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Abstract
Since the publication of Wide Sargasso Sea in 1966 the novels and short stories of Jean Rhys have enjoyed an extraordinary revival, while the authoress, herself, has managed to complement her work by two collections of short stories, Tigers Are Better-Looking and Sleep It Off, Lady, and by the unfinished autobiography, Smile Please. It is one of the tragic ironies of life that her last work should be an unfinished autobiography because it seems that everything else she wrote was but a prelude to the 'real' life of Jean Rhys.
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The Existentialist Dimension in the Novels of Jean Rhys

Since the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966 the novels and short stories of Jean Rhys have enjoyed an extraordinary revival, while the authoress, herself, has managed to complement her work by two collections of short stories, *Tigers Are Better-Looking* and *Sleep It Off, Lady*, and by the unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please*. It is one of the tragic ironies of life that her last work should be an unfinished autobiography because it seems that everything else she wrote was but a prelude to the 'real' life of Jean Rhys. Throughout her work we find a conscious attempt to explore personal experience in the mode of fiction. This subjective concern according to Louis James is, indeed, her apology for writing. It is therefore only natural that the host of reviews and the two critical studies that have been published as a sort of compensation for the lack of previous response to her work should either try to see the work of Jean Rhys from the feminist angle (implicit in its subject matter) or interpret it in terms of the West Indian background of its author. The criticism of Wilson Harris and those critics influenced by him constitutes a third critical tendency, which has been highly perceptive and analytically illuminating, relying as it does on the original theories on imaginative creation which have been expounded by the Guyanese novelist and critic over the years.

However, it seems to me that a major dimension of Rhys's work has been neglected so far. Here I am thinking of the intrinsic development from an overriding fatalist 'vision' to an existentialist treatment of this 'vision'. My thesis is that such a progression does actually take place, and I will illustrate this by referring to points of narrative technique and quotations from Rhys's novels. There is a major danger in this kind of approach, however, which must be emphasized right from the start. One of the essential 'warnings' expressed by Jean Rhys is that of the danger of categorization. Categories, although helpful, are permanent objects of
fear and representatives of repression to Rhys’s heroines, and it is only to
be expected that the anti-rationalist Rhys would not accept them as far
as her own production was concerned. In other words, we should not be
misled by the relativism of our own ordering and so mistake the
secondary classification (whether it be that of the literary product or of
criticism) for what it incompletely reflects, existence itself. Life is essen-
tially a tragic experience, which cannot be ‘boiled down’ to any philo-
sophical doctrine, a point accentuated by Rhys both in her work and in
private interviews with her.

*Quartet* (the original British title was *Postures*) was Rhys’s first novel-
istic attempt representing her version of the ‘ménage à trois’ with Ford
and Stella Bowen. It followed her ‘sketches of bohemian life’ in the
collection of short stories, called *The Left Bank & Other Stories* (1927).
*Quartet* (1928) is fairly traditional in its realistic analysis of characters
and incidents. But already in this novel, a third person narrative, the
heroine’s mind, becomes the focus of the whole story, and her inability to
conform to the conventions of Western civilization and consequent pre-
dilection for the social outcast are prominent elements in her process of
individuation. The strongly fatalist conception of ‘Marya Zelli’ is brought
towards a tragic climax in the final section of the novel, where she,
already deserted by her lover (Heidler = Ford), experiences a second
rejection at the hands of her husband (Stephen) only to watch him
leaving with another woman. This conclusion, as often noted, verges on
romantic melodrama, and does, in fact, counteract the otherwise pre-
dominant preoccupation with a realistic analysis of the main character’s
mind. There is, however, a significant feature of *Quartet* that should be
noted. Alongside the confessional honesty, evident in the application of
the experiences with the Fords, we find a fictive ‘covering-up’ of all
personal aspects with the implicit purpose of rendering a portrait of the
desolate individual, caged in an alien and unsympathetic world, as is
metaphorically stated by the image of the fox:

> There was a young fox in a cage at the end of the zoo — a cage perhaps three yards
> long. Up and down it ran, up and down, and Marya imagined that each time it
> turned it did so with a certain hopefulness, as if it thought escape was possible.
> Then, of course, there were the bars. It would strike its nose, turn and run again.
> Up and down, up and down, ceaselessly.

This ‘Sisyfox’ may serve as an adequate emblem of the main character of
*Quartet*. The paradox of confession alongside fictitious ‘covering-up’ was
to remain a persistent feature of Rhys’s work, and it served a specific

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function. Whilst preserving at least the possibility of universalization of personal experience, and yet not denying the particularity of the latter, it pointed towards a potential general significance. In this way, the whole work became neither classicist nor romantic, but deliberately both.

In *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930) the main character, Julia Martin, was to carry on those traits previously attributed to Marya Zelli, just as other characters are easily identifiable reiterations and elaborations of those found in *Quartet* (see e.g. Mackenzie = Heidler). It is typical of Rhys's early novels that, generally, she works with a set of stock characters who are drawn from her own life and whose complexity increases in each successive novel. Basically, there is not much development to be seen in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* although a couple of new characters widen our perception of the heroine's background. The very movement of the narrative, from Paris to London and back to Paris, indicates the central image of the novel, that of the cycle, representing the circular movement of existence, in which progressive development is only carving out the essence of past experiences. This fundamental 'vision' of the novel is brought home from the beginning, where the drifting Julia accidentally sees the picture of

"La vie est un spiral, flottant dans l'espace, que les hommes grimpent et redescendent très très sérieusement".\(^5\)

Julia is obsessed with reflections of the past, always representing something lost, the way it was lost, and leading us to the resulting circularity of the present. An element of guilt occurs in Julia's self-conception. The childhood story of the butterfly (pp. 115-6) is thus a non-mythological re-telling of the story of the Fall containing all the traditional elements in the unavoidable existential alienation from nature (i.e. possessiveness — self-conscious action — self-legitimation when blamed — feeling of guilt and regret — and finally, the pervading fear of nothing (*Der Angst*). This guilt dimension does not disturb the general pattern, depicting Julia as a victim of determinant factors. As in the Christian doctrine of Original Sin the Fall cannot be evaded. The feeling of geographical and cultural estrangement in Europe is hinted at by the story of the Brazilian mother, which is a variation of the West Indian theme of *Voyage in the Dark*, but it is obvious that this estrangement is only part of a much more radical existential desorientation as far as Julia is concerned. Furthermore, she is very much aware of what she is being reduced to within the social context, but apart from momentary
outbursts against her own predicament her domineering passivity makes her accept the suffering involved event to the extent at times of seeing a possible release as being conditioned by her ability to suffer:

And I was there, like a ghost. And then I was frightened, and yet I knew that if I could get to the end of what I was feeling it would be the truth about myself and about the world and about everything that one puzzles and pains about all the time. (ALMM, p. 41)

Being at odds with life and with the others is not only a negative tension, and Julia is able to see the ambiguity of her position, in this way also drawing strength from the contrarity:

Of course, you clung on because you were obstinate! You clung on because people tried to shove you off, despised you, and were rude to you. So you clung on. Left quite alone, you would have let go of your own accord. (ALMM, p. 130)

Voyage in the Dark (1934), Rhys's own favourite novel, is really an education novel, technically and thematically deepening perceptions made before. In this novel it becomes clear that the different social roles of the heroine must be subsumed under the existential fatality vision! The poor, female outcast in a man's world and the West Indian's estranged life in England represent ways of being that disclose the inevitably tragic dimension of life itself. The novel is about Anna Morgan's initiation into the world of England and into adulthood. These two initiations parallel one another and are repeated twice, bringing out the central idea of life's deception. The 'voyage' symbolically refers to Anna's subjective existence, and it presupposes the idea of a ship, standing for all the determinant factors of her existence, whether they be social, economic, or genetic. The 'dark', the spatial dimension, in which the 'voyage' takes place, principally represents England, but on a more general level also the West Indies, for to Anna these contain the embryo of the conflicts she will eventually experience in England. This is made clear by the fusion of past and present events, whenever Anna undertakes a psychological regression to her childhood.

Voyage in the Dark marks a significant development in narrative technique. We now have a first person narrator, indicative of a growing degree of internalization. This is further substantiated by innovation in the depiction of the main character. In her attempt to penetrate the psychology of her heroine Rhys applies a stream-of-consciousness technique that enables her to fuse impressionist, expressionist, and surrealist devices in order to create a maximum of what I would call psychological
realism. One major example must be singled out because in a concentrated form it brings together the essential ideas of the novel. Existence is primarily tragic and filled with deceptions, and as it is a process, all retreat is futile, and so is all compensation. Religion (in the shape of 'the boy bishop') is there because of the tragedy of existence, which in turn defines the compensatory function of religion, making it inadequate as compensation by its very nature, and pointing towards the basic experience of the absurdity of life:

I dreamt that I was on a ship. From the deck you could see small islands — dolls of islands — and the ship was sailing in a doll's sea, transparent as glass.

Somebody said in my ear, 'That's your island that you talk such a lot about'.

And the ship was sailing very close to an island, which was home except that the trees were all wrong. These were English trees, their leaves trailing in the water. I tried to catch hold of a branch and step ashore, but the deck of the ship expanded. Somebody had fallen overboard.

And there was a sailor carrying a child's coffin. He lifted the lid, bowed and said, 'The boy bishop', and a little dwarf with a bald head sat up in the coffin. He was wearing a priest's robes. He had a large blue ring on his third finger. 'I ought to kiss the ring', I thought in my dream, 'and then he'll start saying *In nomine Patris, Filii...*'

When he stood up the boy bishop was like a doll. His large, light eyes in a narrow, cruel face rolled like a doll's as you lean it from one side to the other. He bowed from right to left as the sailor held him up.

But I was thinking, 'What's overboard?' and I had that awful dropping of the heart.

I was still trying to walk up the deck and get ashore. I took huge, climbing, flying strides among confused figures. I was powerless and very tired, but I had to go on. And the dream rose into a climax of meaninglessness, fatigue and powerlessness, and the deck was heaving up and down, and when I woke up everything was still heaving up and down.⁶

Like previous heroines Anna Morgan is a victim of fate, to be understood as conditioning in the widest sense of the term. And like the others she is continually being overpowered by fate, which is constantly threatening to disintegrate ('drown') her, both physically and spiritually.

In _Good Morning, Midnight_ (1939) the application of the interior monologue (stream-of-consciousness) technique is carried to an extreme. The great extent of internalized analysis of the main character makes this novel the most subjective of all. We find a constellation of two natural cycles, that of day and that of human life, and, as usual, the emphasis is on the tragic absurdity of existence, in which moments of happiness and beauty are only painful reminders of the dominant experience of loss. But the female heroine, Sasha Jansen, is a much more composite
character than those we have seen before. She has been brought to Paris (the scene of her youth with its happiness and failures) for a fortnight, and through the nine days we follow her she re-experiences rejections on both private and social levels with an almost ritualistic precision. She is now locked in a conflict between prevailing disillusion and illusive hope, reflected in the symbolic value attached to the problem: Will tomorrow ever come? The process of life itself makes it impossible for her to remain in a kind of ‘Buddhist’ ‘heaven of indifference’ (p. 76); life is commitment, and this makes the self-legitimizing philosophy of detachment that Nicholas Delmar represents inadequate. Still Sasha finds herself completely desolate:

I have no pride — no pride, no name, no face, no country. I don’t belong anywhere. Too sad, too sad ... there I am, like one of those straws which floats round the edge of a whirlpool and is gradually sucked into the centre, the dead centre, where everything is stagnant, everything is calm. 

Although Sasha has no optimism either on the personal or political levels about eventual basic changes of existential conditions, there are, however, different ways of handling the overwhelming problem of the power of fate (the power of conditioning). Through her acute self-awareness she is able to see herself actively partaking in bringing about the tragedy of human existence, and thus the portrait of the female heroine as primarily (and almost exclusively) a victim becomes less prominent than was the case in *Voyage in the Dark*. There are no metaphysical consolations, but the acknowledged guilt has a major importance as far as human relations are concerned. The sequence in which Sasha is playing her game with the gigolo, who is in turn playing his game with her, clearly illustrates that self-possession does, in fact, counteract the wish of security that motivates it; i.e. life is essentially insecure. To apply Heidegger’s terminology: The human being is living *ein uneigentliches Leben* (and this is guilt), but called back by his/her own conscience (out of a *Vorverständnis vom eigentlichen Leben*) he/she is momentarily capable of leaving behind all securities and lives in *Hingabe* (unconditioned devotion). This is exactly what Sasha does when after the break-down of the relationship with the gigolo she manages to accept ‘the man in the dressing-gown’, who is both an emblem of the enemy and in his relationship with Sasha an interpretation of the origin of enmity:

He doesn’t say anything. Thank God, he doesn’t say anything. I look straight into his eyes and despise another poor devil of a human being for the last time. For the last time... Then I put my arms round him and pull him down to the bed, saying: ‘Yes-yes-yes...’
The universal existential significance of this episode is illustrated by way of contrast with another episode in *Good Morning, Midnight*, in which the painter, Serge Ruben, blames himself for not having been able to react in the same way to a Martinique girl he had once met in London. Determinant factors are no less determinant because of this, but the closing section clearly indicates that there are possibilities of choice enclosed within the determined predicament, possibilities that can be used or abused, but which are experienced as possibilities, whether they are so or not, by the individual. It is worthwhile noticing that after *Good Morning, Midnight* Jean Rhys almost completely disappeared from the literary scene not to appear until 27 years later with an objectification of past insights.

The story of her rediscovery and that of the successful publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* has been told before so I will only add a few points of direct relevance to my general argument in view of the extensive critical literature on *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The novel represents a new departure as far as the narrative technique and the whole scope of the story are concerned. It renders a dramatic juxtaposition of the relationship between the West Indies and England on all levels. Although the specific conflicts within the West Indian context are carefully delineated, and thus nothing is lacking as to particularity, this historical novel transcends its own particularization to pose a general ontological problem, i.e. that of the individual's handling of the determinant factors within his or her own existence. Rochester, on the one hand, willingly obeys the codes and standards that have been taught him, and when he is confronted with the one fundamental trial of his life (meeting otherness), he fails. Fascinated by Antoinette and the West Indies in general he still maintains a rational distrust, to which he can fully resort once the fascination is tinged by threats inherently present in the spiritual and physical contexts. His life serves as an adequate symbol of hopeless and existentially reductionist rationalism such as has been a continual feature of European civilization. In other words Rochester conforms to the conditioning of his own predicament, and in his case psychological repression and consequent frustration are unavoidable: 'She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it.'

Antoinette, on the other hand, undergoes a more dynamic development. Her life consists of vain attempts to find security. At an early age she realizes that feeling safe is a thing of the past, and whether she is trying to find protection by crawling close to the walls of 'Coulibri', seeking refuge in the convent, or fulfillment in love at 'Granbois', fate betrays her. In Thornfield Hall, safe as the prison it is, she is finally con-
fronted with what the conditioning of her own predicament has made her — 'a ghost': 'It was then that I saw her — the ghost. The woman with streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her' (WSS, p. 154).

Through her three dreams Antoinette has gradually and intuitively been initiated into the must of her own position. At the very bottom of her own desolation she takes the burden of her existence upon her shoulders, in this way not evading fate, but transcending it by a deliberate destruction of what it has made her. We thus see an important distinction between fate as a general, objective accumulation of conditioning factors and 'my' fate as a subjective usurpation of fate in action. Whether one interprets this action from a 'positive' angle, as Wilson Harris does when he sees Wide Sargasso Sea as a variation of universal myths of creation11 (a point of view which is supported by the dense symbolism of the novel) or from a 'negative' angle, as is the case with Dash,12 who sees it in terms of the final delusion, tragically substantiating the power of fate in Antoinette's case, remains a matter of choice. Personally, I would prefer the tension between these two by pointing to the aspect of an agnostic cry for redemption, either heard or unheard — who knows?

NOTES

2. Thomas Staley, Jean Rhys. A Critical Study (Texas University Press, 1979) is primarily concerned with the feminist aspect of Rhys's work, while Louis James, op. cit., focusses on Rhys's West Indian background.
8. The existential categories here applied have been freely adapted from the philosophical works of the German existential ontologist Martin Heidegger.
11. See the essays mentioned in note No 3.