Jean Rhys
(1890 - 1979)
NOVELS OF JEAN RHYS: AN EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

Jean Rhys's novels can be analysed, assessed and examined at demandingly complex levels of meaning and response. The present doctoral thesis attempts to examine Rhys's novels from the existential point of view, for the study has largely been inspired by a desire to arrive at a more comprehensive philosophical approach. Traditionally, criticism on Jean Rhys concentrates on three spheres of interest, i.e. – feminist analysis of her heroines’ condition, themes in her novels and their relevance to the novelist's personal life events, and her handling of style and narrative technique. It has been observed that critics of Jean Rhys have, in their obsession with only a certain critical views, ignored the painful existential dilemmas of her pathetically and pathologically sensitive characters. This thesis has arisen from recognition that an existential examination of Rhys’s novels has largely been ignored and that such a critical and philosophical response to her novels is long overdue. There has been no full-length study of Rhys’s fiction, either in India or abroad, that attempts to establish her characters as dignifies existents seriously involved in the process of Being and Becoming. And therefore, a pressing need for such a philosophical examination has been intensely realised. The principal objective of this research study is to present critically Rhys's specific view of existence and human nature, as revealed in her characters’ existential struggle, without ever challenging, doubting, or excluding the validity of alternative critical interpretations.
Technically, this research project has been divided into eight chapters. First, the method proposed for the examination of Rhys's novels, i.e. Existentialism is discussed in the first chapter. The second chapter of this thesis contains a detailed account of Rhys's life events and experiences, her literary achievements, and a survey of the Rhysian criticism. Exclusive attention is devoted to an existential investigation of all the novels of Rhys in the five preceding chapters. (III, IV, V, VI, & VII) Following the themes proposed by the existentialist philosophers, these five chapters endeavour to examine the nature of existential struggle confronted by each one of Rhys's characters. The final chapter of the dissertation gathers up the various threads and establishes, by way of conclusion, the recognition of Rhys's characters as real, authentic, and existing human beings worthy of appreciation.

The first chapter is entirely expository and aims at providing a detailed survey of the origin, meaning and themes of the existentialist philosophy. It is exclusively devoted to an elaborate critical analysis of major philosophical concerns as expressed in the works of five renowned existentialist philosophers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel and Jean Paul Sartre. The study maintains that the term 'Existentialism' is difficult to define precisely, because of the diversity of themes and positions associated with the existential thought. This doctoral thesis, therefore, avoids defining the term; it rather focuses a great deal of concentration on the existential themes and ethics recommended by major existential thinkers. The major existentialist thinkers described here are: Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, and Jean Paul Sartre. This chapter presents a vivid picture of all the major existential principles founded by
Kierkegaard and his followers: the primacy of 'existence' over 'essence', subjectivity, individual freedom, freedom of choice and free-will, existential anguish, anxiety and despair, death and self-transcendence. The study fully concentrates on the official statement of the school of Existentialism—'existence precedes essence.' This chapter puts exclusive emphasis on the essence of the existential thought— that man is personally responsible for what he does and what he becomes, that man is doomed to make free, conscious choices, that man can not escape from the acts of making choices, and that man can achieve human dignity, authenticity, and individuality by way of self-assertion and self-realization.

The second chapter of this dissertation attempts to present an extensive survey of Jean Rhys's private life, her extraordinarily strange and curious literary career, and of the Rhysian criticism. This chapter focuses considerable attention on Rhys's Caribbean sensibility which shaped and designed her literary and artistic talent. The discussion here is aimed at pointing out that Rhys's condition as an outsider, her homelessness and lack of nationality, and social and existential marginality provided a powerful edge to much of her writing. The need to provide a brief account of Rhys's personal details is deeply felt due to the fact that all Rhysian novels contain a large amount of autobiographical elements. It is, indeed, very difficult to understand and appreciate Rhys's protagonists' existential struggle without a profound understanding of Rhys's own life events. It is, therefore, felt necessary to know something of Rhys's unusual life and her formative influences in order to appreciate more substantially her literary achievements. A brief survey of
Rhys's literary works is made and sufficient attention is focused on literary and creative influences on Rhys.

Lastly, a detailed survey of the Rhysian criticism is offered. The discussion is intended to point out that the critics of Rhys have, in their obsession with certain themes and methods of analysis, ignored a more comprehensive philosophical discourse like Existentialism. The discussion attempts to show that the Rhysian criticism is, traditionally, devoted to Rhys's feminist, racial and cultural commitments only. The second chapter concludes with the conviction that any critical study of Rhys's art would remain incomplete and inconclusive without a profound existential analysis.

The third chapter attempts to make a critical investigation into the existential struggle confronted by young and sensitive Marya, Rhys's protagonist in Quartet. Quartet is the story of a displaced, vulnerable, and unprotected young woman searching for her 'necessary fixed background.' Jean Rhys's Quartet, originally titled as Postures, depicts the miserable living conditions of Marya who struggles hard to find out her own solidity and background. During the days of her poverty and unemployment in London, Marya accepts Polish Stephan Zelli's marriage offer. On their arrival in Paris, Stephan is arrested for smuggling in stolen items and Marya is left as unprotected and vulnerable as before. Marya's longing for emotional fulfillment and financial security forces her into an unhappy sexual involvement with Heidler. Marya makes desperate attempts to escape from the imprisonment of Heidler's shabby apartment, but in vain. This chapter is devoted to an exclusive analysis of Marya's existential commitments such as
freedom, love, identity, and human dignity. When Stephan is released from jail, he finds his wife in Heidler's embrace. Marya is finally abandoned by both the males- her husband Stephan and her lover Heidler, leaving her at the mercy of this ruthless world. The novel concludes with Marya's existential awareness that the individual is never safe and happy in the other's background and that he has to create his own 'necessary fixed background,' if one really wishes to survive with dignity. This chapter endeavours to show that this kind of realization is in itself a kind of moral triumph. Marya's existential predicament unambiguously communicates that the individual's pursuit for happiness, love, security, and dignity may be frustrated by the hostile others, but a desire to continue this quest is all the same stimulating, exciting, and worthwhile.

The forth chapter of this thesis makes a comprehensive investigation into the existential quandaries and anxieties of Julia Martin, the central character in After Leaving Mr Mackenzie. Mathematically, the novel is divided into three parts: Part I is set in Paris where Julia is pensioned off by her former lover Mr. Mackenzie and his lawyer. The second part, the longest one, is set in London where Julia visits her dying mother and her sister Norah in order to renew and revitalize her old contacts. Julia's desire to establish a meaningful relationship with the external world is badly frustrated and her pursuit for human contact ends up in abortive relationships. The brief final section of the novel covers Julia's empty return to the shabby and monotonous existence of hotel rooms in Paris. The novel concludes with Julia's assertion that the individual must construct his own universe independent of the rest of humanity. Julia learns a valuable existential lesson through her encounter with the external world- man alone, and not humanity, exists. This chapter concentrates on
Julia’s survival mechanism – i.e. the individual can feel complete in himself only when he is detached from the vast, unreal crowd. Julia’s final assurance to a policeman that she does not have the slightest intention of committing suicide indicates her spirited acceptance of the importance of being-in-the-world. Julia’s promise to the policeman shows her serious existential commitments. Julia knows that the act of being-in-the-world is a stimulating and exciting process of self-enhancement and self-realization, it is a movement forward. Julia’s assurance to the policeman indicates her creative potentiality for participating in the exhilarating movement called life. After Leaving Mr Mackenzie concludes with Julia’s act of leaving the feelings of despair and dejection. The novel ends with a ‘life must go on’ attitude.

The fifth chapter presents an account of Anna Morgan’s existential anguish suffered in an alien country of England after her disorientation from the Caribbean island. Voyage In The Dark, published in 1934, depicts the inescapable conflict between two cultures, two nations, two identities, and between nature and culture as represented by two diverse countries – the West Indies and England. The supremacy of nature, as represented in the character of Anna, is emphasized throughout the novel. The themes of homelessness, lack of nationality, search for love, happiness and cultural and racial identity and self-assertion are once again the dominating ideas in Voyage In The Dark. The title of the novel itself suggests the subject matter of the story: dislocation, transplantation, mobility, dark and cold alienation, attempts to escape from the darkness of England and an eternal quest for knowledge and self-affirmation. The chapter focuses significant light on Anna’s acts of free-will carried out in order to affirm her Caribbean racial and cultural characteristics. Voyage In The
Dark concludes with Anna’s rebellious, yet conscious and free, act of aborting her baby conceived from an English man, Walter Jeffries. The act of abortion is Anna’s conscious choice— it is the act of asserting her Caribbean identity and human dignity. Anna’s abortion shows her intense desire for the liberation of her inner ‘self’ from the cultural bondage of England. The choice of dropping the baby shows Anna’s total refusal to support the growth of anything that is associated with Englishness. Anna loses herself in the recesses of Caribbean memories, she burns Walter’s hand with the end of a burning cigarette when he mentions money, and finally drops British Walter’s baby growing up in her Caribbean womb. These are Anna’s passionate acts of free-will and self-assertion. Anna regains her authenticity, human dignity, and cultural identity by way of living her life in an intense way. Anna knows that there is nothing she could not do, nothing she could not become and she is also aware of the fact that she is too young to die. Anna undergoes an abortion, yet she is determined to start her life all over again. Anna’s longing to start her life yet again symbolically suggests her faith in life and its enormous hidden promises. Anna’s cry, ‘I’m too young to die,’ reveals her passion for life.

The sixth chapter deals with Sasha’s acts of transformation which she undertakes in order to establish her survival and meaning of life. Good Morning, Midnight was published in 1939 at the outbreak of World War II. The novel derives its title from Emily Dickenson’s poem emphasizing the essential opposition between day and night, light and darkness, and evidently, between life and death. This chapter concentrates on the inner life of Sasha who is plunged into a conflict with the others: she is hurled into the darkness of physical and psychological alienation, she is uncertain of her identity and
independence, and is exhausted by the pawing and preying of men. The novel offers a series of transformation acts undertaken by Sasha in order to start her life afresh. Sasha is set out to find out the essence or meaning of her existence and she does find it, unlike Rhys's early characters, in the external world. Sasha's life is a continual passion for establishing her contact with the glow of warm humanity, and finally she does succeed in her attempts to establish at least some line of communication with the outer world. Sasha, however, never sacrifices her honour and individual dignity at the altar of human relationships. Whenever her personal honour and human dignity are assaulted, she outrageously rebels and asserts her individuality. Sasha's final 'yes...yes...yes...' expression is her positive affirmation of the reality of human existence. Sasha's 'yes' expression shows her positive attitude towards life and its quandaries and enigmas- the final 'yes' shows Sasha's spontaneous affirmation of the process of Being and Becoming. Sasha lives intensely, and while living, carries out a series of transformation acts. Sasha is one of Rhys's most assertive protagonists whose entire Being is launched in the direction of Becoming.

The seventh chapter contains a detailed existentialist analysis of Rhys's last novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, published in 1966. Jean Rhys made a sensational reappearance in 1966 after a long literary silence of twenty five years. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which is rightly acknowledged as Rhys's magnum opus, is placed in the island of Jamaica, West Indies, after the political and social upheaval of the Emancipation Act of 1833. The novel can be analysed at demandingly complex levels of interpretation as the theme of conflict is found at all levels: the local blacks and the white Europeans, the freed black slaves
and the white West Indians, the white West Indians and the white Europeans, males and females, and wives and husbands. It is a moving account of Antoinette and Annette’s suffering and exploitation in a post-emancipated colonial society. The novel primarily deals with contradictions, ambiguities, and absurdities inherent in human situations. Antoinette, exactly like early characters of Rhys, is uprooted, alienated, and doomed to physical, psychological, emotional and sexual exploitation in a basically oppressive, masculine social structure. This chapter presents Antoinette’s positive and aggressive acts of self-liberation and self-affirmation. Antoinette’s act of burning down Rochester’s cardboard house is her passionate act of self-liberation and self-affirmation. Antoinette finally plunges herself into the flames—this apparent attempt at suicide is her compulsive assertion of her individuality which she finds at stake. The act of jumping into the fire is a clearly positive act of self-preservation and self-transcendence. It is in the rising flames that Antoinette finds the true meaning and essence of life. She finds ‘the tree of life’ in the burning flames. This chapter gives a picture of the existential significance of Antoinette’s final act of setting the Thornfield Hall on fire—there is always something that man can do.

The last chapter of the thesis begins with a short summery of what has already been said in the seven preceding chapters. The eighth chapter gathers up the various threads and establishes, by way of conclusion, the recognition of Rhys’s characters as dignified human beings worthy of respect and appreciation. This chapter offers a brief account of the existential themes recommended by five major existentialist thinkers, and then moves on to explain the existential commitments of each one of Rhys’s protagonists. The
principal objective of the concluding chapter is to present Rhys’s specific view of human existence and nature as revealed in her characters’ existential preoccupations. This chapter contains, in a capsule form, a brief description of the Rhysian characters’ involvement in the process of Being and Becoming. Rhys’s novels offer a sensible picture of the human situation, and they are models for anyone who wants an original understanding of the human nature and existence.