Chapter I

Life and Work of Jean Rhys

I

This chapter will reproduce the usually accepted version of Rhys’s life and try to give an overview of her works. Knowledge about Rhys’s life is necessary because critics frequently connect Rhys to her heroines to argue that Rhys’s fiction is autobiographical in nature. The chief source of information on Jean Rhys’s life is Jean Rhys: Life and Work (1990), the award winning biography of Rhys written by Carole Angier. Though this work offers invaluable information on and insight into Rhys’s life, yet like most other biographies it too tries to solve the riddle called ‘Rhys’. As the objective of this chapter is to present the established version of Rhys’s life without picking a quarrel with it, the questions that invariably come to one’s mind when one reads Angier’s book will be raised later. It must be mentioned here that though Rhys’s unfinished autobiography, Smile Please (hereafter Smile), and the anthology of her letters, The Letters of Jean Rhys (hereafter Letters), are interesting sources of valuable information on Rhys, none of them, actually, speaks on the Quartet phase which is so central in the context of this dissertation. Smile Please stops just before the Quartet phase ensues and the Letters contains letters that Rhys wrote between 1931 and 1966, i.e., after the phase. This is why critics usually depend on Angier’s biography of Rhys which, it seems, is the inspiration and source for all other biographies on Rhys.¹ A detailed study of Angier’s representation of the first phase of Rhys’s life at Dominica shows how Angier’s assumptions about Rhys’s character has influenced Angier’s representation of Rhys’s persona mostly endorsed and at times questioned by others I propose to discuss in the
following chapters. The latter portion of this chapter takes up Rhys’s works putting an extra emphasis on the works of the 1920s for their obvious relevance to this dissertation.

II

The first impression of Rhys that can be had from Angier’s book is that Rhys is the typical Dominica incarnated: unpredictable, disturbingly beautiful, bearing misfortune and forebodings of possible devastation underneath. This is how Dominica is described in Jean Rhys: Life and Work:

The sun shines hotter and the moon brighter here than anywhere in Europe. Rain falls more suddenly and night comes more quickly. Colours are brighter, smells stronger; trees and flowers and insects grow bigger…The beauty is mainly on the surface, the violence beneath. (3)

In Angier’s book while the beauty of Dominica is described in terms of geography and environment, the island’s history of violence is associated with its Arawak past and the Arawaks’s historical conflict with the fierce Caribs who came to the island later and ultimately ousted the Arawaks. The latter departed leaving a curse for the island which remained as a ‘bad luck’ that typified Dominica. Dominica legendarily turned out to be an island where between expectation and attainment always intervened a disaster; all because of that proverbial ‘bad luck’. The history of violence, beginning with the clash between the hapless Arawaks and the fierce Caribs (another very strong part of Dominican mythology)
continued with the Caribs, who kept their ways of a warrior clan, and then slavery—an institution that survived solely on violence—through the next six or seven hundred years or so.

As Jean Rhys has been described as “not English, but Welsh, Irish and Scottish” (Angier 6), ancestry becomes, naturally, the starting point in the study of Rhys’s life. Angier’s research shows that Rhys’s father’s side has its roots in the South Wales, a region from where comes her great grandfather Griffith Rees Williams. In fact, Rhys carries the Welsh Identity in her real name. Angier points out that the middle name—Gwendoline—is Welsh and it means ‘white’ (Angier 7). From her mother’s side Rhys’s great grandfather, James Potter Lockhart, was Scottish in origin. He happened to be a cousin of Sir Walter Scott’s biographer. It was he who first established a connection with Dominica when he bought there an estate of 1200 acres with 258 slaves in 1824. The estate was named ‘Genever’ or ‘Geneva’. James’s second son Edward was the grandfather of Rhys. He had six children. Among them the twin daughters—Minna and Brenda—were Rhys’s mother and Aunty B (‘B’ was probably a shorter form of Brenda for little Rhys) respectively. So the estate, ‘Genever’ by name, came from Rhys’s mother’s side. Rhys’s father led a brief adventurous life at sea. At its conclusion he took medical degrees in Manchester and London in 1879 and 1880 respectively. Immediately after this, the spirit of adventure took hold of him and he responded to an advertisement published in The Times. This led to his appointment as Medical Officer in the Stowe District of Dominica. “Stowe is only three miles from Geneva, and when William arrived by canoe from Roseau”, writes Angier, “he was met by the two elder Miss Lockharts: the twins, Minna and Brenda (9)”. William and Minna got married on 10 January, 1882 (Angier 9).
The first child of William and Minna was born in 1883. His name was William Edward. The second, Owen Lockhart, was born in 1885. Minna Sophia was born in 1886. Ella Gwendoline (Jean Rhys) was born in 1890 and the youngest, Brenda Clarice, in 1895.

Angier’s research shows that the circumstances of Rhys’s birth were indeed gloomy (Angier 10-11). Angier points out a sad incident that happened just before Rhys’s birth: Rhys’s birth was preceded by the death of an elder sibling of Rhys who died in her infancy:

Brenda Gwenith Maxwell Rees Williams was born just before Jean, probably in early 1889, when she was baptized. But then (again almost though not quite certainly) in November 1889, when she was nine months old, there was a dysentery epidemic in Roseau: and she and Minna caught the disease. Owen, who tells this story, says that the baby ‘hovered at death’s door’; but that by Christmas both girls were better. But he had set out in his account to lighten ‘the tragedies which have always dogged this beautiful Island’; and probably he did so here. For certainly the infant Brenda Gwenith died; and the likeliest occasion was this attack of dysentery. (Angier 10)

But that Angier’s findings are not based on solid evidence is clear from the following passage of her book:

Dominican birth and death records have almost all been lost in a fire (typical Dominica), so that we cannot be absolutely sure when she died. But nearly. (10)

One interesting thing about Angier’s biography is the fact that so many times Angier takes help from Rhys’s fiction to prove her arguments. For instance, while writing on Brenda Gwenith’s death, Angier uses one of Rhys’s short stories, “Heat”, and Owen Lockhart’s
“lightly fictionalised” (Angier 30) biography. Angier uses a fragment of an utterance of the narrator of “Heat”, where the narrator, refers to the grave of an Englishman as to be “quite near the grave of my little sister” (10) and imagines in this line a reference to Jean’s own dead sister. Owen Lockhart, the elder sibling of Rhys, narrates a dysentery epidemic in Dominica, a calamity which caught two of his sisters and the younger one, the baby (Brenda Gwenith), hover at death’s door. Lockhart has also written that by Christmas both the girls got better (Angier 10). According to Angier this baby is the dead elder sister of Jean, and in Owen’s story this elder sister survives because Owen purposefully ‘lightens’ tragedy in his narrative (Angier 10). This is how Angier develops her analysis on the circumstances of Jean’s birth preceded by Brenda Gwenith’s death:

When a baby dies doctors often say that the mother should have another child straight away, to staunch her grief. And that is often the mother’s desire too. Jean’s father was a doctor, and her mother loved babies: I think Jean was the baby they had to assuage their grief over the loss of her little sister. (11)

Rhys’s birth, Angier argues, however, ultimately could not ‘assuage’ the grief of Rhys’s mother who went on mourning the loss of the earlier baby. Rhys’s mourning mother, Angier thinks, had a tremendous impact on Rhys:

Often perhaps mostly, this works, and pulls the mother back into life. But sometimes it doesn’t. Then there is a phenomenon which doctors also recognize: what can happen to a child with a mourning mother. It can be left with a lifelong sense of loss and emptiness, of being wanted by no one and belonging nowhere; of being nothing, not really existing at all.

Like her heroines Jean often felt like a ghost, and from childhood she felt that she’d been fated. (11)
Initial few years of Rhys’s life, however, were not full of gloom and sorrows. Things started changing after the birth of Rhys’s younger sibling, Brenda, who was born five years after the birth of Rhys. Rhys, as mentioned already, was born in a large family. Being the youngest one, she certainly enjoyed the attention and affection of many, which is the natural prerogative of being the youngest. Things were bound to change with the arrival of Brenda who replaced Rhys as the youngest of the family. The long enjoyed attention started waning and Rhys had to adjust to the sad reality with difficulty. Brenda not only diverted their parents’ attention from Rhys, but also in a few years replaced her as the prettiest little one of the family. Rhys had to be left with a nurse as the youngest child captured their mother’s attention. The nurse was a black woman, Meta by name, who, according to Rhys, “couldn’t bear the sight of” Rhys (qtd. in Angier 12). Meta let Rhys to a world of fear, hatred and abomination—to a world of the zombies, the lizards, the scorpions and the cockroaches. Angier’s account, here, seems to be just an endorsement of Rhys’s conclusive statement on the role of Meta in her life in the chapter titled “Meta” in Smile Please:

... but my relief was enormous when Meta left or was sent away... But in any case it was too late, the damage had been done. Meta had shown me a world of fear and distrust, and I am still in that world. (32)

So, the birth of Brenda and the consequent employment of Meta as Rhys’s nurse, Angier thinks, contributed a lot to the creation of the world of fear and distrust that Rhys went on inhabiting almost all through her life.

It has to be mentioned in this context that Angier’s work tries to carefully examine Rhys’s childhood attitude to the black people. Though Angier admits that “she [Rhys] already had complicated feelings about black people (13)”, Angier declares that Rhys ultimately “wanted
to be like them” (13). Angier, however, does not explain why Rhys cherished such a wish.

The principal basis for such a conclusion on Angier’s part probably is Rhys’s own observations on black-white relationship in the chapter “BLACK/WHITE” in *Smile Please.* Rhys was particularly envious of the liveliness and gaiety of the black:

I decided that they had a better time than we did, they laughed a lot though they seldom smiled. They were stronger than we were, they could walk a long way without getting tired, carry heavy weights with ease.

Every night someone gave a dance, you could hear the drums. We had few dances.

They were more alive, more a part of the place than we were. (*Smile* 50)

*Smile Please,* however, does not show an uncritical support for the black; it rather reveals Rhys’s ambivalent attitude to them. There are, indeed, paragraphs in *Smile Please* that record Rhys’s unease with the blacks. While recollecting an incident of riot, for instance, Rhys writes⁴:

However, I could not forget the howling sound and there’s no doubt that a certain wariness did creep in when I thought about the black people who surrounded me. (48)

Rhys was also sceptic about the black admiration for the whites. In *Smile Please* she even asks “Did they like us at all?” (49). Rhys’s desire to “be like them” should also be taken with a touch of scepticism, because in *Smile Please* Rhys only talked about her childish ‘envy’ for the liveliness and liberty that she thought the black children enjoyed (50). ‘Envy’ and ‘desire’, of course, are not synonymous. ‘Envy’ may and may not get translated into ‘desire’.

One of the most important experiences that contributed to the making of Rhys is Rhys’s experience with Mr. Howard. It was sexual in nature and unquestionably the most intriguing adolescent experience of Rhys’s Dominican phase. Mr. Howard, however, was, probably, a
fictitious name for an elderly or aged family-friend. Rhys was, in fact, a compulsive diary-writer: every traumatic experience, hurt and scar found their ways into her diaries. Her diaries are now properties of University of Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA. They are categorized by their colour and are great source of information on Rhys’s life. Mr. Howard episode has found place in Rhys’s Black Exercise Book. While commenting on Mr Howard episode, Angier writes that “the ‘record of facts’” of this episode in the Black Exercise Book “is twenty pages long and very vivid” (26). According to Angier, the Black Exercise Book reveals Rhys’s adolescent attraction for Mr Howard, who was a courteous, charming and gallant old man. Rhys was apparently mesmerized by the attention she got from this ex-soldier of romantically heroic disposition. The Black Exercise Book suggests that her charm for this old man led to her seduction which, although, brought strange exhilaration at the end. As a seductive ploy the old man used to narrate sexual fantasies which always included Rhys. These fantasies generally had their characteristically sadistic perversion as they presented love as “not kindness, but violence and cruelty” (Angier 28). Rhys, Angier writes, “would only be allowed to rebel enough to make it more fun to force her to submit” (28). This whole episode, Angier argues, inscribed in Rhys a strange definition of love: love to her became “submission, punishment, cruelty” (28). In fact, Angier even suggests that the effect of this tryst with Mr. Howard remained with Rhys all through her life.

Angier’s book describes at length how Rhys reached England. In Dominica, Rhys had a short period of schooling—nearly eighteen months or so—at a convent. Then it was decided that she would be sent to England for schooling, a common practice among the colonials at the Caribbean. This decision came as a shock to Rhys, but overcoming this initial shock, she started getting excited at the idea of seeing England for the first time. The idea that her
younger sister would follow her soon was also comforting to Rhys. Never did she suspect that she would return to Dominica after nearly a quarter of a century.

In Angier’s book the story of Jean’s arrival in England is described in the chapter “The First Steps, 1907-1912”. Angier informs the readers that Rhys’s initial impression of England was of disbelief and shock. England was quite different from what she had imagined it to be. “Of course this isn’t England”, Rhys told herself, “it couldn’t be” (qtd. in Angier 39). In England, Rhys got admitted to the Perse School for Girls in Cambridge. Her experiences at Perse were not over all happy. She felt alienated and lonely, and above all the fuss for extreme correctness unsettled her free Dominican spirit (Angier 40). Such was the impact of Perse on Rhys that Angier thinks that “in Wide Sargasso Sea she [Rhys] gave Antoinette’s attic the dark corridors and red curtains of her memories of the Perse School (40)”. Rhys ultimately left the school at the end of 1908, for her long cherished dream of becoming an actress. Much against the wish of her aunt Clarice, Rhys entered The Academy of Dramatic Art at London on 16 January, 1909. She felt relatively better there. But the prospect of success on stage proved really slim as her ‘accent’ became a serious obstacle. Amidst a rumour of her father’s death, she was made to give up her acting career, though the push probably came from a financial crunch back home at Dominica. Out of utter frustration at this failure and a desperate will to resist the attempt of shipping her back to Dominica, Rhys got herself a job in the chorus of a musical comedy. Angier assumed that Clarice would have been very upset at it. The girls at the chorus companies were mostly poor and exploited. But, in the absence of the British upper class snobbery within the chorus company, Rhys thrived and made friends easily. Professionally the experience was not pleasant, though the most intense episode of her London life ensued during this phase. It was the love affair with
Lancelot Grey Hugh Smith, a wealthy, elegant gentleman, twice the age of Rhys. The affair did not last long as Rhys was found not to be suitable to marry into the class and society Lancelot belonged to. When he coldly detached himself from Rhys, she got nearly shattered. It was this emotional crisis that for the first time made her write a fictitious account of the affair. Long after this break-up, Rhys drew from this affair materials for writing to write *Voyage in the Dark*.

The aftermath of the break-up between Rhys and Smith is narrated in the chapter “The Interval, 1913-1919” of Angier’s book. After the break-up, Rhys plunged deep into frustration. Financially too she was in a mess, and Angier—by seamlessly mixing up *Voyage in the Dark* and her writings in the exercise books—conjectures towards a low life of semi-prostitution. An abortion came with all its psychological distress and Rhys even planned a suicide. In the Christmas of 1914—mired in depression and sorrow—Rhys purchased some good-looking exercise books along with a pen and a bottle of ink. After a few nights “three exercise books and half another” were filled with whatever she had about the affair with Lancelot (Angier 80). For the next ten years Rhys dragged these books with her through half of Europe without even looking at them once.

During this period, Rhys moved on with her life without pondering much over the past. She posed for the painters, joined the Crabtree Club (one of the first places in London used by the bohemians and artists for meetings and gatherings), made friends and got into several relationships, one of which even led to an engagement with a journalist named Maxwell Henry Hayes Macartney. As the war broke out, Max travelled to France as a correspondent
and estrangement set in between them before long. By the time the war was over Rhys was engaged to Jean Lenglet, much against the wish of Lancelot. Jean ‘escaped’ England by means of Lenglet and reached Paris, a city she fell in love with forever. But, poverty, uncertainty and the danger of being caught for not having proper papers stalked Lenglet and Rhys continuously. Their anxiety was compounded by Rhys’s pregnancy. An English tutor’s job at a very reputable French family (the Richelots) at Paris stabilized Rhys for a while. She had a rare period of happiness there before the birth of her child. But the new born child died of pneumonia just a few weeks after its birth. Misery and depression lurking always over Rhys swooped on her and soon she was sad as ever. It was again the Richelots who came in aid and got Lenglet a job and arranged for his papers. His job as interpreter at a disarmament commission took him—and later Rhys—to the post-World War Vienna.

However, Lenglet’s characteristic manipulative nature soon got them into trouble. After a dream-phase of happiness with costly gifts, chauffeurs, cars, parties, dresses and friends, suddenly Lenglet became a suspect for illegal money laundering. Lenglet and Rhys fled to Vienna. Rhys, in the midst of this mess, was pregnant again. She gave birth to Maryvonne, her only daughter, in Belgium. When they got back to Paris, poverty, uncertainty and the fear of being caught returned as old friends. Rhys was put into an abject state because of this as she had neither money, nor acquaintance. She tried a lot of jobs (saleswoman, American Express guide, mannequin etc.) during this period without much success. Poverty certainly was pushing her towards desperation.
Poverty pushed Rhys to writing as well. "I never wanted to write", wrote Rhys, "I wished to be happy and peaceful and obscure. I was dragged into writing by a series of coincidences—Mrs Adam, Ford, Paris—need for money" (qtd. in Owen v). In fact, when Rhys was trying to sell some of Lenglet’s articles translated by herself for money, Mrs. Adam, an expatriate English journalist, wanted to have a look at Rhys’s own writing. After much hesitation the diaries she had been carrying with her for so many years made their way to Mrs. Adam. Eventually, the diaries of Rhys were edited and titled by Mrs. Adam and sent to Ford who at that time was married to Stella Bowen and was busy publishing "Joyce, Pound, Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Richardson, Djuna Barnes, Paul Valery, Philippe Soupault, and dozens of others" (Angier 131) in his The Transatlantic Review. In the autumn of 1924, most probably in October (Angier 131), Ford met Rhys. On 12th December the last number of The Transatlantic Review came out with six pages of what would be later Rhys’s short story “Vienne”, re-titled by Ford from “Suzy Tells” to “Triple Sec”. Ford also intervened to turn Ella Lenglet into Jean Rhys. On 28 December, Lenglet (whom Rhys always called John) was arrested for stealing 23,421 francs from Exprinter, a travel agency which had employed him. It was catastrophic for Rhys, as in an unfamiliar place she had neither money, nor influence, nor any friends to bank upon. The not-so-close acquaintances included Mrs. Adam—who when sought out was found to be away—and the Fords. Inevitably, this led to Rhys’s dependence on the Fords initiating the Quartet affair. Not much documents are available to provide details of the phase and surely that is why the biographer prepared a new strategy to describe the affair. The fictitiousness of the narrative can be guessed from this paragraph of Angier:

All four participants wrote about what happened during the next two years. Jean wrote Quartet. John wrote Sous les Verrous. (Later Jean translated, cut and edited
this to become *Barred*, which is in effect, therefore by both of them.) Ford wrote a novel called *When the Wicked Man*. And Stella wrote an autobiography called *Drawn from Life*, which naturally includes an account of the end of her life with Ford...

Now Ford, Jean and John were all three novelists, fantasists and sometimes plain liars. And Ford and Jean were perhaps the two greatest artists of self pity in English fiction, never more so than in *When the Wicked Man* and *Quartet*. Stella was the only one who was not a novelist; and the only one who claimed, at least, not to be writing fiction but the truth. She was an interested party; but she was also a fair and honest person, and everyone who has studied this tangled affair agrees that she is its most reliable witness. But the trouble is that she deals with it only briefly and generally; and only with character and feeling, not at all with events. For those we have to go back to the novels. (Angier139)

Angier, actually, collates the four narratives mentioned above to prepare what a very plausible version of the affair. The four participants, Ford, Jean, Stella and Lenglet have three sets of names in the three novels mentioned. Angier constantly juggles with them to prepare her version of the affair. As a result of this, Angier’s account of the affair proves hardly adequate in alleviating the confusion in reader’s mind. The real and the fictitious characters interchange their positions frequently and at random creating a very unstable basis for understanding. Besides, Angier’s account of the Ford/Rhys affair appears also to be flawed with certain preconceived notions about these characters formed through various literary and non-literary representations of them. Even a cursory look at a few passages from Angier’s text could be description of the affair proves this:
On their last evening Marya and Stephan dine ‘recklessly’; Jan [Lenglet’s name in Barred] makes Stania very drunk. In the taxi to the station Marya turns to Stephan to say ‘Stephan, don’t leave me here. For God’s sake, take me with you.’ But he is already speaking, making his plans, and the moment has passed. ‘I’m not going to see your train out,’ Marya says. ‘It’s unlucky.’ Stania says the same thing – she will not wait until the train goes, ‘Ca porte Malheur.’ But Hubner is there; and he smiles up at him, ‘de son sourire plein de soumission et d’admiration.’ And Jan says, ‘si elle pleure en me disant au revoir, c’est peut-être que sa piété, pour un bref instant, dépasse son Bonheur d’être tout à Hubner désormais.’

Jan goes to Belgium (helped by money from Hubner); Stephan goes to Amsterdam. John was probably expelled to Holland, for he’d given his nationality as Dutch. Both Sous les Verrous and his next novel, Kerels, suggest that he spent most of the next two years tramping around Europe, being a sandwich man in Lucerne, selling newspapers in Berlin, carrying books for publishers in Frankfurt; and when he couldn’t get even such lowly jobs, passing round his hat as a street musician. (146 – 147)

The intrusion of fiction in Angier’s version of the actual events is very much clear in the above quoted portion of her book, but, more importantly, we should realize that it was nearly impossible for Angier to get beyond that version because—as mentioned before—very little historical evidence of this phase of Rhys’s life is available. Certain evidences, a few dates and periods, of course, can be gleaned from various sources. These evidences, however, hardly throw light on the crux of the Ford/Rhys affair; they rather merely provide a few timelines of the affair.
On 10 February, 1925 John was “tried, convicted and sentenced to eight months’ imprisonment, and moved to the prison at Fresnes, just outside Paris” (Angier 140) and “it seems to have been then that he (Ford) took Jean in to live with him and Stella” (Modjeska 85). The affair—according to Angier—began quietly with Ford assisting Jean with her writing and Stella with her clothes (141). They moved about together and in that brief spell of happiness Jean became Ford’s receptive disciple and the coveted mistress at the same time. But soon Stella became aware of the growing intimacy between Ford and Jean and that period of happiness was over. The muddle took away peace from all three. When John came out of prison he also felt cuckolded by Jean. On 4 August, 1925, John was arrested again for breaking his expulsion order. He was probably expelled to Holland. In the meantime Jean—helped by Ford’s reference—was employed by a wealthy American Lady to ghost-write for her. She was sent to Juan-les-Pins. It was another brief spell of happiness for Jean as she lived in luxury in a beautiful house by the Mediterranean. But, that too was short-lived as Ford eccentrically accused the Lady of exploiting Jean. The letter of accusation from Ford chucked Jean out of her job. Her unhappy return to Paris was made unbearable by Ford’s growing apathy for her. Ford could not accommodate her anymore in their new studio on the rue Notre Dame des Champs. Ford arranged a room for her in a hotel near the Gare Montparnasse. Ford probably visited her often (Angier, however, only talks about Heidler and Marya in this context) in her hotel room and insisted that Jean keep up the public appearance of her relationship with the ‘Fords’ by coming to their parties. “This went on till Christmas…At the end of December he, Stella and Julie left for Toulon. They stayed there for three months” (Angier 151). Jean during this period was trying to publish her Left Bank stories and went to England with some money Ford had given her. It is not quite clear how long she stayed there or when she came back to Paris. Perhaps she came back “some time in the spring” (Angier 152). She had to move into a hotel room again but was avoided and
ignored by the Fords: “Jean knew it was all over, but she couldn’t let go” (Angier 152). As a natural consequence ‘Jean fell in’ (Angier 154) and went through a phase of drunkenness and suicidal depression. Angier assumes that Rhys received irregular allowances from Ford. In mid-December, she went to Holland to join John. “She had already, she said later”, writes Angier, “begun to write Quartet in Paris, and in Amsterdam she finished it” (163). Rhys, in fact, wrote several other versions of the Ford/Rhys affair before attempting to write a novel. “Houdia” the unpublished short story was one of those which led to Quartet. “Susan and Suzanne” was another.

After the publication of Good Morning, Midnight in 1939 the whole literary as well as political scene of Europe changed as the World War II started. Rhys vanished from public attention and remained so for a very long time. No wonder that most of her literary connections were gone, and many thought she had died during the War. Rhys, in fact, remained without any new publication, and all of her published works went out of print. This part of Rhys’s life is not elaborately narrated in this work. The reason for this is also the fact that in the later part of her life Rhys probably lost of her bitterness for her past and saw no reason to write about what happened; neither did anyone trouble her with her past except Stella Bowen, whose memoir came out during the War, in 1941. But Rhys was probably reluctant to stir up the affair all over; especially with Ford having gone (Ford died on 26th June, 1939) and Stella barely surviving the War (Stella died on 30th Oct, 1947), there was no need to. Rhys’s second marriage, with Leslie Tilden Smith, a literary agent saw the production of the rest of her pre-War novels, undoubtedly marking Leslie’s inspiration behind them. Her married-life with Leslie saw much domestic fight caused by Rhys’s alcohol abuse, but no battle of the books like the one the Ford/Rhys affair produced. After Leslie’s
death Rhys married Leslie’s cousin Max Hammer and spent a life of poverty, prison terms and unsettledness. This period is best caught in the Letters of Rhys. Literary activities were almost buried at this time. It was only late in her life that she took up the writing of Wide Sargasso Sea. Wide Sargasso Sea brought success to Rhys who got recognized as an important fiction writer of English Language. At the age of eighty six Rhys started working on her autobiography which she left unfinished when she died in 1979.

III

This part of the chapter, as said already, will discuss the works of Jean Rhys beginning with the two—The Left Bank and Other Stories (1927, hereafter Left Bank) and Postures or Quartet (1928)—which are directly related to the Quartet phase of her life. The Left Bank and Other Stories, a precursor to Postures/Quartet (Quartet was published in America with the title Postures, the title Rhys originally thought for the novel and was denied by her publisher), was published with an active participation on part of Ford who wrote a lengthy preface to it. The collection—that shows Rhys’s early mastery over the craft of autobiographical fiction—is mostly about lonely women. Its twenty two short stories are all (except “Vienne”) told against the backdrop of post World War I Paris or France. Though apparently these stories have a variety of themes, according to critics, they draw chiefly from the past and the present of Rhys. When one reads these stories, Rhys’s Parisian professional life of a mannequins (represented in “Mannequin”), her poverty and hunger (represented in “Hunger”), her low life (represented in “From a French Prison”), her loneliness and
alienation (represented in “A Spiritualist” and “La grosse Fifi”), melancholy, depression and suicidal wish (represented in “A Night”), her jibe at the comically hollow intellectuality and foppishness of the rich (represented in “At the Villa d’Or” and “Discourse of a Lady Standing a Dinner to a Down-and-out Friend”)—all the things associated with the conventional projection of Rhys—accumulate in one’s imagination to create “...an underworld of darkness and disorder, where officialdom, the bourgeoisie and the police were the eternal enemies and the fugitive the only hero” (Bowen 166). The Left Bank and Other Stories, Castro says, reveals “sketches of life on the bohemian fringes of European society, frequently focusing on female characters who suffer, in one way or another, indignities imposed by husbands or lovers” (8). “Mixing Cocktail” and “Again the Antilles” offer momentary respite from this world, as they wistfully look back at Rhys’s past in the Caribbean. Left Bank is striking for its economy of expression and triteness in form—in fact, very few of the stories of this book are more than three pages long. This triteness of form, indeed, is exactly what struck Ford when he discovered the talents of Rhys. “What struck me on the technical side”, wrote Ford in his lengthy preface to Left Bank, “was the singular instinct for form possessed by this young lady, an instinct for form being possessed by singularly few writers of English and by almost no English women writers” (Ford, Reader 244). Quoting Ford’s introduction, in her The Worlding of Jean Rhys (2001) Sue Thomas observes:

Ford measures the sketches against the ‘neatness of form’ he admires in these French writers. His ambivalence about her “terrifying” Antillean “insight and . . . terrific . . . almost lurid! -- passion for stating the case of the underdog” is apparent in his construction of her having “let her pen loose on the Left Banks of the Old World--on its goals, its studios, its salons, its cafés, its criminals, its midinettes--with a bias of admiration for its midinettes [Parisian working women] and of sympathy for its law-
breakers” (24). On the one hand he thinks it a note “that badly needs sounding” (24); on the other he links it with the shortcomings of French youth who reject neatness of form, “determined violently not to be coldly critical, or critical at all”. (49)

Left Bank was a book for which Rhys took indispensable help from her mentor Ford. Nobody at that point perhaps could guess that the whole armory bestowed by Ford onto Rhys will be turn against him in no time.

Quartet is the next published venture of Rhys and it is to be noted that this is not only the first novel of Rhys but also her first published work that does not have the literary guidance of Ford. Read with this knowledge, the novel shows the grip of the author on the genre and her remarkably mature style. At about half past five in an October afternoon at Paris Quartet begins and immediately after the beginning, Marya Zelli, its heroine, is introduced. She is soon discovered by Miss Esther De Solla down the Rue de Rennes and taken to her studio. In a conversation over drink there, Marya is first acquainted with the names of the ‘Heidlers’. Then Marya is introduced to Mr and Mrs Heidler in a small restaurant. When they are having a polite discussion, Marya feels “his [Heidler’s] hand lying heavily on her knee”; she makes “a cautious but decided movement” and the hand is “withdrawn” (13). Coming back to her dark room in the hotel, she meets Stephan, her husband. The story now is shifted to the past of Marya when she was in England earning her bread as a professional member of a chorus group. It is shown that Marya was going well there, although underneath “she remained apart, lonely frightened of her loneliness, resenting it passionately” (15). Then, “during a period of unemployment spent in London”, she met “Monsieur Stephan Zelli” (16). Stephan proposed to marry her. They got married and on “a June afternoon, heavy with heat, they arrived in
Paris” (18). Marya did not know how Stephan earned his livelihood as he was “secretive and liar” (20). But for a while, at least, “she felt that her marriage, though risky, had been a success” (20). After this journey into the past, the story comes back to the present and Marya is informed by the patronne of her hotel that her husband has been arrested but the reason for the arrest is unknown. Marya is shocked and almost devastated as the ominous forebodings of her mind seem to have come true. After a long self demeaning quest, she comes to know that Stephan has been arrested for stealing. She is allowed to meet him in a prison within a few days. She meets him at Prison de la Sante where Stephan claims to be innocent. He asks Marya to arrange for some money and says that all that while he has been worrying for Marya. She in the next few days sells her clothes and gets a surprise invitation from the Heidlers to a party. Mr. Heidler seems extremely understanding about Marya’s plight. He looks caring.

Ten days later Stephan is tried and sentenced to a year’s imprisonment to be followed by expulsion from France. Marya goes to Sante to meet Stephan. She is apologetic for not turning up in the trial. She also tells him about her impending meeting with the Heidlers and their sympathy for her. She mentions Mrs. Heidler as “a good sort” (36). Marya feels a desperate longing to comfort Stephan. In the evening, however, a curious thought comes to her: she decides not to worry about things as she is “sick of being sad” (38). In her meeting with the Heidlers, Lois invites her to stay with them in the spare room of her studio. After dinner she is invited by Lois to her studio as Heidler goes to another business. Lois appears to be in sympathy with Marya and she also seeks sympathy for herself as well. When Marya next visits Stephan, she tells him that the Heidlers have “asked her to go and stay with them” (45). She tells him that she does not want to go. When Stephan persuades her strongly to
accept the invitation, she agrees to “quieten him and make him happier” (46). She receives a money order for five pounds from her aunt Maria Hugh at England. Marya shifts to the Heidlers’ studio where everything begins in a quiet note: coffee in the morning, then Heidler reading his letters, and then lunch at Lefranc’s. She also sits as model for Lois. Thursday parties by Lois become a regular phenomenon though Marya “felt strangely at a loss” (49) in them. Every Saturday Marya visits Fresnes to see Stephan. One day Lois asks her not to visit Stephan anymore so that she can distance herself from him and come back to a respectable life. Marya protests and is upset. Just after this, Heidler talks to her alone. Then one day, after a dinner party, late at night, Lois leaves Heidler and Marya at a cafe saying she is tired. Heidler gets an opportunity to talk to Marya alone and he professes his passionate love for her adding that Lois knows it and has her consent to this. Lois keeps leaving them together more often as Heidler makes more advances. Marya almost gives in under intense emotional pressure. Soon Marya talks to Lois and expresses her willingness to leave the Heidlers. But Lois insists that she should stay with them as running away would not mean Heidler will give up on her: “Of course, mind you, he wants things badly when he does want them” (64). The ménage a trois takes off and Lois does her best to keep up a public appearance of normalcy. Still, Marya would frequently have sudden longings for “her life with Stephan as one longs for vanished youth” (70).

Marya, being invited with a letter, meets Cairn in a restaurant. Cairn warns Marya about Heidler and offers to help her with some borrowed money so that she can free herself from the association of the Heidlers. But Marya does not believe in the words of Cairn as she is almost sure that Cairn cannot help her, and before she walks “three steps from the Closerie de Lilas” she forgets “all about him” (74). Heidler forces Marya to join their weekend sojourn to
Brunoy thereby making her miss the weekly meeting with Stephan. The night before they are to return to Paris, Marya has a fierce quarrel with Heidler before Lois as Marya overhears a conversation between The couple denouncing her. Marya, in fact, violently hits Heidler. As an outcome of this, it is decided that Marya will not live with the Heidlers anymore; she will be lodged in some hotel and she will be provided with the expenses by Heidler. On these conditions, she is sent back to Paris.

Marya again visits Stephan at the Fresnes. Stephan tells her how he has been heart-broken when she has not turned up last time. But as soon as she turns her back to Stephan, thoughts of Heidler come in waves to Marya. She realizes that she is almost immersed in his love. Heidler starts frequenting her hotel and making love to her. He also forces her to join tea-parties of Lois where inevitably Marya feels insulted by Lois and her friends. Marya soon realizes that the whole affair “wasn’t a love affair”; it “was a fight”, a “ruthless, merciless, three-cornered fight” (91). She gets depressed by this thought. She even dislikes the way Heidler makes love to her: “He wasn’t a good lover, of course. He didn’t like women. She had known that as soon as he touched her” (92). She hates the way Heidler gives money to her after each time he visits her and makes love. Still she feels that “Love” is “a terrible thing”—it cannot die: “You poisoned it and stabbed at it and knocked it down into the mud—well down—and it got up and staggered on, bleeding and muddy and awful. Like—like Rasputin’ (96). There comes back again her despair and depression. For the six days of a week she remains plunged in despair. The respite from that morbidity comes on the seventh when she visits Stephen and comes back comforted and soothed.
It is early August and Stephan is to be released on the second Sunday in September. He starts making plans with Marya. Heidler makes it clear that Marya will have to distance herself from Stephan. Marya assures him that she will “never live with him [Stephan] again” (100). Stephan now comes back after his release. He seems to be very caring to Marya. His company brings peace to her. With it comes back the feeling that Stephan “was the only human being with whom she had ever felt safe or happy” (104). According to the wish of the Heidlers Stephan and Marya meet them at a café. It turns out to be an uneasy and awkward meeting. After the meeting Marya frees herself from the Heidlers and comes back to Stephan much to the annoyance of Heidler. Stephan leaves Marya for Amsterdam; but before leaving he senses the abnormality in Marya’s behavior: “You don’t love me anymore,” Stephan says, “I feel it. I know it. You stiffen when I touch you” (110). Marya meets Heidler after this and in that meeting he dumps her. He proposes to arrange a trip down the South for Marya, and leaves her. She is acutely depressed and heavily drunk and lets a waiter take her to his place and make love to her. Marya goes to the South and being depressed writes to Heidler to send some money for a return journey. Instead of money Miss Nicolson (a friend of Lois) is sent by Lois (It’s an insinuation toward the elaborate game the Heidler couple is playing with the apparently innocent Marya. The couple appears to collaborate in exchanging information, desecrating Marya’s relationship with Heidler and humiliating Marya intentionally) Heidler sends some money for her stay there, but refuses to pay for her return journey. Stephan also writes to Marya informing her about his plan of coming back to Paris as he cannot find any work in Amsterdam. He sends Marya four hundred francs for her return journey. Marya ultimately comes back to Paris and unites with Stephan. Stephan, even now, takes help from dubious people and is still in trouble. He finds a shelter in his present benefactor’s unused room. Under heavy pressure of the situation, and as a victim of depression and drunkenness Marya unearths her story to Stephan and accuses him for everything. When Stephan wants to
take a violent revenge upon Heidler, Marya tries to stop him saying, “You shan’t! ... You think I’d let you touch him? I love him” (142). Stephan, in fury, hits her and leaves her. The ending shows Stephan “going off” with the girl of his benefactor and host (143).

Quartet has been read as an autobiographical novel and the principal criticism against Quartet is that it is the most self-excusing work of Rhys; it is distinguished from her later mature novels by its indulgence in self-pity to an extreme which verges on vulgarity. Katie Owen, in her introduction to Quartet, points this out by a close-reading of the text:

Marya is a ‘blonde girl, not very tall, slender waisted...her long eyes...were...oddly remote in expression’. Later: ‘... she appeared ‘frail, childish, and extraordinarily shabby.’

The apparent self-pity of such descriptions is one side of Rhys’s heroines. Marya moans: ‘...the trouble with me...is that I’m not hard enough, I’m soft, thin skinned sort of person ... I’ve realized, you see, that life is cruel and horrible to unprotected people.’ Within a few pages of each other in Quartet, both Lois and Heidler are bitterly described as looking ‘extraordinarily hard’ (xvi)

It has, however, to be admitted that even in Quartet Rhys shows that she is learning the art of curbing her instincts—something that she masters in her more mature works. Owen writes:

But self-pity is undercut by wit and irony, sporadically in Quartet but more consistently in her mature work – and also by the heroine’s suppressed violence – the revenge of the meek – that is present in Quartet, builds throughout her fiction and
function and bursts out triumphantly in *Wide Sargasso Sea* when Antoinette – the mad woman in the attic – sets fire to Rochester’s house. (xvi)

What is perhaps more important about *Quartet* is that in spite of its irregularity and ‘uneven’ ness (Rhys, *Letters* 171), it “never wastes a word and rarely spells things out. In place are her style, key symbols and paradigmatic heroine. Her sustained use of imagery is brilliant – the fairground machinery, the animals (usually caged, but with the potential to be dangerous – like Marya), and hats – used to express aspects of the personality or situation of the wearer. These recurring and mutating images work almost on a subliminal level, and partly account for the experience of reading the novel is so unsettling” (Owen xvii).

Rhys’s next novel, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, was published in 1930, two years after the publication of *Quartet* and it is written, as if, in continuation of its predecessor with a somewhat similar heroine, Julia Martin, at the centre and Ford’s figure casting a shadow upon Mr Mackenzie. Julia is a dumped lover of Mackenzie living on allowances from the latter. *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* is divided into three parts. Part One opens up with Julia in her hotel-room “[a]fter she had parted from Mr Mackenzie” (7). It is a life of gloom and depression—as is usual with Rhys’s heroines—mostly due to the sense of betrayal and abandonment that came with that separation. It is learnt then that Mr Mackenzie pays her three hundred francs per week through her lawyer, Henri Legros, to keep things quiet and amicable. But not before long, Julia is intimidated by the lawyer that the weekly allowances will stop with a final one time allowance of fifteen hundred francs. Stirred up by this, Julia tries to meet Mackenzie who is wealthy but not a millionaire. Julia stalks him and ultimately confronts him at a restaurant. She prepares for her revenge and executes it by refusing the cheque of final allowance saying: “I despise you” (26). The whole scene is noticed by a
bysitter, Horsfield, who develops an unusual sympathy for Julia. Horsfield meets Julia, takes her with him for an evening and after hearing about her affair with Mackenzie gives her the fifteen hundred francs she refused from Mackenzie. Julia—to Horsfield’s surprise—accepts the money. Horsfield tells Julia that she should pay a visit to London where her ailing mother and an unwelcoming sister, Norah, still live. Julia buys some cheap dresses with Horsfield’s money and the first part ends with Julia on train to London. Julia reaches London with not more than thirty shillings left with her and lodges herself in a dirty hotel-room at Bloomsbury. She has a mnemonic walk down some streets of London and on return to the hotel finds Norah, Julia’s sister, waiting for her. Julia fails to secure accommodation in Norah’s place. Neither does she get any money from Norah who informs her about their mother’s grave condition and the expenses she had to bear for her. From her Julia comes to know that their uncle Griffiths has come to London. He is a wealthy man and Julia decides to meet him for assistance. In the mean time she also writes to Neil James, a wealthy former lover of hers, and calls Mr Horsfield intimating both of them of her arrival. Julia’s meeting with uncle Griffiths does not yield much. She is scolded for her reckless life and for abandoning her family. Mr Griffiths sends her off with one pound as expense for her return to Paris which he thinks would be the wisest thing to do for her. On returning to the hotel Julia finds Mr Horsfield waiting for her. They go out for dinner, wander the streets in the evening and at last part. The next afternoon Julia goes to see her mother at Acton where she meets Wyatt, the attendant, who gives her a formal reception. Soon she gets to see her ailing mother who seems to have lost memory although Julia remains under the impression that she perhaps recognizes Julia and talks about her Brazilian past. She goes again to Acton next day and after coming back to her hotel gets a telephonic message from Neil James asking her to meet him that night or the night after between nine and ten. The meeting with James seems to be productive: Julia is received with apparent show of warmth and at the end of the meeting Neil
promises to send some money to her hotel’s address. The next day Julia receives a phone call which asks her to go to Acton immediately as her mother’s condition has worsened. Julia’s mother dies after she reaches Acton. The death brings a sense of relief to all. But just after the cremation the sisters have a nasty quarrel which was long pent up within their hearts. Julia is thrown out of her sister’s flat by her sister’s elderly maid, Mrs Wyatt. She has a dinner with Horsfield and he spends the night with her. A day later Julia receives twenty pounds from James and prepares to leave for Paris. The final part opens up with Julia back in Paris. After reaching Paris, she gets a letter from Horsfield who sends her ten pounds and assures her of a visit. Suddenly Julia feels happy again. The novel ends with a chance encounter with Mackenzie. Both Julia and Mackenzie seem to come out of the bad blood. Julia asks for some money from Mackenzie who gladly gives her that. They part and the ending remains typically open:

The street was cool and full of grey shadows. Lights were beginning to come out in the cafes. It was the hour between dog and wolf, as they say. (137)

The novel, therefore, does not say anything about Julia’s future and it seems that the journey of the Rhys-heroine does not end.

*Good Morning Midnight* (1939), though came out after *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), is the next in sequence of Rhys’s Paris novels. *Good Morning Midnight* is the final novel in the series of Rhys’s Paris novels and it tells the story of an aging heroine who, on the brink of destruction and catastrophe, lives the lowly life of a hunted haunted creature. This novel is divided into four parts. The first two parts are basically a long interior monologue in the typical modernist tradition. Part one begins with the listless ways of the life of Sophia Jansen,
the principal protagonist of the novel. She wanders aimlessly around the streets of Paris under the heavy, darken- ing haze of depression. She drinks heavily, is lonely and lives in some cheap hotel-rooms. There are frequent shifts and cracks in narration and chronology acquainting the reader with the descent of Sophia or Sasha from the bored out receptionist in a fashion-store to an American Express guide to a forsaken alcoholic who hovers about cafes, bars and restaurants without company. All of a sudden a legacy of 'two pound ten' a week saves her to some degree from the prospect of starvation and destitution experienced already. She makes friends with similar drifters: two Russians in the first place. Now, in a flash back the scene of her new-born child's death is revisited. After leaving the Russians Sophia feels a curious urge for transformation. She dyes her hair, buys a hat and soon after gets spotted by a young gigolo who takes her for a rich lady. In Part Two, Sophia is revisited by the two Russians. The younger one takes her to an artist, a painter. She buys a painting from him for six hundred francs. For a very brief while she feels happy. Part Three travels back to Sophia's past with Enno Jansen. The life Sophia spent with Enno seems similar to the lives of Rhys's heroines in her earlier works like "Vienne" and Quartet. Sophia and Enno are on the move and, when in Brussels, they are found to be preparing for Paris, where, Enno thinks, everything will be all right. But very soon they run out of money. Enno, leaving Sophia, goes out in search of some money. Sophia visits an old acquaintance and manages to borrow some money from him. The man, having given the money, kisses her to her absolute disgust. She, of course, has to lie about the money before Enno who has—in the mean time—secured some promise for assistance from a waiter. They go to this waiter's place. His mistress sulks and later complains about the waiter's miserliness on her. Enno, however, gets some money from him and reaches Paris along with Sophia. In Paris, he plans to join an advertisement campaign for tea. Sophia—in the mean time—gives English lessons to three pupils for ten francs an hour. She then is found to be pregnant and gives birth to a child who, quite like the
baby of Marya in *Quartet*, dies soon. At this point in the story, Enno leaves Sophia. Completely forsaken, Sophia writes to her relatives back in London but without much success. Part four returns Sophia to her present state of desolation. The young gigolo visits her at the hotel and begs for an evening out. They wander about from cafes to bars and restaurants. The gigolo persistently begs her to let him make love to her. Sophia refuses repeatedly and discloses her fear and hatred for human beings who—it seems to her—are fundamentally predatory in nature. The gigolo, however, does not let her go and pursues her to her room, where, under a paradoxical situation, Sophia suffers a “sex-theft” (xii). The novel ends as Sophia sinks in depression-incited reveries of desolation.

*Voyage in the dark* (1934)—though published in between her Paris novels—tells the story of a young heroine in England struggling against odds, with memories of West Indies as her only refuge from suffering. This is the first of the two West Indian Novels of Rhys, the second being the celebrated *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Voyage in the Dark* is narrated by its protagonist, Anna Morgan, barely a girl of nineteen. She begins with the revelation of her dislike for London which is cold and lacks all sorts of warmth. She takes refuge in her memories of her Caribbean past which is warm, colourful, full of voices and smell. It is also revealed that she works as a member of a group that travels around for shows. She has friends in the group like Maudie and Laurie. They live a lowly life typical of such a job—they seem to be habituated with change of address, cheap rented houses with disapproving landladies and changing male-companions. During a stay at a cheap rented house Maudie and Anna pick up two men on their evening walk. The one that likes Anna is Walter Jeffries. He takes Anna’s address at London, and when she comes back to London, meets her at a rich club. The first meeting does not go well as Walter’s attempt to bed her is thwarted by Anna. But, to her
surprise, Walter is not offended. He gets her a taxi to her place. She does not feel well after reaching home and has a row with the landlady who asks her to leave. Next day Anna gets a letter from Walter and finds two five-pound notes with that. She goes out and buys some dresses with that and immediately after returning she falls sick. She writes Walter asking for help which comes soon. Walter settles with the landlady for a while and on her recovery arranges a better accommodation for Anna. Anna visits his place on his wish and he makes love to her. She always gets some money inside her bag after each of their love-makings. Maudie now gives Anna a visit and is happy to see Anna going well with Walter. Maudie, however, has no illusion about the affair and advises her to squeeze the man as much as possible, as, probably, she foresees that the end of the road is not very far. In the mean time, Anna meets Walter's cousin, Vincent, whom she does not like much although he is extremely handsome. Anna also has a visit from her stepmother Hester who refuses to provide for Anna any more. The issues of ancestry raised by Hester take Anna back to the Caribbean in memories. The Caribbean, in fact, seems to be the only happy refuge to her. Soon she is taken on a tour to the countries by Walter where they are joined by Vincent and a girl brought by Vincent. The tour, however, does not go well as Vincent's girl quarrels with Vincent and in the end Anna learns that Walter will be away to New York for a few months with Vincent. She remains depressed at the thought of not remaining separated to see Walter for that long. Walter returns earlier than expected. But that can hardly make Anna happy, as soon comes another letter written by Vincent on behalf of Walter announcing the end of her relation with Walter. Anna is now crestfallen. A meeting with Walter confirms that what Vincent has written in the letter is true. Anna now changes her address and in her new boarding meets a cunning looking girl named Ethel who proposes to start a massage-cum-manicure business with Anna. Anna also meets Laurie who takes her out with two of her American male-friends. The evening turns out to be a disappointing one as both Anna and Laurie get drunk.
But one of the two Americans, Carl, renews the acquaintance by paying another visit to Anna later. By then Anna is a partner in Ethel’s business which does not take off at all. Anna now has another money-for-love affair with Carl. But not before long Anna starts feeling sick and it turns out to be an unwanted pregnancy. The whole thing ends in a traumatic abortion at an advanced stage with financial help from Walter through Vincent. The novel ends in a long reverie of Anna that takes Anna back and forth in time. Anna’s Caribbean memories come vivid with all the colours and warmth. Doctor comes and announces her to be out of risk and hopes her to be all right soon.

The next novel of Rhys comes nearly three decades after the last. The intervening period was as uneven as any of Rhys’s novels is. A picture of that can be had from her Letters, which also reveals the great preparation and trouble Rhys took to write her magnum opus. *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), the last and the most well-known novel of Rhys, is the one on which rests the reputation of Rhys. It opens in the post-Emancipation Caribbean islands with trouble brewing between the liberated slave community and their erstwhile masters. The novel is divided into three parts. The first part is narrated by Antoinette, who is a little girl in the beginning of the novel. She comes from a decayed family of slave-owners residing in Coulibri, a beautiful place gone wild. Antoinette’s family has lost prosperity and security and is left with its last three members: other than Antoinette, there are her young widowed mother Annette and her crippled brother Pierre. Except the Martinique servant Francine, who is the only person to have affection for Antoinette, all the other attendants and servants have turned hostile to them. The little girl feels distanced even from her mother who seems to be sinking in emotional pressure of the circumstances. The emancipated slaves jeer at them as “white niggers” (9) and “white cockroaches” (8). Even Tia, the black girl brought by Christophine as
a playmate of lonely Antoinette, bears hatred for Antoinette’s race. Amidst such uncertainties, Annette marries one Mr Mason, a British, who is relatively wealthy. But the new found order does not last for long, as one night, all of a sudden, a racial riot\(^6\) drives the entire family away from Coulibri. Pierre is burnt to death in the riot and Annette loses her sanity. As Antoinette recovers from the trauma in Aunt Cora’s home, the beautiful Coulibri gets out of her reach leaving only a strong impression in her memories. She is sent to a convent, where Mr Mason visits her occasionally with gifts. The death of Annette has only a sly reference in the novel, because, as Antoinette suggests, she has died for her a long time ago. At the end of the first part there is a suggestion of marriage. Antoinette is seventeen and Mr. Mason wants her to meet some English friend, one of whom, he mysteriously adds, will certainly come. The purpose of this person is, as a matter of fact, to marry Antoinette. Vagueness in Mr. Mason’s tone is intended to bring out the menace of the conspiracy of marrying Antoinette off without much fuss. The first part, however, ends with a dream. Antoinette wakes up in a nightmare—something which happened to her often in her childhood—and is pacified by Sister Marie Augustine.

The second part of the novel begins in Rochester’s narration, although he is not named. He has already married Antoinette and is on his way to their honeymoon house at Granbois. Alongside the couple are porters and attendants. Rochester, however, seems strangely disturbed by the place as well as by its people. The coloured woman, Amelie, seems to be laughing at him, whereas, the place creates an apparent unease by its excess—its big rain drops, its thick green leaves of trees and so on. Antoinette seems to be a woman, who is hesitating and nervous, and the coloured porters ignorant, uncivilized. Reaching the honeymoon house they drink to happiness and are happy for a while. Rochester writes a letter
to his father telling him that everything “has gone according to your plan” (46). The letter strongly echoes *Jane Eyre* and Rochester’s loveless marriage in it. Rochester’s unease is revealed in his memories of the early flutters prior to his marriage. Soon he meets Christophine whom he does not like. Antoinette and Rochester diverge on their placiality, as Antoinette’s attachment to the island seems strange to Rochester. Their early days of honeymoon are still spent in intense love. Trouble erupts when a coloured man (called Daniel) writes to Rochester half telling, half blackmailing him with ‘stories’ about Antoinette and her family. A meeting with Daniel worsens the situation further. Amelie also takes part in damaging the relation of the couple by insinuating on the shady past of Antoinette’s family and soon Rochester’s unease, nourished by rumours, suspicion and jealousy develops into a problem. Rochester distances himself from Antoinette, who, at last, in desperation, looks to Christophine’s obeah for help. In Antoinette’s narration the encounter is described where Christophine advises her to go away from him for a while. But Antoinette refuses to take any advice and extracts some obeah assistance from the reluctant Christophine. Things, however, change for the worse. Rochester torments her by making love to the coloured servant Amelie with the knowledge of Antoinette’s presence and not before long Antoinette—having failed to win him back by telling him the other side of the story—rages in fury. Christophine comes and pacifies her. There follows a furious altercation between Rochester and Christophine, both accusing each other. The second part ends with Rochester’s departure from Granbois with his troubled wife according to his prior arrangement.

The third part of the novel begins with Grace Pool’s account of the circumstances leading to her appointment as a secret attendant of Antoinette in the mansion of Rochester who does not want to hear any more of Antoinette. Soon the narration shifts to Antoinette
who now narrates her experience of confinement in a room where she wakes early and lies shivering. She thinks it is not England. She often steals the keys from the sleeping Grace Pool and wanders around the mansion at night. She wakes up one morning aching all over, and is told by Pool of her last night’s encounter with Richard Mason who came to see her. Antoinette attacked Richard Mason fiercely. Antoinette remembers the incident of the last night gradually. Much does she forget though and tries hard to recover her past through memories of colours, sound and smell. In an almost schizophrenic consciousness Antoinette jumbles up dreams, visions and reality. In one such confused dream she sets the house on fire and finally recovers her lost identity by identifying herself with Tia, standing beneath the burning mansion. She jumps from the top of her residence (the ‘jumping’ and ‘awaking’ are intentionally left vague in the novel to highlight their symbolic significance) and awakes to realize that she has found her way out of her labyrinthine crisis and steals out of her room as if on a mission.

As the critical writings on Rhys—discussed in the Introduction to this dissertation—suggest, a connection between Rhys’s life and work is established in the canon of Rhys-criticism. This has been done firstly because of Rhys’s own claim that she “can’t make things up”, she “can’t invent”; she “just” writes about “what happened” (qtd. in Plante 52), and secondly because of biographical endeavours like Angier’s—which try to smoothen things out to make them fit into a pre-conceived frame. But, the components of biographical criticism (such as biography, autobiography, letters, autobiographical writings, interview-excerpts etc.)—placed under the umbrella term of life-writing—are not as stable as they are supposed to be in such criticism. The linear, unilayered narrative of life-writing has, of late, been put under the critical scanner and the linearity of life writing has been shown to be
fraught with cracks and fissures. The dependence on biographical materials to arrive at a
concluding point has, therefore, received a jolt and scepticism and doubt have become regular
companions of life writing studies. The next chapter will delve into the past, present and
future of life-writing before examining and interrogating (in Chapter III) the categorization of
Rhys as a writer of autobiographical fiction/prose. An insight into the genre of ‘life-writing’
is, indeed, necessary for a proper evaluation of Rhys’s negotiation with it in her works.
Notes

1. A reading of the only other known biography of Jean Rhys—Lilian Pizzichini’s *The Blue Hour* (2009)—very distinctly reveals the limitations of biographical works on Rhys in general. Pizzichini’s book has been criticized on several grounds. In fact, coming twenty long years after Angier’s *Jean Rhys*, Pizzichini’s work has not only disappointed the readers, but has also drawn severe criticism from many. The first reason behind the adverse response to Pizzichini work is her over-dependence on Angier’s book. In her author’s note Pizzichini acknowledges her gratitude to Angier saying, “Angier has laid the groundwork for any biographer of Rhys and I am very grateful to her for that” (305). In fact, other than depending upon Angier’s work, very much like Angier, Pizzichini draws heavily from Rhys’s fiction. According to reviewers, Pizzichini borrows both content and style from Rhys, losing in the way factuality and turning her biography of Rhys more into a subjective impression of Rhys—‘a portrait’, rather than an evidential account. “Lilian Pizzichini’s *The Blue Hour*”, writes Elaine Showalter in her “Jean Rhys Has Seduced Her Biographer”, “echoes Pound [Pound’s “Portrait d’une Feme”] in its subtitle; a “portrait”, after all, is more subjective and intimate than a biography” (n.pag.). This subjectiveness propelled by the lack of enough factual evidence and research resources in Pizzichini’s work is spotted by almost all reviewers of *The Blue Hour*. This is what Lauren Elkin says in her review, “When a Biography is not a Biography: *The Blue Hour: A Life of Jean Rhys*”:

The “facts” are culled largely from Angier’s volume (as far as I can tell she did not consult the Rhys archives in Tulsa where Angier herself got more of her primary source material); (n.pag.)
In addition to this over dependence on Angier, Pizzichini’s tendency to borrow heavily from Rhys is also pointed out and criticized by Elkin:

... a god deal is cobbled together from Rhys’s own work, resulting in a narrative that reads like a mash-up of everything Rhys ever published. Were I to cut up my copies of Angier’s biography, the *Collected Novels* and the *Collected Stories* and paste them together, the result would not be so far off from what Norton has just brought out. (n.pag.)

*The Blue Hour*, thus, turns out to be a biographical work, which, stylistically, gets inclined towards the fiction written by its subject [Rhys]. Content-wise too it becomes dependent both on its predecessor [Angier’s *Jean Rhys*] and its subject [Rhys]. In fact, Pizzichini’s *The Blue Hour* ultimately becomes more a ‘portrait’ or a subjective impression of Rhys than a dependable biography and this “makes it difficult for a scholar to use her book for academic purposes” (Maurel n.pag.)

2. Arawaks were “American Indians of the Greater Antilles and South America who spoke languages of the Arawakan linguistic group” (Britanica n.pag). Caribs were “American Indian people who inhabited the Lesser Antilles and parts of the neighbouring South American coast at the time of the Spanish conquest. Their name was given to the Caribbean Sea, and its Arawakan equivalent is the origin of the English word cannibal … The Island Carib, who were warlike (and allegedly cannibalistic), were immigrants from the mainland who, after driving the Arawak from the Lesser Antilles, were expanding when the Spanish arrived” (Britanica n.pag).
3. Rhys’s father was William Rees Williams and mother was Minna Williams (formerly Lockhart).

4. “I remember the Riot”, writes Rhys in *Smile Please*, “as if it were yesterday. I must have been about twelve. One night my mother came into the bedroom I shared with my baby sister, woke us up, told us to put on dressing-gown and slippers and to come downstairs. We followed her half-asleep. ... I heard far away a strange noise like animals howling but I knew it wasn’t animals, it was people and the noise came nearer and nearer. ... They surged past the window, howling, but they didn’t throw stones. As the noise grew faint my mother said: ‘You can go up to bed again now’. ... This particular riot was aimed at the editor of the local paper. His house was near ours. He had written an article attacking the power of the Catholic priests in Dominica. The crowd was some of the faithful who intended to stone his house, frighten him and prevent him ever writing about religion again” (47-48).

5. According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, ‘menage a trois’ is “an arrangement in which three people live together, usu. a married couple and the lover of one of them.”

6. The fictional representation of the riot in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is elaborate. In it the Blacks set fire on the house of the Masons, fatally burning Pierre in the end. It is, however, based on a real-life incident of a far lighter magnitude from Rhys’s childhood (see note 4).

7. Obeah is a kind of sorcery practised in the West Indies.
Works Cited


“Arawak.” Encyclopedia Britanica. 2007 ed. DVD ROM.


“Carib.” Encyclopedia Britanica. 2007 ed. DVD ROM.


