JEAN RHYS

Jean Rhys has long been central to debates in feminist, modernist, Caribbean, British and post-colonial writing. Elaine Savory's study, which incorporates and goes beyond previous critical approaches, is a critical reading of Rhys's entire oeuvre, including the stories and autobiography, and is informed by recently released unpublished manuscripts by Rhys. Designed both for the serious scholar and those unfamiliar with her writing, Savory's book insists on the importance of a Caribbean-centred approach to Rhys, and shows how this context profoundly affects her literary style. Informed by contemporary arguments on race, gender, class and nationality, Savory explores Rhys's stylistic innovations – her use of colours, her exploitation of the trope of performance, her experiments with creative non-fiction, her use of humour and her incorporation of the metaphysical into her texts. This study offers a comprehensive account of the life and work of this most complex and enigmatic of writers.

ELAINE SAVORY teaches at the New School for Social Research in New York. She has written extensively on African and Caribbean literatures, especially women's writing. She is co-editor of *Out of Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature.*

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JEAN RHYS

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To Robert

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Preface

Jean Rhys and her texts have been interpreted by different critics and theorists in strikingly different ways. She and they are in those readings: Caribbean, English, European; feminist and anti-feminist; elite, working class, marginal; white and white Creole; outsider and insider; ageless and of her time. But one identity can hold all of these contradictory facets: Rhys is a Caribbean writer. In her very complexity and contradictoriness, in important aspects of her writing style and in her fictional portrayal of race, ethnicity, class, gender and nationality, she is best understood within the richly diverse tradition of Caribbean literature and culture. The scribal aspect of this tradition has largely come into being as part of local and global anti- or post-colonial movements but equally as much as an important component of nation-building. At this time, almost the turn of the century, Caribbean writing reflects both the extensive migration of Caribbean peoples to Europe, America and Canada and also the need to confirm and define nationality and regional identity.[1]

Rhys reflects two major facets of Caribbean culture: a multi-faceted cosmopolitanism which searches out complexity and a desire for home and belonging which seeks an uncomplicated self-definition. Like Caribbean culture, her writing is both metropolitan and anti-metropolitan, both colonial and anti-colonial, both racist and anti-racist, both conventional and subversive. In the best and most creative ways, her textuality demonstrates a refusal to be absolutely coherent and therefore an acceptance of unresolved ambiguity, ambiguity which permits creative innovation and which is in effect politically anarchist, in the sense of resisting centralised and authoritative readings of experience.

There are controversial questions with which I am very much concerned. The first is the old chestnut question of whether Rhys is a Caribbean writer. This may appear to have been largely resolved already: my own statement of Rhys's affiliation is unequivocal. But there are still those who either deny Rhys's Caribbean identity or are largely ignorant of it. However most controversy about Rhys's placement derives from Caribbean discourse which is not only about Rhys, or writers, but about the major work of defining still developing identities in the face of an increasingly international world. Recently, as I discuss in chapter 9, the major Barbadian poet and cultural theorist Kamau Brathwaite has called Rhys the 'Helen of our wars', meaning the contemporary intellectual culture wars in the Caribbean which are fought to determine which affiliations and directions will predominate as the Caribbean moves towards the next century. Rhys then is absolutely at the centre of these major questions: her importance, like Helen's, has as much to do with geopolitical relations as with her indisputable talent and literary contribution.

The second question is closely related to the first: it asks what exactly we mean if we say that Jean Rhys is a Caribbean or West Indian writer.[2] Caribbean identity is various and political in especially complex ways. It is not monolithic but infinitely various and located not only in the region itself but importantly elsewhere: Canada and the United States both have important West Indian communities. Each major literary talent contributes to her or his culture but also helps to redefine it. Considering Rhys has made critics more aware of the complexities of white Creole identity.

Despite Louis James's very early placement of Rhys as Caribbean (1978), a good many critics have chosen to ignore this, though Brathwaite (1974), O'Connor (1986); Emery (1990) and Gregg (1995) as well as post-colonial scholars such as Peter Hulme and Sue Thomas have sought to demonstrate that understanding Rhys's Caribbean affiliation is critical to realising her project. It is only recently that the various camps of Rhys criticism, feminist, British, Caribbean, post-colonial, have begun to converse.

My own interest in Rhys is a writerly one, and I am primarily concerned with the ways in which Rhys's Caribbean identity

translates into textuality, especially given her isolation from Caribbean cultural locales after her teens. She began to write well before decolonisation movements became evident and Caribbean literature in English established its canon.[3]

I write also as a feminist critic informed by the Caribbean.[4] I know that a woman writer, as the twentieth century closes, still often writes outside or across cultural borders, and the more information we can acquire about how she writes and where and when, the more strength we give to women writing: this means I am very much interested in the context of the Rhys texts, i.e. in Rhys's writing life. But I have used biographical material about Jean Rhys cautiously, always with an awareness that when the source is Rhys herself it is wise to remember that she created the narrative of her life, in her autobiography, letters or articles, as an ongoing fictional text. It was true in the sense of being honest in its interpretation, its reading, of her experience: it did not attempt to be literally faithful to small details and to the shapelessness of actual life. It is mostly a mistake to *simply* conflate Rhys's life and her texts.

Though I do agree with Veronica Gregg (1995) that Rhys's account of her writing experience is a structured narrative, I see in it two levels: on the relatively coherent official version which Rhys left as finished or near-finished text and the other, which ruptures the first, a fragmented series of much less edited statements. In chapter 1, I trace these levels of the story of writing, especially the importance of Rhys's formative years in Dominica and the ways in which these informed her mature self-construction. There follow seven chapters which each deal with an important issue in relation to Rhys's textuality and its Caribbean identity: her characteristic writing style; her construction of gender and sexuality; her use of colours as a fictional code and its connection to her construction of race; humour and the spiritual or metaphysical; landscape; story-telling; autobiography and performance. The argument of each chapter is organised around a specific text or texts, but applies generally to all of Rhys's writing. The last chapter is concerned with variant readings of Rhys by critics and scholars working out of different ideological and cultural locations and is framed by the recent important

exchange between Kamau Brathwaite and British post-colonial theorist Peter Hulme.

Rhys's early instinct as a writer was for poetry and drama. Her fictional texts, spare and economical, often containing elision, are connected by a series of images or technical devices which function as sustained codes, as is common in the work of major poets. Rhys saw theatrical possibilities in some of her texts, which has been borne out by the effectiveness of various radio, stage and film adaptations.[5] She first wrote *Quartet* as a play.[6] Dramatic dialogue, like poetry, works as much by omission as by explicit statement: pauses and silences are extremely important in the meaning of the whole. Rhys's style matured over the length of her career but did not substantively change. Therefore I have set out the major contributing elements of it in the chapter on her early work.

In a departure from other Rhys criticism, I have separated the short stories from what I regard as personal essays or creative non-fiction, and have discussed the latter along with Rhys's autobiography *Smile Please* (1979). I link her whole writing career to her love of the theatre and argue that writing became a substitute milieu for the stage and that autobiography became performance.

Despite my deep interest in Rhys, I have at times felt some difficulty during this project. There has been such an enormous amount of writing on her, that taken in the context of Caribbean literary scholarship, this is an embarrassment of riches as well as a welcome tribute to Rhys's importance, because the fact is that there are few substantial studies of other major anglophone Caribbean writers, such as Brathwaite, Lamming, Walcott, Selvon, Naipaul, Harris, many of whom began to publish their major work before Rhys completed *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In 1979, at Rhys's death, only two book-length studies had appeared, James (1978) and Staley (1979). By 1998, as I complete this, there is an enormous amount of work: a good number of full-length studies all or partly devoted to Rhys's work, a biography, numerous unpublished dissertations, several important bibliographies and a collection of critical essays. There are also many chapters in books on Rhys as well as hundreds of articles, reviews, interviews and profiles. Scholars exchange views via the *Jean Rhys Review* and the

University of Tulsa's Rhys Listserve. In short there is a Rhys industry: certainly enough to make a full-fledged conference on Rhys alone a feasible proposition.

In understanding this, it is not enough to recognise Rhys's outstanding writing ability. There are also some historical and political factors at work. Rhys was, as I will discuss later, fortunate to be encouraged and first published by Ford Madox Ford, then a very powerful literary figure, a man who could open doors. He ensured her important reviewer attention by writing a lengthy preface to her first collection of stories, *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927). Many artists discovered Paris was an aesthetic and social haven in the 1920s, including many marginalised in their own country, like Josephine Baker (Benstock 1987: 13).[7] For women artists in general, Paris provided a creative space: but Rhys was herself very isolated for the most part from that community.[8]

By the time *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published (1966), the feminist movement was gaining ground following on the civil rights movement, and by the height of the feminist movement in America and Europe (c. 1970–85), Rhys aroused much feminist interest. Finally, in the past twenty years or so, the development of post-colonial studies has meant that Rhys has again become a central literary icon.

I do think it is imperative that there be a much greater balance between criticism on Rhys and that devoted to other major Caribbean writers. But Rhys deserves to be read as an early professional Caribbean writer, experiencing exile well before the first major generation of Caribbean literary exiles of the 1950s. Like Rhys, I have both a healthy scepticism towards borders, boundaries and nationalities and a resistance to strategies which reduce human complexity. The Caribbean, at best, offers a space within which conventional identities are both subverted and restored, in which both the impulses to leave and to come home are equally understood.

Reading Rhys through the lens of the Caribbean intensifies an awareness of the complexity and variety of Caribbean literature: Rhys is clearly part of the family, not the lost relative living away. Like V. S. Naipaul and Jamaica Kincaid, she provokes radically different responses in readers of different cultural and political

locations. Naipaul has a tendency to criticise all but the British and Kincaid to criticise mainly the British: both deconstruct their immediate cultural community with razor-sharp intelligence but their polemical texts frequently stereotype those they marginalise. Like Naipaul, Rhys can at times use her skills as a writer to portray in disturbing ways how a prejudiced consciousness works; like Kincaid, Rhys relies on the voice or consciousness of a young, extremely clear-sighted woman in most of her fiction. But Rhys's contradictions prevent her fiction from becoming polemical: in the end she disturbs in more interesting ways.

Like Kamau Brathwaite, Sam Selvon, Paule Marshall and Nourbese Philip, she explores her own particular racial and ethnic identity. Like Derek Walcott and Michelle Cliff, she textualises a pained but powerful affiliation with Europe, source of both literary recognition and the damage caused by colonialism. Like George Lamming and Erna Brodber,[9] she conveys a culture through the journey of a child to adulthood. Her concerns about insoluble divisions caused by race contrast with Wilson Harris's challenge to essentialisms in his mythic construction of liminal identities, but in writing, controversially, the first-person narrative of a black woman, in 'Let Them Call It Jazz' (first published 1962), she opened the door to the idea that a Caribbean writer can attempt to cross over racial and gender boundaries, something which important Caribbean writers of the next generation, Robert Antoni and Caryl Phillips, have claimed and used themselves.[10] Antoni spent the five years it took him to write his second novel, *Blessed Is the Fruit* (1996), with a copy of *Wide Sargasso Sea* on his work table.

Caribbean texts clearly read differently to insiders, those who know the culture and thus can understand nuances, but all readers are biased, partial and contradictory in their expectations: all readings are to some extent flawed by the shortcomings of the reader. Mine are no exception. I have tried to read Rhys in the context of the Caribbean, as I read the Caribbean.

I think no apology is needed for the fact that I have written this study because I admire Rhys as a working writer: nor because I have tried to hold a careful balance between the academic and the writerly in my style. Jamaican poets Olive Senior and Lorna

Goodison have produced elegies on Rhys, Senior's about a pilgrimage she made to Rhys's grave in England. Both poets wish their literary ancestor peace and express their affection. In that spirit, and as a poet myself, I offer this work in gratitude for Rhys's discovery that it is possible to defy prescriptions and to find home in writing itself.

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Finally, I am immensely grateful that over many years, the Caribbean has adopted me, kept me challenged, alert, usefully conflicted, silenced productively at times. It was in the Caribbean, naturally, that I first recognised I needed to pay more attention to Jean Rhys. It is to the Caribbean that I bring my work always, with many, many thanks.

Abbreviations and note on the text

PUBLISHED TEXTS

ALMM	*After Leaving Mr MacKenzie*
CSS	*Collected Short Stories*
GM, M	*Good Morning, Midnight*
L	*Letters*
Q	*Quartet*
SIOL	*Sleep It Off Lady*
SP	*Smile Please*
TAB-L	*Tigers Are Better-Looking*
TLB	*The Left Bank*
VITD	*Voyage in the Dark*
WSS	*Wide Sargasso Sea*

UNPUBLISHED MANUSCRIPTS

BEB	Black Exercise Book
GEB	Green Exercise Book
OEB	Orange Exercise Book
REB	Red Exercise Book
'TS'	'Triple Sec'

LOCATION OF RHYS MANUSCRIPTS

University of Tulsa, Special Collections, is always indicated as UTC. I have, at the request of the Tulsa Collection curators and archivists, not indicated file numbers as the collection is likely to be constantly reordered and refiled for some time.

The term 'coloured' as used in this study in relation to race is a West Indian usage signifying a person of mixed race.

The term West Indian is used to signify the anglophone Caribbean. The term Caribbean signifies the the whole region.

Rhys's diaries, letters and unpublished manuscripts have unusual punctuation when they are punctuated at all. When quoting from these documents, I have been faithful to Rhys's original texts.

Chronology

1824	James Potter Lockhart, Rhys's maternal greatgrandfather, buys 'Genever' (now spelled Geneva) plantation in the British colony of Dominica.
1831	Legal discrimination on the grounds of skin colour abolished in Dominica.
1833	29 August slavery abolished in British law. This was effective from 1 August 1834 in West Indian territories.
1838	Coloured majority in Dominica House of Assembly, which would control the legislature until the introduction of Crown Colony government in the late 1890s.
1881	Williams Rees Williams, Rhys's father, arrives in Dominica from Britain to practise medicine.
1882	Marriage of Rhys's parents, William Rees Williams and Minna Lockhart.
1890	Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams born in Roseau, Dominica, 24 August, fifth child and fourth surviving child of the family.
1901	Colonial Office approves Administrator Hesketh Bell's plan for an 'Imperial Road' to open up the interior of Dominica for development into plantations.
1907	Ella Williams leaves Dominica for England and attends the Perse School, Cambridge.
1909	Leaves Perse School for Tree's School, now RADA.
1910	William Rees Williams dies.
1909–10	Joins chorus of *Our Miss Gibbs*. Calls herself Ella Gray.
1910	Meets Lancelot Grey Hugh Smith.
1912	End of the affair with Smith.

1913	Writes her account of the affair in diaries, which will eventually become raw material for fiction.
1914–18	First World War.
1919	In Holland, marries Willem Johan Marie (Jean) Lenglet, 30 April.
1920	Rhys's son William Owen dies, three weeks old, Paris, 19 January.
1922	Rhys's daughter Maryvonne born 22 May, Ukkel, near Brussels.
1924	Meets Ford Madox Ford in Paris. Lenglet is arrested for misappropriation of funds; serves time in prison in France. Rhys's relationship with Ford Madox Ford begins. Ford Madox Ford publishes Rhys's short story 'Vienne' in *the transatlantic review*.[1]
1927	*The Left Bank and Other Stories*, with a preface by Ford Madox Ford. Leaves Paris for London.
1928	*Postures* (later titled *Quartet*).
1931	*After Leaving Mr MacKenzie*.
1933	Divorce from Jean Lenglet.
1934	*Voyage in the Dark*. Marries Leslie Tilden Smith.
1936	Returns to Dominica for a three-week visit.
1939	*Good Morning, Midnight*.
1939–45	Second World War. Rhys is separated from her daughter from 1939 until 1945.
1941	Edgar Mittelholzer, *Corentyne Thunder*.
1945	Leslie Tilden-Smith dies.
1947	Marries Max Hamer.
1949	Vic Reid, *New Day*. Rhys charged with assaulting neighbours; spends a few days in Holloway Prison.
1950	Max Hamer tried for misappropriation of funds: serves time in England.
1952	Sam Selvon, *A Brighter Sun*.
1953	Roger Mais, *The Hills Were Joyful Together*. Phyllis Shand Allfrey, *The Orchid House*.

	Phyllis Shand Allfrey returns to Dominica from England to co-found the Dominica Labour Party.
	George Lamming, *In The Castle of My Skin*.
1957	V. S. Naipaul, *The Mystic Masseur*.
1958	Jan Carew, *Black Midas*.
	Federation of the West Indies established: Phyllis Shand Allfrey becomes Minister of Labour and Social Affairs.
1959	Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.
	Race riots in Britain in Nottingham and Notting Hill, London.
1962	Sylvia Wynter, *The Hills of Hebron*.
	Derek Walcott, *In a Green Night*.
	Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock*.
	Federation of the West Indies collapses.
1965	Max Hamer dies.
1966	*Wide Sargasso Sea*.
1967	Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Rights of Passage*.
	Dominica becomes an Associated State of Britain.
1968	*Tigers Are Better-Looking*.
1975	*My Day*.
1976	*Sleep It Off Lady*.
1978	Dominican Independence celebrated, 3 November.
1979	Jean Rhys dies, 14 May, Dorset, England.
	Smile Please.
1984	*Letters*.
1987	*The Collected Short Stories*.