her rural experience that would likely impede her struggle for self-independence in the city. Jane's impression of her entry into a sophisticated setting is succinctly captured in these words:

When Jane enters Mrs Mason's house, she had never seen such a large house before; in a vague sort of way she wondered how many hundred persons lived in them, so spacious did the Villas of Kingston gentry appear to her unsophisticated eyes' (p.28).

These experiences launched them into the threshold of urban life to feel what obtains between the rich and the poor, mistresses and maids with underpinning connectedness to the environment.

Also, racism, an inevitable evil of the colonial era shows itself in the distrust of negro servants in the post-colonial period, particularly in *Jane's Career* and *The Year in San Fernando*. In *Jane's Career*, it noted in Jane's connectedness to some objects of nature make Mrs Mason question her integrity which aggravated the already sour relationship between them. Specifically, Jane's intention not to cheat her mistress or be indebted to the retailers in the neighbourhood dispels the rumour of iniquity and insincerity levelled against her. Similarly, in *The Year in San Fernando*, certain distrust is found in Mrs Chandles' disposition to Francis until the weather condition changed from dry to the rainy season, thus, allowing her to relate in an unstudied manner with Francis. Invariably, the rural background of the negro servants is endowed with purity as a consequence of their cordialness with unsullied nature in the rural setting. Therefore, racism and slave-like conditions as human historical experiences are implicated in the natural environment. The interactions of the negro servants reveal their integrity and purity which the whites and the Caribbean elite glossed over or misinterpreted as synonymous with iniquity.

As a mark of dissimilarity, De Lisser fails to note the effect of seasonal change throughout Jane's stay in Kingston, good or bad, on Mrs Mason's health and emotion, unlike what happened to Mrs Chandles. It implies that old age accounts to some extent for Mrs Chandles' susceptibility to the heat from the burning cane field, cropping season and Usine Ste Madeleine. De Lisser argues that there is a change in weather conditions, but its underpinning effect does not belie Mrs Mason's ill disposition to Jane or affect her health. In other words, Mrs Mason might not be as old and vulnerable as Mrs Chandles to feel the impact of the heat from the dry season, the burning canes and Usine Ste Madeleine. This gives credence in part to the excuse to Mr Chanles that old age is the cause of Mrs Chandles' ill disposition to Francis and himself, not solely the harsh weather condition and heat from Usine Ste Madeleine. This accounts for the differences in the historical experiences of Francis and Jane despite the fact that shared the same geographical region, the Caribbean.

The representation of 'sameness' in the people's suffering and struggles right from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial in the texts is aptly captured in the images of the trees and wind,





particularly in *Batouala*: ‘the leaves of the Kapok tree stopped moving at moment. The breeze stopped caressing the giant grasses. In the distance, smoked columns climbed straight upward. But, inflamed, hallucinated, unquenchable, the song of the Cicadas had intensified (p. 32). To the blacks, the presence of the European imperialists made life static and monotonous as signified in ‘the leaves of the Kapok tree stopped moving’. The traditional life of the Caribbeans has been suppressed by the overwhelming Western culture of individualism and exploitation. The people have no rest of mind as the oppositional Western antics do not benefit the Caribbeans who have suffered cultural humiliation and environmental degradation, ‘the breeze caressing the giant grasses’ confirms this. ‘Song of the Cicadas is metaphoric of the people’s murmuring for a possible way of going to unite with their natural world and traditional life. The Pombo has its own way of symbolising the going home of the people:

With a hoarse and sweet voice, the Pombo swollen with rains of night and with the contributions of its tributaries, hummed the beautiful laments that water murmurs night and day to the river banks which listen and drink in his words’ (p. 50)

The exploited people represented by the Pombo are a formation of several people of African, Indian and Chinese descent. With their various experiences, they lament the unsuitability of Western culture on Caribbean soil. ‘Night and day’ is used like the continuous grinding of canes in *Usine Ste Madeline* in *The Year in San Fernando* to express the persistent cry for cultural liberation similar to ant others elsewhere.

In *The Dragon Can’t Dance*, it is the habitual practice of Miss Cleothilda and Philo to meet in Cleothilda’s two-room apartment strictly on invitation. The exploitation of Philo concerning the rooms is connected to the haughty and selfish behaviour of Miss Cleothilda, to satisfy her seasonal mood in preparation for the carnival. Philo’s movement within the apartment is restricted to the sitting room. Whereas, Sylvia goes to Guy’s room on volition after the first prompting by her mother. Unlike Philo and Cleothilda, that of Guy and Sylvia is not seasonal but perpetuated throughout the year. However, Philo’s infatuation which is perceived as a weakness, is what Philo considers good enough to strengthen Guy and Sylvia’s relationship. Philo observes that Guy may not value the beauty and potential of Sylvia, just like the proverbial blind man and the garden. This is because, to Guy, anything that lacks pecuniary value is piffle. As such, ‘he would destroy without even knowing it, for how could a man who is blind (and foolish too) avoid trampling on the plants in a garden through which he walks believing it to be a highway’ (p. 208). The ‘where’ of the couple’s relationship is in their rooms in the city slum. In opposition, Bissibi’ngui and Yassigui’ndja in *Batouala*, at the beginning of their amorous relationship, engage in an illegal love-making spree in a nearby forest. This clearly exemplifies the connectedness of man’s activities to rustic nature. It was after the couple had had some fun in the forest that they shifted their rendezvous to *Batouala*’s house, even after his death. Maran argues that the exploitation of nature is depicted in the image of Yassigui’ndja. Lovelace, on his own part, argues that what was obtained in the pre-colonial Caribbean was also obtainable after contact with the whites, but in a different place: a city slum.

*Batouala*’s dissimilarity with other texts lies broadly in the agrarian, simple life of the people advocated by the first wave of Ecocriticism. It is a reflection of the rural experience of the people of the Caribbean before the coming of the European colonizers. The differences in the placeness of human relationships; and man’s relationship with nature that are located between the three texts and *Batouala*, ironically account for their convergence as one in the context of the second wave, in the common task of raising environmental awareness. This is bringing to



bear on our understanding of the texts the collapse of the slippery boundary separating nature and environment.

*The Dragon Can't Dance*, unlike *The Year in San Fernando* and *Jane's Career* expresses the suffering that binds the male characters especially together as portrayed in Fisheye, Aldrick, Philo and Pariag. Fisheye is pauperized such that he has nothing to do to earn money. This resulted in his brutality to extort money from people on the street corner. Aldrick is immersed in knitting the dragon costume for the carnival, an enterprise that is not lucrative. Philo is engrossed in producing Calypso to express nostalgia and inspire the deprived people to take their destinies into their hands. Pariag is involved in selling petty items until he breaks away to start something meaningful. Aldrick, Fisheye, Sylvia, and Cleothilda with other characters, each represent particular aspects of human suffering, for instance, prostitution, rebellion, envy and brutality. These social consequences are linked to the natural world around them. The thoughts and actions of these characters represent the whole deprived people of the Caribbean agitating for self-assertion and regeneration.

There is dissimilarity in Jane's mother's gift of fruits and yams; from Francis' mother to register her presence and care in nature. However, implicit in Jane's reaction outside the understanding of parental love expressed in the fruits, is the de-motivating social condition in the house of Mrs Mason which the gift items could not ameliorate. The objects of nature are not used to frame human actions but are imbued with meanings that reverberate beyond their literal presentation. The sudden departure of Jane to avoid the inhibiting social condition attests to the ineffectuality of her mother's gesture in nature. Ironically, women are involved in the feminization of poverty as female servants experience harsh conditions in their servitude to their mistresses, comparable to slavery and, or the exploitation of nature in the plantation period. It is the same poor condition of living that prompted Mary and Elizabeth to expend their labour on the coffee plantation, thus illustrating the feminization of poverty. *Jane's Career* shows how women are 'subjected to docile and uneventful life from childhood' (Ngwaba 2020, p. 96).

*The Dragon Can't Dance* further distinguishes itself from the other texts based on its physical setting in the city slum. The inability of the liberated slaves to cope with the unfavourable economic policy of city life necessitated their withdrawal to the ghetto, commensurate with their social status. Meanwhile, the rich class occupies the central and other well-developed arts of the town where there are available social amenities. On the contrary, *Batouala's* peculiarity lies in its pre-colonial setting. It is the influx of the imperialists that changed the agrarian nature of human existence in Ubangui-Shari.

As a subsequent development in a reaction to the unfavourable environmental condition, Lovelace uses his characters, especially Aldrick, Fisheye, Philo, Small and Pariag and a few other slum fellows to argue for collectivism in the struggle for change, particularly holding the police hostage as a form of remonstrance against their drab social condition. These characters are of different racial backgrounds, but they de-emphasize the cause of individuality and pursue that of generality because they are bound together by the same historical experience. That is why the characters, especially Miss Cleothilda Alverick repeatedly say 'all of we is one'. Regardless of their ancestral home – Africa, India, China and Caribbean Islands – they are bound together by the same environmental issues which when addressed would positively redefine their social status. The spirit of collectivism is not in *The Year in San Fernando* and *Jane's Career* which show male and female individuals respectively trying to carve a niche for



themselves in the face of hardship. The collective struggle in *The Dragon Can't Dance* shows some elements of similarity to the one depicted in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* (1977), where the exploited majority shows collectivism for a positive change. Contrariwise, Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria, of different racial identities exhibit, in a negative way, collectivism in the exploitation of the less privileged.

Concerning the literary tropes of the texts, the figures of speech and imagery used are drawn from nature. However, one significant figure of speech, onomatopoeia distinguishes *The Year in San Fernando* from the other novels. A few of the numerous examples used suffice: 'screeching' and 'booming' describes the sounds of Mrs Chandles and Mr Chandles' voices in their row at home. Also, the 'rumbling' sound of thunder and 'tap tap' of the rain are phonological representations used by Anthony to express sound effects. This employment of sound effects of nature is deficient in other texts. Importantly as a mark of difference, *The Year in San Fernando* and *Jane's Career* scarcely make use of animal imageries either to embody human qualities or epitomize unpleasant human conditions. One can suggest that the three texts essentially dwell on post-colonial Caribbean life that hardly has little or no connection to wild animals in their socio-cultural interactions. But, *Batouala* is pre-colonial, hence the life of the characters is embedded in rustic nature, and their mutual interactions, particularly with the fauna. This is demonstrated in their creative imagination and the combined memories of African homes with plantation experience to bring folk expressions and folktales, using animals as characters in the stories. The tales as celebrations of human spirits are filled with emotions of sorrow, love and hope. An instance out many are the tale of M'bala, the elephant and Gato, the chicken. Maran shows that the people are immersed in safari life rich in wild animals. Apparently, Maran chooses imageries of non-human life to teach certain morality, human strength and weakness. In general, it confirms the perception of the natural that shapes the literary trope.

The novels link their ecological stance to the post-plantation through the pre-colonial life of the Caribbeans. But, the quest for ties with the root necessitated Maran's literary sensibility to locate French Equatorial Africa as part of the locale of *Batouala*. Obviously, other texts are imbued with African nuances, but it is only *Batouala* that exhibits much affinity with the African experience compared with the other texts investigated. Therefore, nature, either raw or transformed, tends to bolster the claim that human history is implicated in natural history, and that Africa looms large in the Caribbean imagination. *Batouala*, being much of a pre-colonial experience, exemplifies the embeddedness of ritual in nature, unlike the other texts. For instance, the people have a way of tracing the cause of the 'untimely' death of their sons and obituary announcements to the general public of Ubangui-Shari. An instance is located in the death of Batouala's father where 'they opened the throat of a black hen' (p. 82) to cast a spell on whosoever is instrumental to his death. By implication, the fate of the black hen would be replicated through spiritual means on Yassigui'ndja, the principal suspect. Yassigui'ndja believes however that Batouala is behind the diabolic machination to ruin her life like the black hen, in revenge for her coquetry. Also, the death of Coquelin was announced by the shiny black bird that hovered in the sky at his death. The point of emphasis not found in the other texts is that the hen and the bird are united in colour sameness that portends sorrow. This symbol of the oneness and unity between the blacks in Africa and those in the Caribbean Islands with related colonial historical experiences of exploitation of their labour and environment.

In the evocation of socio-cultural experiences in relation to nature, the aspect of superstition is silent in *The Year in San Fernando*, *Jane's Career* and *The Dragon Can't Dance*. But,





*Batouala* explicates the embeddedness of superstitious beliefs in nature. Superstitious beliefs may be didactic, to teach sociocultural values that would develop the individual and society. 'Women', for example, 'who wanted to be mothers could eat neither goat flesh nor turtle meat. Those who fed themselves could be stricken by sterility while those who ate of the turtle would have only prematurely old children' (p.22). The traditional belief of being struck with infertility and premature children is linked to the people's natural world. However, the substantive connectedness between the cause and the effect of the belief is still hollow but has become established in society for certain moral lessons.

All the novels celebrate human existence in relation to terrestrial, avian and aquatic nature. Aquatic nature is portrayed particularly in the connectedness of the fisherman, Macoude to the fish that he eats with *Batouala* and *Bissibi'ngui*; and Mrs Mason's likeness for the red fish, not Carite. Avian nature has to do specifically with the black bird and black hen, while terrestrial involves the connectedness of human activities to the earth, especially husbandry (farming and keeping of animals).

## CONCLUSION

The selected Caribbean novels argue via the prism of Ecocriticism on the relationship between man and the natural world. Events that show similarity and dissimilarity between and among the texts are analysed to point out the common thrust of creating ecological consciousness, that is, people's sensitivity to the degraded environment and human health. Put differently, the differences in the treatment of the subject matter, time and locale of the texts strengthen their common stance of awakening people's consciousness of environmental issues and human existence. It would therefore serve as a stimulus for a re-organisation of Caribbean political thought. It is established that the authors attempt to open up a community of people connected to land, water and animals from socio-cultural and economic angles. They argue that there is a confluence of environment and identity formation in the understanding of Caribbean literature. The selected texts in the vast disparity of time and space show a comprehensive representation of the shades of common historical experiences across the Caribbean Islands.

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