Chapter 4

Reading the Cultural Miasma: Exploring the Identity Politics

Literature is a cultural process. The text and its subjects are the products of the social and cultural processes which confer a meaning to the text and an identity to the subjects concerned. Totally destabilising the humanist concept of the Author-God, the twentieth century theoreticians have clearly epitomised the signature of culture in the production of the text.

Culture is a highly contested word which evades any fixed definition. The concept of culture can be best thought of as a signifier that enables distinct and divergent ways of talking about human activity. Raymond Williams considers the word culture as a process connected to growing crops, that is, cultivation. Hence the concept of culture began to encompass human beings because of its link to the soil, so that a cultivated person was considered a cultured person. However, the nineteenth century changed the whole scenario holding the view that not all persons are equally civilised and ‘cultured.’ This initiated the divide between the high and the low culture, the best and the worst culture.

Barker, in the dictionary of Cultural Studies, gives an elaborate explanation of “Culture as a whole way of life:”

The multitudinous ways that culture has been talked about within cultural studies include culture as a whole way of life; as like a language, as constituted by representation; as a tool; as practices; as artifacts; as special arrangements; as power; as high or low; as mass and as popular. This variety of ways of comprehending culture does not
represent cases of objective right versus objective wrong, for none of
the definitions of culture is erroneous in the sense of mis-describing an
object. However, they do achieve different purposes and may be more
of less applicable in different times and places. The concept of culture
is thus political and contingent and to explore its meaning(s) is to trace
its users and the consequences that follow from this. (44)

Culture is understood as the material expressions and images that people
create and as the social environment that shapes the way diverse groups of people
experience their world and interact with one another. It is everything made, learned or
shared by the members of a society, including values, beliefs, behaviours and material
objects. Culture varies tremendously from society to society. Rituals, mores and
customs, tradition and practices all become the expressions through which culture is
practiced in a society. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson in *Resistance Through Rituals:
Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* say thus:

The culture of a group or class is the peculiar and distinctive way
of life of the groups or class, the meanings and values and ideas
embodied in institutions, on social relations, in systems of beliefs,
in mores and customs, in the uses of objects and material life.
Culture is the distinctive shapes in which this material and social
organization of life expresses itself. A culture includes the ‘maps
of meaning’ which make things intelligible to its members. These
maps of meaning’ are not simply carried out in the head: they are
objectivated in the patterns of social organisation and relationship through which the individual becomes a ‘social individual.’ (10)

In the societies there are different kinds and groups of people and usually one group becomes more powerful than the others. Generally, societies consist of a dominant culture, subcultures, and countercultures. The dominant culture in a society is the group whose members are in the majority or who wield more power than other groups. In the United States, the dominant culture is that of the white, middle-class, protestant people of northern European descent. There are more white people here than African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, or Native Americans, and there are more middle-class people than there are rich or poor people.

A group does not have to be a majority to be a dominant culture. In South Africa, there are four times as many black Africans as white Africans of European descent. Yet, under a system of racial segregation and domination called apartheid, which was legally in effect from 1948 to 1991, the white population managed to hold political and economic power. South African whites thus were the dominant culture.

Apart from the existence of the dominant cultures, there are subcultures in each society. A subculture is a group that lives differently from, but not opposed to, the dominant culture. A subculture is a culture within a culture. For example, Jews form a subculture in the largely Christian United States. Catholics also form a subculture, since the majority of Americans are Protestants. Members of these subcultures do belong to the dominant culture but also have a material and non-material culture specific to their subcultures. Religion is a defining aspect of a
subculture. Besides religion, the elements like occupation, financial status, political ideals, sexual orientation, age, geographical location and hobbies also can define a subculture.

In some of the societies, a subculture will oppose the dominant culture. For example, the hippies of the 1960s were a counterculture, as they opposed the core values held by most citizens of the United States. Hippies eschewed material possessions and accumulation of wealth, rejected the traditional marriage norms, and espoused what they called *free love*, which was basically the freedom to have sex outside of marriage. Though hippies were generally peaceful, they opposed almost everything the dominant culture stood for.

Not all countercultures are nonviolent. In 1995, the federal building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, was blown up, killing 168 people and injuring many others. That horrific crime brought to light the existence of another counterculture in the United States: rural militias. While such groups go by several names, their members tend to be people who despise the U.S. government for its interference in the lives of citizens.

The Creoles form a subculture in the Caribbean islands that live in compliance with the dominant culture but with their own specific cultural nuances. The Creole culture emerged as a social determinant in the postemancipation period and evolved the position of a subculture only in the late nineteen’s. Till then, Creole culture was devalued by even the people of low status in the colonial society. The Creoles were denied a distinct cultural identity or a specific ethnic genealogy. The social stigma that they had to face during the period lowered their position in the social hierarchy
and hence, they became a disparate ethnic category lacking a strong ideological and
cultural identity to resist the racist dogmas of imperialism. They remained as a
separate entity with their differing values, ideals, beliefs and behavioural patterns.

The Creoles, however, assumed great importance when the racial barriers
began to break down in the late nineteenth century. Studies show that although
Creoles have their own culture specific belief systems, cultural institutions,
customs and behavioural patterns, they are inextricably linked to the Victorian
elite culture. The Creoles share the same basic institutions, socio-cultural ideas
and values of the Victorian elites. In such a context, the Caribbean Creole culture
can be perceived as a subculture of the dominant Victorian culture system.

In the novels, *The Orchid House* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Creole culture
constitutes the central focus that has been analysed to determine the cultural
hegemony and identity politics in the Caribbean context. The novels perceive Creole
culture as a subculture with the potential to sabotage the dominant ideologies of the
Occident. It is this subculture which emerges as the counter culture to challenge and
demolish the age old Occidental political insinuations. The central characters in both
the novels represent the Creole subculture and they oppose the dominant culture with
their culture bound ideologies and political orientations. Hence, the study of the
Creole culture evolves as significant in the exploration of Caribbean cultural miasma.

The term ‘culture,’ etymologically, derives from ‘cultura’ and ‘colere,’
meaning ‘to cultivate.’ It also has the meaning ‘to honour’ and ‘to protect.’ By the
nineteenth century in Europe, it meant the habits, customs and tastes of the upper
classes, or the elite. This conceptualised the thought that acquiring culture was
the means toward moral perfection and social good. Hence, culture as human
‘civilisation’ is counterbalanced against the anarchy of the ‘uncultivated and
uncivilised’ masses. However, the term developed much further and its meaning
underwent varied modifications. This explains the political aspect of the concept
of culture.

Stuart Hall considers culture as “the actual grounded terrain of practices,
representations, language and customs of any specific society” (qtd. in Barker 7).
Mathew Arnold says that culture is not meant to be the property of the few but
what builds everyone. His notion of culture dismantles the pervasive view of
classes. In Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism, he
describes culture:

... is a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know,
on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been
thought and said in the world, and though, this knowledge, turning a
stream of fresh and free thought upon stock notions and habits,
which we now follow staunchly but mechanically. (viii)

Culture, is also seen as providing a common ideal that can unite all in
pursuit of perfection. It is concerned with questions of shared social meanings.
The notion of culture identifies broadly those patterns of human knowledge that
refer to the customary beliefs, social formations and traits of racial, religious or
social groups. It is applied to assemblages of social practices defined periodically
and in terms of race, belief and class. Culture is significantly seen as a specific
form of sense-making, though neither uniform nor monolithic. Michele Barrett
signals other determinations of culture:

In the contemporary world, where migration and diasporisation have produced more complex and hybrid cultural identities, the generic descriptions of culture as a way of life have become far more complex. This points to the issues of ‘cultural difference’ and the question of whether and how we could, or should, translate experience. (qtd. in Wolfreys 40)

Barrett focuses her attention on the complexity of the notion of culture and on the questions of ethnicity and difference and to social hierarchies of culture.

Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* connects nationalism with cultural systems:

What I am proposing is that nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as—against which it came into being. (12)

Anderson opines that national consciousness emerges as an extension of cultural significations. He considers national upsurges as functions of “cultural roots” rather than as “self-consciously held political ideologies” (12).

In order to undertake the questions of these political ideologies and national identities emerged recently a field of study named cultural studies. Cultural studies is not a tightly coherent, unified movement with a fixed agenda. Rather, it embodies and explores the production and inculcation of culture or maps of meaning. It can also be defined as a discursive formation, that is, a group of ideas, images and practices, that
provide ways of talking about, and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity or institutional site. The Dictionary of Cultural Studies explains:

. . . Cultural Studies is constituted by a regulated way of speaking about objects (which cultural studies brings into view) and coheres around key concepts, ideas and concerns that include articulation, culture, discourse, ideology, identity, popular culture, power, representation and text . . . a good deal of cultural studies is centred on the question of how the world is socially constructed and in particular with the themes of ‘difference’ and identity. As such, the central strand of cultural studies can be understood as an exploration of culture, as constituted by the meanings and representations generated by human signifying practices, and the context in which they occur, with a particular interest in the relations of power and the political consequences that are inherent in such cultural practices. (42-43)

Thinkers like Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams thus connect cultural studies to matters of power and politics in the cultural scenario. For Williams, culture constituted the meanings and practices of ordinary men and women, in their everyday life. Culture is what determines the real lives of people, their identities and their values. It is culture which inevitably defines and ‘constructs’ reality. So, in order to comprehend the culture, cultural studies gives prime emphasis on narratives. In such a context, a literary text is seen as a narrative which constitutes network of meanings, the analysis of which helps to interpret and understand the culture of a particular community.
Cultural studies believes that the ‘culture’ of a community includes various aspects: economic, spatial, ideological, erotic and political. Aiming to include all these in its ambit, cultural studies seeks to understand how particular objects acquire meaning and value in a society or community. Culture, according to the thinkers like Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, is not a natural thing; rather it is produced. Cultural studies links the production and consumption of culture to matters of class, economy and representation. That is, cultural issues and themes are mediated through questions of economy (profit) and politics (power) which in turn defines one’s identity (representation). In short, the production and consumption of culture is linked to power and identity (Nayar 7).

Cultural studies analyses the processes through which certain meanings are produced in a particular culture. It believes that the structures of power in society are intricately connected to the processes of meaning production. Certain meanings acquire greater power because of their sources; other meanings become less important. This reveals the oppressive or hegemonic structures of society, the study of which is detrimental in the understanding of a culture. Cultural studies thus strives to probe into the social complexity and the political and power relations in the social structure of everyday life.

Raymond Williams defines culture and society in an influential manner:

\[\ldots\text{our descriptions of our experience come to compose a network of relationships, and all our communication systems, including the arts, are literally parts of our social organization}\ldots\text{Since our way of seeing is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact}\]
the process of community: the sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and the achievements of growth and change. (55)

Cultural studies, for Bennett, “is concerned with all those practices, institutions and systems of classification through which there are inculcated in a population particular values, beliefs, competencies, routines of life and habitual forms of conduct” (28).

Cultural studies exists in various forms and they can be understood by the active analysis of power relations, the examination of the effects of everyday social practices which produce and circulate meaning. The theoretical base of the varied cultural studies varies according to the power structures that rule the community. Marsha Pearce in her essay “Caribbean Cultural Studies” explains the difference thus:

British Cultural Studies was formulated on concerns with power within the sphere of mass culture; it examined the resistance of capitalist hegemony through working class culture than youth culture. North American Cultural Studies is distinguished by an emphasis on power in terms of audience response—the appropriation of texts; it incorporates “the ‘textualist’ turn of . . . theory.” The early phase of Australian Cultural Studies is marked by concerns with film/screen theory, feminism, the construction of national identity and race (“particularly indigeneity”) and “the Foucauldian concept of governmentality – the relation of culture to government.” Canadian Cultural Studies is made distinct by its
concern for “the role of communications technologies in organising socio-spatial relationships derived from the work of Harold Innes.” (4)

As compared to other cultural theories, the Caribbean cultural studies has its roots, according to Pearce in the theories of “space and place” and “subjectivity” (4). The power relations can be identified by analysing the formative ideas of the Caribbean such as transformation, transcendence, transculturation and transplantation. The prefix common in these words suggests movement and helps to characterise the region as one that is in flux. The transportation that all the Caribbeans have undergone is evident in these words; hence Stuart Hall describes the Caribbean as a ‘diaspora.’

The notion of diaspora indicates a certain dislocation from the normal or natural place of living. The dislocating force may be direct and coercive or diffused and subtle, but is based on a level of involuntariness or helplessness. Since the motivations behind the migration of different individuals and groups into different parts of the world are varied, it is difficult to define the phenomenon with accuracy.

In the postcolonial studies, diaspora is an important area of discussion as colonialism resulted in a voluntary or a forced movement of the coloniser and the colonised alike. When compared, the case of the colonised is more traumatic as theirs was a forced movement akin to the enforced movement of the Jewish people described in the Bible. The African slave trade and the indentured labour export from the Indian subcontinent also are examples of diaspora emphasising the element of force or the lack of freedom in the movement of the people. Though not as severe and pathetic as in the case of the colonised, the coloniser sect also painstakingly
underwent the trauma of dislocation. The journey from a familiar, known country to a totally strange and alien country will be taxing to all alike. They had to reorder their space as well as their ways of living, resulting in a wide range of cultural disorientations and ideological disagreements. In *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, Cohen states that colonial and postcolonial developments can be seen as affecting the movement of people and hence he categorizes diaspora in different heads like victim diaspora as in the case of Africans and Americans; labour and imperial diaspora as in the case of indentured Indian and British; trade diaspora as in the case of Chinese and Lebanese; homeland diaspora as in the case of Sikhs and Zionists; cultural diaspora as in the case of Caribbeans, etc.

The Caribbean landscape visualizes the cultural diaspora in all its dimensions, stitching together the disoriented past and the dislocated present of the coloniser and the colonised alike. The dynamics of diaspora alone can merge the colonised and the coloniser in the history of cultural oppression, for in the politics of colonisation, the dominant picture is that of the coloniser “holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it” (Fanon 145). On the other hand, the Caribbean history of dispersal and fragmentation helps in unearthing the colonial experience buried and overlaid, bringing to light the hidden continuities it suppressed.

Since the inception of the term colonialism, it has been stated that the colonised are the victims of the brutal, inhuman atrocities of the colonisers who force away the land, language and culture of the natives and enslave them in
every manner possible. The white colonisers are always conferred the garb of the victimisers, whiteness of their skin often related to the bloodless atrocities that they mete out to the black or coloured victims. But in the Caribbean power politics, the victim position oscillates between the white and the black in equal proportion. The identities of both the sects, though opposite ideologically, hang on the verge of uncertainty and problematic transparency.

The very notion of identity is problematic, as Stuart Hall has stated: “identity as a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, ‘cultural identity,’ lays claim” (221). Cultural identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ It is a problematic term which evades any restraints or fixations regarding time or space. The evanescent nature of the concept is made clear through the words of Stuart Hall:

Cultural identity . . . is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give
to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (224)

Analysed against this positioning, the real trauma of the colonial experience will come to fore. Not only will the trauma of the colonised be dug out, but the pathetic plight of the colonisers will also be highlighted in its true colours.

Representation is a central term in the analysis of the colonial experience as the meaning of all the narratives evolve from it. Representation is the process of meaning generation which includes the word/sign and its concept/meaning. An image, a word, a sound or a concept can become a representation which presents the world in such a way that a particular understanding is achieved. Using different signs, representation generates meaning and ascribes meaning to a culture. Hence, it can be seen as the alphabet, or the very language of culture.

But language is not neutral or transparent, nor is representation. Language and meaning are linked to the issues of class, power, ideology and the material conditions in which speaking or interpretation occurs. Therefore, the chief tenet of cultural studies is to analyse the processes through which meanings are produced in a culture. It brings to light the close connection between meaning production and the structures of power in society. Even the cultural identity conferred on each individual is linked to these power structures.

The structure of society is always based on the power politics inherent in it. Certain meanings acquire greater significance in a society as opposed to other meanings which are often sidelined. The high/low, dominant/subservient, master/slave, rich/poor, coloniser/colonised dichotomies dominate the social
structure, a demarcation clearly manifested in the economical, political, social, cultural and racial discrimination. Every narrative of the literary world takes up any of these binary groups and assigns meanings to individuals and groups according to how the power holding societal structures dictate. Consequently one of the two would be affirmed as the victimiser and the other as the victimised. The affirmation of these roles would last forever and so neither the victimiser nor the victimised would be able to escape from the sealed, cemented identity.

The thesis tries to disentangle the labyrinthine knots of colonial experience of the Caribbean islands which thoroughly shatters the notion of binaries, whether it be coloniser/colonised, high/low, dominant/subservient, master/slave or rich/poor bifurcation. The two novels under study, *The Orchid House* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* deal with the trauma of the colonial experience. The study pursues to unravel the double-voiced textuality of these cultural discourses, thereby laying bare the power politics hideously inherent in the social structures and societal identities.

The Caribbean history from the very beginning dismantles the native/foreigner opposition, for Caribbean islands are a region which is always in flux. The uniqueness of the region lies in the fact that it is a land of mixed cultures, mixed identities, mixed language and mixed tradition as the region is inhabited by people of varied descent. The region is populated with people from different countries, mainly the third world countries; different tribal communities and different villages who are often dragged into slavery and forced transportation to the new island. Apart from these ‘dark’ sects of people, the whites also inhabited the same island, often through enforced migration of sheer necessity. But, quite often the critics tend to highlight
only the plight of the dark or coloured inhabitants of the island while contemplating the issues of diasporic experience. They conveniently ignore the traumatic experience of the white migrants, taking for granted their skin colour as the sign of luxury and enjoyment, evading any scope of exploitation.

Whiteness renders an overall understanding of superiority, domination and colonial exploitation. It is often designated as ‘power’ itself and hence, whiteness belongs irrevocably to the play of power. The problematic of representation thus demonstrates the colour of the skin as a signifier of discrimination. As Fanon has noted: “... you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich” (*Wretched 5*). But seldom one thinks of the economic, political and cultural dependency of the white community over the land that they inhabit. The sense of alienation that may haunt any migrant inexhaustibly haunts the white migrants as well. The demonic clutches of the diaspora strangle the white masters in the same proportion as that of the black slaves and the indentured labourers.

The protagonists of the *The Orchid House* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* thoroughly shatter the kind of recognition attributed to the stereotypes. They demolish the oft welcomed concept of colour as the cultural/ political sign of superiority/ inferiority, and skin as its natural identity. Fiction, theoretical texts and critical essays have warmed many a pages in order to analyse the issue of colonialism and the ‘black’ trauma, often questioning the divine superiority bestowed on the white elite. But only a few fictive pieces exist to elucidate the ‘white’ trauma, and rarer still are the theoretical texts and analytical essays to detail the pathos of the white migrants. Venturing to take up the cause of the
white emigrants, Phyllis Shand Allfrey and Jean Rhys bravely assert the voice of the less heard in the realm of mainstream literature.

Main stream Caribbean literature has always been the voice of the natives, the voice of those who became the inhabitants of the islands. This voice is primarily of the blacks, for the islands have been populated in majority with the black community who were shipped across from the black continent to the Caribbean islands. The Indians, Chinese, North Africans, Jews, Japanese, Syrians etc. also form a part of the island community who reached there as indentured labourers. Since West Indies became their New World, they began to consider themselves as the natives of the country, often rejecting their homelands as the Old World. Hence, the West Indies became the land of the blacks and the coloured, often labeled as the home of black Creoles. The literature of the island thus began to be equated with the voice of the black and the coloured writers like Aime Cesaire, Leon Damas, etc.

In such a context the voice of the white Creoles has often been sidelined as non-Caribbean, and the predicament of this community has proved more than painful. Taking up the challenges, the writers like Phyllis Shand Allfrey and Jean Rhys ventured to make their voice heard in the mainstream Caribbean literature, thereby unlocking the pangs of the depraved community in their literary pieces. The agony and anguish of being displaced and alienated are so vehemently portrayed in their novels that their readership helped the white Creole community gain an acceptance in the Caribbean literature.

Phyllis Shand Allfrey’s *The Orchid House* explores into the cultural parables of displacement in a land of diasporic lineaments. Dominica is the backdrop of the
whole story which is the hotpot of hybrid cultures. The protagonists of the novel face the difficult predicament of being born into a white Creole family. The cultural alienation that they confront throughout forms the thread of the novel, though the political and economic issues of the island too are woven into the fabric.

Allfrey’s throes of having undergone the identity crisis are strongly painted into the central characters of the family, namely the Creole sisters. The writer herself has undergone the torment of not having a fixed identity, as she, like the protagonists, was a westerner and an islander at the same time. The conflict between these two incongruities has tortured her to such an extent that she endeavoured to pen a novel unveiling the trauma of her own life. Through the novel, she pinpoints the significance of place in the life of any man which only would proffer him an identity.

Identity is always culture bound, yet it is space and place specific. Ashild Lappegard Hauge in his “Identity and Place: A Critical Comparison of Three Identity Theories” has stated that identity is a condition which manifests itself on many levels, and place is significant in this context. Places are not only contexts or backdrops, but also are integral parts of identity. Speller argues that the deeper aspects of the function of place should be analysed rather than viewing place only as a social category. According to Speller, places can be nurturing or challenging, in varying degrees, in terms of personal and social identity.

The formation processes of identity are dependent not only on the culture but also on the place where one belongs. According to Breakwell, places are important sources of identity elements. He says that certain aspects of identity
evolve from the places we belong to because places have symbols that have meaning and significance to us. Places build up reciprocality between personal memories and social memories, between personal histories and shared histories since places are located in the socio-historical matrix of intergroup relations. People have a holistic and correlative interaction with their physical environment; hence people affect places and at the same time places influence how people see themselves. This interaction contributes to identity formation.

Identity of an individual develops as he learns to differentiate himself from people around him. Likewise, place identity develops as he learns to see himself as distinct from, but related to, the physical environment. Proshansky defines place identity “as those dimensions of self that define the individual’s personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preferences, skills, and behavioral tendencies relevant to a specific environment” (147). The core of place identity is the symbiotic interaction between how an individual reacts to and navigates through the built and natural environment and how he modifies it to reflect who he thinks he is and who he thinks he wants to be. When people explain who they are, they use self-concepts that contain information about places; what country they live in, what city or town they are from, if they belong to the urban area or the rural, and so on. Hence, the places help people shape their environmental preferences, and how they see themselves.

Home and home place are considered to be the most important places in people’s life, and therefore the most decisive to influence identity. It is the sense
of home that helps people identify themselves with the society they are in. As a positive self-esteem is a hallmark of identity formation; in order to maintain it people will move to places that will help them maintain their positive self-esteem, and move away from places that have negative impact on their self-esteem (Twigger-Ross et al. 203). It is also important to note that the stronger attachment people have to a place, the less they consider the negative aspects of the place and vice versa.

The Caribbean authors have been successful in analysing the concept of self and place identity in their characters by pondering over the relation they have with their homeland and their physical environment. An analysis of the biography and the autobiography of Allfrey and Rhys respectively will light up the connection between their place of birth and subject matters of their novels. It will also illumine the resemblance between their private affairs and their fictitious female protagonists. The colonial experience underlying their literary works are analogous as both of them hail from West Indies and were born to old white Creole families occupying an insecure position in the socio-economic island hierarchy. Both the writers seem to have taken their stimulus to write these novels from their desire to truly inform the readership about the people and the place. They also incline to create an opposing picture to the English depictions of the West Indian colonial situation. Thus, Rhys built her story of a white Creole woman on Charlotte Bronte’s mad woman in *Jane Eyre* and extended it with her personal knowledge of the West Indies. Whereas, Allfrey constructed the narrative on her family’s Dominican chronicle and fictionalised most of her
family members as well as political and church representatives. Through the biographical and autobiographical portrayal of their West Indian saga, the novelists are actually probing into the difficulties involved in developing a concept of self as well as in fixing a personal and social identity.

Allfrey’s three Creole protagonists are examples enough to depict the trauma of negative place identity and frail social identity. They are often fraught in the onerous situation of fixing a place as their home. Since they are settlers in the island, the white Creoles have an allurement towards England which is their home country. They always envisage England as a cultural model, fascinating enough with its rich cultural tradition. Their preoccupied admiration for everything English is evident in a dialogue between the Master and Marse Rufus whose only interest is whether his article in the newspaper is “up to the standard of the London Press” (32). It is this blindfolded admiration for England and Europe that press the Creole sisters in the novel crave for English life. Lally recalls Stella’s desperate eagerness for going away: “I am very unhappy, I would like to go away, please help me to get away soon” (8). Joan also nourishes her dreams about England from her very childhood.

She would often shut her eyes when she was alone with me, and say: “I can see England. It is grey and green. The trees are different. The people talk so fast–a chirp, chirp. I can see my English godmother. She looks quite different from her picture. She looks very noble, and lives in an enormous house. She smiles at me, and invites me to live with her for ever and ever. I climb the trees on her
estate, and in the winter I put out my tongue and the snow falls on it
. . . Oh, it’s delicious! It tastes like vanilla ice-cream.” (25)

O’Callaghan ruminates on their desire to depart and asserts that “the metropole . . .
exerts a magnetic pull” (Woman Version 33). Yet, their place of birth never ever
vanishes from the realm of consciousness which in essence is their mother nation.

Though the teenage fancy has pushed them crave for departure from the island,
they soon realise the throngs of disillusionment. The first of the sisters, Stella
exemplifies chagrin and despondency over her decision to part with the West Indian
landscape. She was too happy to embrace the new land America as the place where
she dreamt she could flourish. But soon she regrets her choice of the cold and
wintry place, frigid and unfriendly to her.

And me dressed like a snow-maiden, but with a burning heart, Lally
darling. And the awful thing was that I could hear Helmut’s mother
singing in her bass voice ‘Kennst Du das Land?–and all at once I
imagined that I smelled real orange-blossom, and I got so dizzy
with the smell of orange-blossom and coffee that I nearly smashed
the window glass frosted with snow-flowers to escape . . . then,
Lally, right then and there I knew that I must come back for a little
while, before too many winters smothered me. (46)

This helps her realise her passion and attachment to the West Indian landscape
and its people, and finds retreat in dreams about the vivid colours, flora and heat
of the island. The discomfort and agony on leaving the county of her birth leave
her devoid of a sense of place identity which torments her psyche.
Snow has such blue shadows! It is as blue as our moonlight between the trees. When you see whole fields of it, time stands still. But when you touch it, it is smooth and cold—like cities. That’s something else I learned in America: never try to touch what you can never enjoy. (47)

The retrieval, though late, helps her win back her lost identity. “. . . I came here to forget the lost years. I came here to grab the past and feel how rough and real it is” (47). The few details of America in the novel express both alienation from her exile country and attachment to the island, contradictory to her teenage pining for escapade. Lally reads her mind and establishes the contrast between the homeland and an alien land—the former is warm, colourful and aromatic, the latter is cold, grey and sad. Thus Stella’s return trip speaks eloquently about her sense of nostalgia towards the island:

In Stella’s sick dreams of home the island had been a vision so exquisite that she was now almost afraid to open her eyes wide . . . It was impossible not to look and look and drink it in like one who had long been thirsty. *It is more beautiful than a dream, for in dreams you cannot smell this divine spiciness, you can’t stand in a mist of aromatic warmth and stare through jungle twigs to a spread of distant town, so distant that people seem to have no significance; you cannot drown your eyes in a cobalt sea, a sea with the blinding gold of the sun for a boundary!* Stella put her arms round the trunk of a laurier cypre and rubbed her cheek softly against the bark. *I’ve come back*, she said to the tree . . . *I’ve come back,*
said Stella, squeezing the laurier cypre as if she would strangle it for joy. (51)

Joan is the second sister embittered between the polarities of the two places, two nations–West Indies and England. Since she and her sisters are colonially tied to England, they had always dreamt about the benediction they would receive in England, their homeland. Like Stella, who always longed to get away from the West Indian islands and like Natalie, who nurtured the dream to live and dance anywhere in the world, Joan too had her dreams. She often used to reverie her life with her English Godmother, who she hoped would be her benefactor and well-wisher. Lally had often listened to her childhood dreams which always had the tint of Englishness about them: “I can see England. It is grey and green. The trees are different. The people talk so fast . . . Oh, it’s delicious! It tastes like vanilla ice-cream” (25). Lally remembers that though she was an islander Joan considered England as her comfort zone. The strong aspiration to embrace England and everything English ignited her dreams:

The English godmother was a great comfort to Miss Joan. Whenever she fell out with others and they made her cry, she would shriek: I’ll write and tell my English godmother how hateful you are! I will go and live in England for ever and ever, and I will never invite you to my godmother’s enormous house. My cheeks will get nice and rosy, and I will be an English schoolgirl and wear gloves!” (25)

But while she was in England she recognised the real trauma in parting the island. She acknowledges the warmth of the island as something life-giving and
yearns for a return. Her coming back to the island helps regain her true vigour and she becomes her old self in the island. Comparing the two lands she agrees that the Island is more comfortable and less destructive than her dream place England:

“... It is the lesser of two evils, and it must be good when everything is so familiar and beautiful, and so warm! Do you know what I shall be afraid of, when I sail away?”

...“The cold. It terrifies me. I’m half-dead every winter.”

...“It’s the grey cold. One day I shall die of it.” (106)

Natalie too loves the island more than any place in the world. Though she has the riches to roam around anywhere she likes, or to buy any palace that attracts her, she passionately buys their half-ruined old house in the island, L’Aromatique. Though she revels in the luxuries of life, she too nurtures a feeling of nostalgia for their homely island. She is angry to hear about the English laws or the New York refinement. Rather she craves for the warmth of the island. “Now listen, Joan: I could shake you. You’ve brought the grey blight of your English theories all the way across the Atlantic Ocean. Why not give yourself to the sunshine–let it burn all that away...” (160).

The three sisters show how mesmerized they are by the almost Eden-like island, their paradise. Though they are racially tied to England, it is not a place which consoles them. Instead they are tormented by the feelings of alienation in England and they perceive the West Indian island as their real home. This is a
feeling only a Creole will understand and Lally fervently attempts to understand their feelings:

. . . I myself gazed outwards at the scene around me, trying to see what there was in this common everyday outlook of mountains and blueness which filled my girls with passionate admiration. All I could see was a riot of gold and purple and crimson (Madam’s flowering bushes) and the two huge mango trees, the shining silver fern against a damp wall, and the purple shadows on far hills. Nothing unusual, except to those who had lived like exiles in grey shadows. (133)

However the island too betrays the Creole sisters of the true sense of self. Though they are influenced more by the cultural norms of the island they cannot fully embrace the island in its entirety. The island combines both beauty and danger. This reality gradually dawns on them. Joan and Stella come to understand that “beauty and disease, beauty and sickness, beauty and horror: that was the island” (59). They come to the realization that all layers of its life are ill—fruit trees are chopped down by the Government (115), the forest trees are undermined by wood-ants (163), the black children are starving, the Master is a drug addict, Andrew is dying of tuberculosis and Lally has a tumour. As has been asserted by Louis James: “the political, religious and social life of the island, it could be said, is also diseased” (46). Each of the sisters endeavours to change the people and the place according to their own norms and standards. Stella, influenced by the American principle of usefulness of things and people, murders the drug peddler trying to rescue her father. Joan, who is influenced by the English social concerns,
fights to revive the political and social life of the island. Natalie, having inherited money from an English husband, financially restores the family and tears the two sick men away for a sanatorium treatment.

The enterprises they have taken up seem to be apt and welcome. Yet, as Louis James maintains: “the tension can never be resolved between the two worlds of the tropical island and the continental northerly nations” (46). The three sisters lack the courage to identify their true place, their true identity. Hence the reformations in the hands of white Creoles turn out to be impossible. Stella is forced back to America, the country she hates now; Joan is forced to desist from the public life and Natalie flies away with sick Andrew and her airsick father. The missions set out by the Creole sisters fail which reflects their failure in bridging their cultural and spatial polarities.

The perception of home is decisive in attributing a sense of identity to any person which again is dependent on the place of her identification. In the case of the Creole sisters, place is ever elusive for they fail to fix a particular place as their home. They try to strike a balance between the two places that they are familiar with in their lives, one being the place of their birth and the other being their Western home. But the two worlds stand at two extremes which they understand can never be bridged. This results in the estrangement of the three sisters in the island and they remain culturally diverged throughout their lives.

Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* is yet another novel which tackles the problem of the place identity and social identity along with the perception of ‘Home.’ The white Creole protagonists in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Annette and Antoinette have
primarily two choices of home. It can be either England they have never been to, or their West Indian island, Jamaica. By exploring Antoinette’s attitudes and feelings about the landscape of her native island and England, the significance of place identity can be studied. In the first part of the novel, Antoinette is in West Indies and though discontent with her plight of being a Creole, she never wants to quit the place. As a Creole girl who “[has] the sun in her” (102), she thinks of England to be cold, colourless and inodorous. She craves for the heat, colour and aroma of the West Indies.

West Indies is the place of Antoinette’s existence and her stay. She is the third generation islander for whom the island is the only place to associate herself with. Yet the cold hostility that she receives from the black community estranges her from the place of her birth, pushing her into the abyss of identity crisis. She fails to mould for herself an identity in relation to her physical environment as the interaction between the two is not possible. The pre-emancipation history has thrown the Creole community into an abyss from which they could never escape. Since the white Creoles were the ex-slave owners, they were always hated by the ex-slaves. However hard they tried to mix themselves with the black community, the only response they received was rejection. Since the blacks were taken to the islands as slaves in the Imperial plantations, they had to undergo fierce and gruesome atrocities in the island. Because of the forced migration and labour, the blacks were not only displaced and uprooted, but they also experienced inhumane and degrading treatment from the slave owners, for they were treated as commodities. Therefore, the black people’s feelings of hostility towards the
former slave owners after the emancipation are more than understandable. The situation can be read from the experience of Antoinette:

I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches. Let sleeping curs lie. One day a little girl followed me singing, ‘Go away white cockroach, go away, go away.’ I walked fast, but she walked faster. ‘White cockroach, go away, go away. Nobody want you. Go away.’ (9)

The revenge of the black community can be detected in this kind of behaviour which is expressed “by violence and by the discursive tools of alienating and, in their own way, denigrating the whites” (Haliloglu 157). Verbal abuse is one of the weapons that the black people in the novel possess. The emancipation has given the blacks immense power that they retaliate in the same coin. As they experienced offensive behaviour and language from the slave owners, they strike back by treating the ex-slave owners in a similar way. Being helpless, the white Creoles accept the debasing treatment as a form of a punishment. Though it was not their fault, they are of course aware of the injustice that their family caused to the blacks. Therefore, they stay away from the black society apart from the few servants who stayed with them after the end of slavery.

The dilemma is even worsened as the Creoles are rejected by the whites too. The Creoles are deserted by the white people on the belief of the English that they are superior to the white inhabitants of the West Indies. However, the white Creoles long to be English because they still see England as the place of their origin. As Burrows points out, “[i]t is to imperial whiteness that white creole
ideological loyalty lies: but they are white but not quite” (29). The sense of alienation that the whites imparted can be observed in Rochester’s behaviour towards Antoinette. He is used to the English environment and culture, and hence, he sees the West Indies as an exotic place and thus throughout his narration he keeps on resenting the place and its inhabitants, merely just for the difference from England. His resentment is most particularly focused at Antoinette, his bride, whose appearance only repulses him:

. . . I watched her critically. She wore a tricorne hat which became her. At least it shadowed her eyes which are too large and can be disconcerting. She never blinks at all it seems to me. Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either. (40)

The same resentment can be discernible in the attitudes of Jamaican ladies towards her mother, Annette. After her mother’s marriage, the white neighbourhood only mocked at the couples saying:

‘A fantastic marriage and he will regret it. Why should a very wealthy man who could take his pick of all the girls in the West Indies, and many in England too probably?’ ‘Why probably?’ the other voice said. ‘Certainly.’ ‘Then why should he marry a widow without a penny to her name and Coulibri a wreck of a place? . . . (13)

So the question of identity has always tormented the Creoles for they could never identify themselves with the communities they were surrounded with. Stuart Hall observes that shared identities help to understand oneself by
differentiating from others, they “are the way in which we are recognised and then come to step into the place of the recognitions others give us. Without the others there is no self, there is no self-recognition” (“Negotiating” 30). In “Who needs ‘Identity’?” Stuart Hall claims that identity and the process of identification are outcomes of a common background which is shared with somebody or something:

[I]dentification is constructed on the basis of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. (Hall 16)

But for the Creoles in the novel, shared identity is marred as they are considered outcasts by both the communities. Antoinette speaks of this dilemma: “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks. The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, ‘because she pretty like pretty self’ . . .” (5).

In the case of Antoinette, the question of belonging to a particular place is very important because she, being a Creole, cannot identify with people and cannot trust them. Hence, she identifies with the estate and other physical things which surround her:

I took another road, past the old sugar works and the water wheel that had not turned for years. I went to parts of Coulibri that I had not seen, where there was no road, no path, no track. And if the razor grass cut my legs and arms I would think ‘It’s better than people.’ Black ants or red ones, tall nests swarming with white ants,
rain that soaked me to the skin—once I saw a snake. All better than people. Better. Better, better than people. (12)

Place identity is pertinent in identity construction. West Indies has always granted her the tangible sense of place. Though her existence in the island is marginalised, she often takes pleasure in the company of wilderness. The smell of the flowers, river pools and vivid colours give her a feeling of safety and belongingness and proffer a belief in having a place of her own. The island and its beauty give her a deep sense of home which she intimately shares with her husband on their arrival at a remote honeymoon house in the wilderness of Granbois. But Rochester denies her perception and rejects the extreme colours of the place and groans: “Everything is 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” (42). He cannot merge himself with the strange land. The extremities of the island only alienate him from the place and he longs for England, his home. On the other hand, Antoinette feels at home in the honeymoon home which offers her the prospect of gaining back her lost sense of belonging. She says of the place: “this is my place” (45) and: “Here, I can do as I like” (57). Here Rhys merges place identity with personal identity.

Place marks decisive not only for Antoinette or the islanders, but for Rochester too. The knowledge and power of Antoinette over the place, Granbois instill frustration in Rochester which is intensified through Antoinette’s understanding and familiarity of the island. The power makes Antoinette confident enough to educate Rochester on how to prepare for his new surroundings: it is she
who instructs him to put his coat on when they are riding into a cooler climate (42), and to watch out for red ants when he bathes (53). She also chases away a giant crab with a rock that she throws “like a boy” (54). Rochester feels his authority diminished and undermined by Antoinette’s knowledge of the Caribbean. Self confidence is seen to be a trait of an English man. But, Rochester loses his confidence in the new surroundings, where he cannot associate himself with in any way. “But the feeling of security had left me. I looked round suspiciously” (45). He admits his feelings clearly to her: “‘I feel very much a stranger here,’ I said. ‘I feel that this place is my enemy and on your side’” (82). Thus place and place identity affect the individuals’ concept of self that the alienation from the land will prove exasperating and traumatic. The trauma that both the characters undergo because of their confused identification with the strange ambience is explicit in the conversation between Rochester and Antoinette. Both are trying to cling on to their own notions of their homelands with exasperation.

‘Is it true,’ she said, ‘that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so. She said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes. I want to wake up.’

‘Well,’ I answered annoyed, ‘that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream.’

‘But how can rivers and mountains and the sea be unreal?’

‘And how can millions of people, their houses and their streets be unreal?’
‘More easily.’ she said, ‘much more easily. Yes a big city must be like a dream.’

‘No, this is unreal and like a dream,’ I thought. (49)

Rochester feels himself superior and tries to judge Antoinette with the eyes of a typical Englishman. He says that Antoinette is stubborn and will only learn from his experience:

If she was a child she was not a stupid child but an obstinate one. She often questioned me about England and listened attentively to my answers, but I was certain that nothing I said made much difference. Her mind was already made up. Some romantic novel, a stray remark never forgotten, a sketch, a picture, a song, a waltz, some note of music, and her ideas were fixed. About England and about Europe. I could not change them and probably nothing would. Reality might disconcert her, bewilder her, hurt her, but it would not be reality. It would be only a mistake, a misfortune, a wrong path taken, her fixed ideas would never change. (58)

Rochester blames Antoinette for not trying to see England from his perspective, but he fails to realize that he makes the same mistake and thus “his own received ideas about the Caribbean are just as fixed, gleaned from books, pictures, and songs” (Haliloglu 169).

The enigmatic sense of identity in which place and home play a decisive role is revealed through the fictional characters of Jean Rhys. Through these divergent characters, Rhys makes it clear that the search for identity became a
never-ending struggle for all races in the Caribbean. Glissant supports the point and says:

The relationship with the land, one that is even more threatened because the community is alienated from the land, becomes so fundamental in this discourse that landscape in the work stops being merely decorative or supportive and emerges as a full character. Describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history. (105)

Yet, the country where Antoinette was born to never embraces its child with warmth. Rather she is rejected by her neighbourhood and her Jamaican community which disentangle her sense of self. Laura N. De Abruna states that the white Creoles were “disliked by the African-Caribbeans, who view them as related to the former slave owners . . .” (90). The islanders look at her and at her family with hostile eyes often addressing them as ‘white niggers’ and ‘white cockroaches.’ The estrangement that permeates the Caribbean ambiance lends the protagonist devoid of an identity. Hence, she turns to England as a place of solace and acceptance. For the settlers, England is their mother country. With the kindled hope of finding a space for herself in the home nation, Antoinette look to England as a possible home when she is shunned by the people of the island, a home to which she could look up to for education, fashion and as a “place of values” (Ramchand 36). She likes to view it as a place of possible refuge and safety, but soon she recognises the disillusionment and understands the coldness
and hostility of England like her literary creator, Jean Rhys who defines England as dark, cold and hostile.

The plight that subsumes Antoinette is reminiscent of the novelist herself who has suffered the angst of displacement. For the white Creoles, England is their mother country, their home. Yet, the mother nation embraces them not even for once. Like Antoinette, Rhys felt that she did not have a country or a residence that she could consider ‘home’ and in her autobiography she often complains of England as cold and dark. As O’Connor has pointed out, Dominica stood in stark contrast to England:

In Rhys’ developing symbology, England provided the antithesis to “home,” an anti-home. If Dominica was light, England was dark; if Dominica was warm, England was cold; if in Dominica the male seduction was “mental” and paid for with chocolates, in England it approached prostitution; if Dominica was dominated by the rejecting figure of Rhys’ mother, England proferred an endless line of hostile landladies; and if Rhys’ island suggested an expansiveness of the soul, England offered finite closure, infinitely. (72)

It is the same angst that has been written down into Antoinette in the novel. She passionately desires to establish a strong bond with England and she sees the place as an alternative when she feels rejected by her beloved island. She always fondles her favourite picture which is an English girl “the Miller’s Daughter” (18) which surfaces her deepened dream of identification with England and everything English. When her marriage with Rochester worsens, she actually believes that
England could be a place of refuge. In her imagination England is a place with beautiful and natural scenery, a setting comparable to her island, and often she tries to convince herself that England is a place of light:

Cool green leaves in the short cool summer. Summer. There are fields of corn like sugar-cane fields, but gold colour and not so tall. After summer the trees are bare, then winter and snow. White feathers falling? Torn pieces of paper falling? They say frost makes flower patterns on the window panes. I must know more than I know already. For I know that house where I will be cold and not belonging, the bed I shall lie in has red curtains and I have slept there many times before, long ago. How long ago? In that bed I will dream the end of my dream. But my dream had nothing to do with England and I must not think like this, I must remember about chandeliers and dancing, about swans and roses and snow. And snow. (70)

Still, she has the foreboding intuition that her mother nation will be the place of her extermination. The natives of England embark a distance from the white Creoles pricing them inferior and deteriorated. A diary entry of an American Lady (wife of British governor in Jamaica) will speak the true judgment of the Europeans of the white Creoles: “It is extraordinary to witness the immediate effect that the climate and habits of living in this country has upon the minds and manners of Europeans, particularly of the lower orders” (qtd. in L. James 2). In addition, she also criticises the settlers’ adaptation of some features of African culture—particularly the language which, according to her is a “tiresome Creole
drawl” (qtd. in L. James 23). These comments evidently entail that “[i]n many cases, the distance between those Creole whites and the imported ones [Europeans] seems to be greater than between the Creole whites and the Creoles of colour” (Arion 111).

The lack of warmth from the islanders and the complacent coldness that she receives from the English people force Antoinette to occupy an uneasy middle ground between West Indies and England which benumbs her sense of identity.

The two Creole novelists have thus manifested the trauma of homelessness in their novels in exquisite terms. Devoid of a place identity the protagonists are depicted as being marred from having a social identity which torments their sense of self. They prove the plight of what Freud has stated, ‘unheimlich’ (199) meaning unhomely or uncanny. They make an attempt, but in vain, to gain self-reflexive knowledge of the power relations that could define their identity. But the cultural discord makes them realise the painful fact that they can only have an identity which should be rejected or shed like a dead skin. Being mixed race children, they are considered as the inmates of the hybrid space which can never confer them a cultural identity. Thus through the protagonists in *The Orchid House* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Allfrey and Rhys bring home the pangs of alienation of the colonialist ‘native.’ The novelists have thus put the issue of cultural identity in question.