Chapter III

“*I just write about what happened*”: Rhys and Life Writing

As proposed at the end of Chapter II, this chapter will examine the validity of the claim that Rhys’s writings are principally autobiographical. It must be remembered that Rhys herself is one of the primary contributors to this belief, as on various occasions (in interviews, letters etc.) she has acknowledged to have drawn from her life for writing her fiction. Carole Angier, the writer of the authorized biography of Rhys, is the other most significant personality to have emphasized on the visible presence of autobiographical elements in Rhys’s fiction. Most of the critics of Rhys have also accepted and developed the line of argument of set by Angier. In fact, very few have either examined the consistency of Rhys’s remarks or questioned the authenticity of Angier, and none actually dared to reject them outrightly. It goes without saying that denying Rhys the status of a writer of autobiographical fiction is a difficult task, though, one needs to examine the autobiographical status of Rhys’s fiction critically, as gaps, contradictions and doubts are not rare in Rhys’s own remarks, in Angier’s biography and also in what the critics have said so far to prove Rhys an autobiographical writer. Angier’s biography, however, does not require another examination here, as Chapter I, while offering a reading of Rhys’s life from Angier’s work *Jean Rhys: Life and Work*, has done that at length. The indeterminate tone in Angier’s narrative, the narrative’s knack for presenting the most plausible version of events and incidents of Rhys’s life as ‘truth’ or ‘fact’, and, finally, Angier’s tendency to draw from Rhys’s fiction to narrate Rhys’s life are sufficient to tell us that Angier’s biography of Rhys is anything but an absolute or final version on Rhys’s life; neither can it be a final commentary upon the autobiographical nature of Rhys’s fiction. Therefore, we will begin our examination of the validity of the claim about Rhys’s
autobiographicality with the strongest of factors operating behind the projection of Rhys as autobiographical: Rhys’s own utterances uttering on Rhys herself.

The common notion about Rhys amongst the critics is that all her pre-war novels are drawn from her own life lived in Paris and England. This trend in criticism has definitely come out of what can be called one of Rhys’s most striking comments on this issue, made during one of her encounters with David Plante, the amanuensis of Rhys during her old age. Plante records this comment in his slim memoir of three women he has been close with (Jean Rhys, Sonia Orwell, and Germaine Greer): Difficult Women: A Memoir of Three (1984). This is, in Plante’s version, what Rhys told him:

I can’t make things up, I can’t invent. I have no imagination. I can’t invent character. I don’t think I know what character is. I just write about what happened. Not that my books are entirely life—but almost... (Plante 52)

This is undoubtedly a strong remark in terms of Rhys’s own thoughts about the autobiographicality of her work. However, the more important task is to determine the limit to which we can trust this remark and hang on to it while assessing Rhys’s fiction, as the facts remain that a) Plante’s book is only a memoir, and not a historical document, that b) the circumstances under which Plante and Rhys interacted were not always completely favourable for a sane, cold, detached self-analysis of the kind quoted above (most of the times when they were working together, Rhys got quickly drunk and often shouted in between their talks), and that c) Plante’s memoir itself contains doubts expressed by Rhys relating to the degree of autobiographicality of her own books. In support of reason b) let us read these lines from Plante’s memoir:

On our work days, there was no inspiration. Jean quickly became drunk. I became
drunk with her. The work sessions degenerated into her shouting, “Lies! Lies!”

(50)

Sometimes they (Plante and Rhys) even had drunken rows, with Plante standing up to Rhys’s verbal assault. Although there is no evidence that Rhys’s remark on her inability to invent was made under the influence of alcohol, surely the condition was not best suited for an interview, as Rhys was raw from a bad fall at the bathroom the previous night, making her considerably unsteady and fragile than usual. Besides, we have to take into account the fact that there were no witnesses to the conversation, and there is no proof that Plante was taking note of or recording what Rhys was saying. In support of reason c), we may consider the following remark on Rhys made by Plante in the same book:

She did not, however, think that in reading her novels one knew anything about her life. (18, emphasis mine).

What surprises us is the use of the word ‘anything’ in this context, as this word negates beyond doubt any possibilities of the presence of autobiographical elements in Rhys’s fiction. It becomes literally an enigma as to how a writer can say that she remains completely unknowable from her books when she herself has claimed her books to be almost her life! However, not always did Rhys deny being autobiographical in interviews she gave on various occasions after Wide Sargasso Sea made her famous. In one such interview with Mary Cantwell, published as “A conversation with Jean Rhys” (1974), Rhys seems to be uncharacteristically frank in admitting the autobiographicality of her novels. Cantwell writes, “Her [Rhys’s] father dies, her mother was sick, and her sister, she [Rhys] says didn’t like her. ‘is she Norah,’” I [Cantwell] asked, “in After Leaving Mr Mackenzie?” “Oh yes,” she [Rhys] replied.”(23). Our amazement at Rhys’s frankness in admitting her life’s relation to her works—without even a touch of ambiguity—continues as we are then led to another part of
the same conversation with Cantwell, where Rhys directly acknowledges the autobiographicality of *Quartet*:

“Then”, she [Rhys] added, “things began to go wrong in Paris.”

“What went wrong?”

“Well, that’s *Quartet.*”

I had suspected, in fact assumed, that Jean Rhys had based her novels on her life. But to meet her, I discovered, was to be simultaneously introduced to Sasha, Julia, Marya, Anna, even Mrs. Rochester. Whenever I asked about one of them—Jean Rhys’s women they’ve been called—she replied with “I”. (23)

Cantwell’s burst of joy in unearthing all the mysteries of autobiographicality of a writer as complex and inscrutable as Jean Rhys in this way certainly appears disturbing to us, as it exposes a kind of naivety in the unliterary, simplistic conclusion drawn with ease. And this happens notwithstanding the fact that Rhys expresses ample doubts against such simplistic deductions in *that very* interview by replying to Cantwell’s question, “And has most of what you wrote about happened to you?”, with considerable ambiguity:

It’s hard to explain how, when and where a fact becomes a book. I start to write about something that has happened or is happening to me, but somehow or other things start changing. (24)

This clearly demonstrates the process of writing for a writer like Rhys who, however autobiographical may she be called, ultimately does not limit herself to the rawness of factuality, and makes fact a starting point for her fiction, rather than an end to be reached through fiction. The gap between what Rhys meant about her life and what such simplistic articles/interviews projected it to be also becomes quite obvious from the analysis of the
excerpts taken from Cantwell’s interview. Judging the degree of distortion such literary representations tend to do to one’s ‘self’, we can now certainly imagine how it might have agitated and angered Rhys herself who could hardly put up with such a wrongful projection of her ‘self’ made by journalistic excesses and manipulation. Inevitably, writing back was the only option she had. In a short but characteristically sharp personal essay titled “Making Bricks without Straw” (1978), Rhys writes about the interviewing business, which appears to her, in a way, a game, so to say, with a subject like Rhys, again, at the receiving end. This essay is an elaborate work of irony on the business of journalistic interviews and under Rhys’s piercing insight, the process of taking/giving interviews unfolds with disturbing realities, revealing an unease and discomfort not easy to describe. Critics skip the unusually bleak/disturbing details that Rhys gives of her experiences about facing an interview and instead head toward her dark conclusions. And this is what she ultimately realizes about giving an interview:

The question-and-answer game goes on. I realize that I am being gently pushed into my predestined role, the role of a victim. (35)

Throughout Rhys’s literary career, she has presented the process of oppression as a game and the oppressed subjects as role-players playing the same with the powerful—the haves constructing the parameter of such games and guarding/monitoring the playing rules as well. This essay ends with a dark irony on the interview-game, as Rhys apparently gives in before the elaborate arrangement of that game and accepts her role as an entertainer, a circus animal, a victim to be crushed before public eyes:

Inaccuracies occur, for people must be entertained. So now I can read calmly of my dark dreadful life, extraordinary versions of my first marriage, that I worked on the stage for ten bob a week (this last annoys me), but as a rule I don’t turn a hair. (37)
Rhys’s reaction to the inaccuracies in the act of presentation of her ‘self’ in popular literature like newspaper, journal interviews and memoir makes it clear how far these presentations are from being absolute proofs of the unity between Rhys’s life and fiction. The distrust shown by Rhys in the literary representation of her ‘self’ by others—as expressed in the above quoted lines—is not new to Rhys and neither is her attempt to write back to such presentations. Like “Making Bricks without Straw”, *Smile Please*, as said earlier in this thesis, is another product of Rhys’s writing-back exercise. *Smile Please*, the unfinished autobiography of Rhys, published posthumously, was supposed to set a few facts straight about Rhys’s life, especially some facts related to the Ford/Rhys affair. For example, Mizener’s biography of Ford, *The Saddest Story*, (1972) hinted that Rhys had a child from Ford who died. Such lies grieved Rhys immensely and instigated her to write back². Phoebe-lou Adams, in her article, “Life & Letters: ‘Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography’” (1980), published in *The Atlantic Monthly* points out another motive behind Rhys’s attempt at writing *Smile Please* at the advanced age of eighty-six:

Jean Rhys thought that it was “idiotic to be curious about the person” of a writer, so when she embarked upon [*Smile Please*] at the age of eighty-six, she did so only to clear up the misunderstandings that invariably arose from her admittedly autobiographical novels. (n.pag)

Thus, “Making Brick without Straws” shows that Rhys was not satisfied with the literary presentation of her ‘self’ in others’ literary works such as interviews etc; and—if we are to believe Plante’s memoir—neither was she willing to accept that one can know her by reading her fiction, which, rather, could have created some misunderstanding in ‘self-representation’. Probably, this is one of the reasons she chose instead to write an autobiography to make a
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proper representation of her ‘self’. But when *Smile Please* came out—in the absence of Rhys—it was found that a considerable portion of the critical community was not satisfied with the way Rhys was represented in that work. They rather thought Rhys’s novels to have given a truer picture of hers than *Smile Please*, which, in their opinion, was flawed by distortions caused by time and disillusionment:

It is sad to have to report that, after reading “Smile Please” and comparing it with Miss Rhys’s autobiographical novels, one gets the impression that the novels give a much truer picture of her. While Miss Rhys herself edited her life for the novels, time and disillusionment edited that same life in “Smile Please” (sic) and the second distortion is greater. (Broyard n.pag)

Some even thought that instead of clearing up the confusion her novels created in representing her, *Smile Please* actually gave Rhys the last chance to rework incidents and perceptions Rhys had already used up in her fiction. This is, in other words, to say that *Smile Please* is Rhys’s last attempt at producing another novel out of her life’s feelings. Helen Mcneil, in “Broken Heart”, her *New Statesman* review-article of *Smile Please* (1980), says:

*Smile Please* doesn’t illuminate the differences between Rhys’s felt life and her fiction. Instead it is a stylistic and narrative coda [postscript/afterthought] to her novels and stories, Rhys’s last chance to rework incidents and perceptions which she had already written several times… the life that counted, the life of feeling, appears to have already been absorbed into the fiction. Many names, phrases and sentences about Rhys’s girlhood in *Smile Please* are identical or almost identical with passages in her novels... (Mcneil n.pag.)
All these critical opinions lead us to a point where we are neither unanimous on the issue of Rhys's presence in her novels, nor are we certain whether Rhys's autobiography offers a reliable projection of Rhys. Even when from memoirs and interviews and *Smile Please* we shift our attention to Rhys’s novels, we are faced with similar hesitation in affirming the autobiographicality of them. As if as a solution to this problem of finding Rhys nowhere some have tried to re-interpret the sense in which Rhys’s novels should be called ‘autobiographical’. Samuel Hynes in his article “Books: ‘Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography’” in *The New Republic* says:

Certainly she [Rhys] made her novels out of her own experiences (doesn't everyone?); but they are not autobiographical in the sense of describing an entire life. Rather they turn over, again and again, one human situation—the condition of absolute loneliness. Her heroines have no connections, no hopes, and no will… (Hynes n.pag. 6)

What Hynes means is that the novels of Rhys do not deal with the details of incidents; rather they deliver on sincerity of feeling, especially the feeling of loneliness, and so the novels are related to the world of Rhys’s sensibility and not to the factuality of her life. This view finds a support in what Rhys, in one of her letters, herself says about her first novel *Quartet*:

I think it [*Quartet*] is angry and uneven as you say, but it has some life and it wasn’t an autobiography, as everyone here seemed to imagine though some of it was lived of course. (*Letters* 171)

Rhys here negates the possibility of *Quartet*’s being absolute anchoring in factuality and stresses rather on its containing some portion of life lived. The above statement of Rhys
indeed suggests that Rhys acknowledges the presence of some emotional truth in *Quartet* but, at the same time, she thinks that the novel does not have that kind of factual evidence which can make it an autobiography. Elaine Savoury in her essay, “Brief Encounters: Rhys and the Craft of the Short Story” (1998) carries this argument further by terming her short stories almost a kind of creative non-fiction or the personal essay, because in such works of autobiographical fiction, Rhys controls the limit up to which she is to expose her ‘self’ before the readers, and, as a result, her ‘self’ is crafted and reinvented as fictional material:

    But at times she in effect writes creative non-fiction, or the personal essay, in which the autobiographical element is clearly stated and understood, but also crafted, reinvented, as fictional material. Fiction gave Rhys an opportunity to work through the personal without exposing herself. (Savoury n.pag. 24)

No doubt, criticism (as quoted above) attempting to judge Jean Rhys as a writer of a distinct category of autobiographical fiction and prose is more accommodative, but we should bear in mind that the body of Rhys-criticism, as revealed in the Introduction to this thesis, is heavily tilted toward labelling her as a writer of ‘autobiographical fiction’ in the conventional sense of the term. But the doubts about such an interpretation of Rhys’s work—expressed by Rhys herself and by some others—certainly call for a re-reading of her fiction for assessing the authenticity of the interpretation. As such an interpretation takes as its starting point the proposition that the principal protagonists of most of Rhys’s fiction are based on Rhys herself, the next chapter will seek to examine in detail the literary representations of Rhys in her own writings. As the focus of the thesis is on Rhys of the *Quartet*-phase, the next chapter will give adequate emphasis on to Rhys’s representations of herself related to that phase.
Notes

1. David Plante was a young writer who self-volunteered as an amanuensis for Rhys for writing *Smile Please*, the autobiography Rhys started to write at an age (nearly eighty-six) when she could not even hold pen and had to depend upon somebody to write down what she dictated from a failing memory. Plante’s memoir describes the experience of working and interacting with the volatile Jean Rhys who despite the advanced age and fragile health surprises Plante with her sharp intellect and insight into life.

2. As a note to Chapter 25 of his book *The Saddest Story*, Mizener writes:

   …and there was plenty of gossip to make him look worse: people said Miss Rhys had had a child by him and that, coming across him six months after their affair ended, she walked straight up to him and slapped him hard in the face. (583)
Works Cited


