Chapter IV

In Search of Rhys: Representations of Rhys of the *Quartet* Phase in Her Own Writings

As said in the conclusion to Chapter III, the present chapter will examine the literary representations of Jean Rhys in her own writings. As the title of the thesis (“Fiction of Coherent Self: A Study of the Literary Representations of Jean Rhys of the *Quartet* Phase”) suggests, the focus of this chapter will be on the representations of Rhys of the *Quartet* phase, a phase which, although consisting mainly of the 1920s, begins with the conclusion of World War I and continues up to the 1930s. It is a phase in Rhys’s life which pivots around her adulterous relationship with Ford Madox Ford [leading Rhys to write *Quartet* (1928) based on that affair] and holds multiple significances for Rhys. The relationship with Ford was the cause of Rhys’s entry into the expatriate literati community of post-War Paris; it led to the publication of her first book *Left Bank*, her eventual break-up with Jean Lenglet (Rhys’s first husband) and also to the break-up between Ford and his common-law-wife, the Australian painter, Stella Bowen. However, the series of events leading Rhys to this affair with Ford, shows a kind of continuity from a period as early as the end of the War, when with very little money Rhys stormed out of England (vowing never to return again) with Lenglet and having roamed all through Europe ultimately settled down in Paris. The phase does not abruptly end with Rhys’s estrangement with Ford either, as a Parisian milieu and a lonely, out of luck woman protagonist, whom we find in *Left Bank* and *Quartet*, keep appearing in novels like *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930) and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939). The Literary
representations of the *Quartet*-phase, however, begins almost a decade after Rhys left England with *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927), a collection of short-stories which is literally the precursor to *Quartet* (1928) in term of Rhys’s published efforts, and was written under direct patronage of Ford Madox Ford. *Left Bank* contains sketches from the post War Vienna and Budapest to the 1920s bohemian left bank\(^1\) of Paris. The 1920s Paris—the central backdrop to the *Quartet*-phase—was, Precisely, the Paris of the Lost Generation\(^2\) artists like Ernst Hemmingway, Gertrude Stein, Hart Crane, F. Scott Fitzgerald and others, the Paris of coffee shops, bars, parties with gatherings of artists, writers and intellectual; in other words, it was a place vibrant with great artistic inspiration. But Rhys’s fiction strangely captures with brilliant details and a keen human sympathy another Paris coexisting with the Paris of artistic inspiration: it was a Paris, which despite its intellectual superiority, was also a part of the Europe devastated and impoverished by the great War where a job was not easy to come by, a place shadowed by the chronic phobia of a Bolshevik uprising, a place like most other places of the world: cruel to the underdogs of society, particularly insensitive to those people who are on the cultural, economic and gender peripheries. Most of the stories of *Left Bank* share a relation with each other by offering the voice of a young woman narrator, who not only shares the gloom of this underbelly of Paris, but also with a keen intellect tries to understand the fallacy of such an existence as she and her other fellow human beings, the beaten, the insulted, the forgotten of Paris are having. The chapter will first take up *The Left Bank and Other Stories* which is Rhys’s first published effort; it will then move on to analyzing some other stories relevant to this project and it will ultimately conclude with an analysis of the five novels of Rhys. The purpose of the chapter is to see how much of Rhys of the *Quartet* phase is present in these works. As there is a belief that “most of the stories” of Rhys “of course have a basis in Rhys’s personal experience”, about which the readers “are much
clearer since Angier’s research” (Savoury, Jean Rhys 152-76), the chapter will read Rhys’s fiction and Angier’s work side by side.

As shown in the introduction and emphasized in the previous chapter, a large number of critics view Rhys’s writings as autobiographical in nature. *Left Bank*, for them, marks the beginning of Rhys’s attempts at representing her own ‘self’ in fiction while telling her life’s story. Diana Athill’s 1987 introduction to the *Collected Short Stories*, for instance, relates all Rhys’s stories to her own experience:

Like all her [Rhys’s] work, these stories relate closely to her own experience: she was teaching herself, as she wrote them, how to turn personal experience into something of value to other people. They contain touches of self-consciousness. (vii)

As mentioned already in this chapter, Angier’s work, in a big way, is responsible for the creation and strengthening of the conviction in Rhys’s autobiographicality. Angier’s *Jean Rhys* uses “Vienne” (one of the short stories of *Left Bank*) to describe the post World War I phase of Rhys’s life, that is, the early part of Rhys’s married life with Lenglet, marking, in a way, the beginning of the *Quartet* phase. The authenticity of Rhys’s self-presentation and her presentation of Lenglet in “Vienne” is taken for granted by Angier, as Angier remarks, “And in everything they [the fictional counterparts of Jean Rhys and Jean Lenglet in “Vienne”] do and say John is utterly John, Ella utterly Ella—utterly Jean” (119). John and Ella were, however, characters in the first published version of “Vienne” in the last issue of Ford Madox Ford’s *Transatlantic Review* in 1924. Ford published it as part of a novel called *Triple Sec*. The names, John and Ella, were changed into Pierre and Frances in “Vienne” when it came
out in *Left Bank* (1927). “Vienne” has, indeed, been accepted as autobiographical by critics. This is what Thomas F. Staley in his *Jean Rhys: A Critical Study* (1979) says on “Vienne”:

> ‘Vienne’, the last and longest story in the collection [Left Bank], is at once an autobiographical saga of the restless and heady days of the reconstruction period in Middle-Europe after World War I. (31-32)

Athill, having declared all of Rhys’s stories autobiographical, seems more assured of “Vienne”s relation to Jean’s life, than even Staley:

> Lenglet’s too-good-to-be true job in Vienne really was too good to be true—it took him into a French prison, and how it did so is recorded in the marvelous story ‘Vienne’.

(viii)

Angier’s opinion on “Vienne” in *Jean Rhys*, which could easily have an impact on what Athill said on “Vienne”³, can be had from her narration of that particular part of Rhys’s life when Rhys was practically roaming all over the post-War Europe with Lenglet and was for a while having a great time at Vienna as the pretty wife of Lenglet, a handsomely paid facilitator in the Disarmament Commission. Angier, as usual, intentionally mixes up “Vienne” and her account of Rhys’s life again to describe the extravagant phase of the couple with all its exhilaration:

> It all happened just as it does in ‘Vienne’—the Hotel Imperial, Vienne’s most luxurious after the Sacher (for which you had to have old money); the maid (who was called Dini), the dresses and rings … John was doing what ‘everyone was doing’ in Vienna: making money ‘on the ’change’. That is to say, he was selling foreign currency illegally, on the black market: francs and crowns, shillings and yen. In the hyper-
inflation of post-war Austria this was hugely profitable. Only a little longer, Pierre says in ‘Vienne’, and he will ‘pull it quite off and we will be rich, rich …’ (116-117)

The projection of Frances [the fictional counterpart of Rhys according to Angier] amidst all these is easy to have. Angier quotes the following line from “Vienne” to describe Rhys’s state of ecstasy:

I was cracky with joy of life that summer of 1921. (The Collected Short Stories, Hereafter CSS 101)

Angier is so assured of her notion that Rhys’s fiction is authentically autobiographical, that she not only picks up information from “Vienne” to fill in the gaps in her biography of Rhys, but also describes the state of mind Rhys was in at those times by simply quoting the thoughts of Frances from “Vienne”. The fictitious Frances and Rhys are the same for Angier without any ambivalence.

As the task of this chapter is to examine the literary representations of Jean Rhys of the Quartet phase in her own writings, it is imperative that we take for granted, at least initially, the view of the biographer and critics of Rhys on Rhys’s autobiographicality. Taking the conventional notion about Rhys’s autobiographicality for granted implies that we consider Frances’s character as a literary representation of Rhys. An analysis of Frances’s character reveals her as a woman who worships money and the kind of luxury money can buy; and money is abundantly available to her because of some shady deals Pierre is involved in. However, the story does not stick to this luxury of Frances and takes a turn ultimately. All this glitz and pleasure—as said earlier—is too good to be true. Fortune changes and soon Frances finds “Pierre sitting hunched up on the striped yellow sofa, staring at a revolver in his hand” (CSS 113) obviously contemplating suicide, because he has “lost money—other
people’s money—the Commission’s money” (CSS 114). Pierre is, however, dissuaded from doing anything rash by Frances, and a flight-plan is hatched. “Vienne” ends in the midst of a restless run through the tumultuous post-war Europe.

Although like many other female protagonists of Jean’s short stories, Frances is considered as a literary representation of Rhys herself, Frances is distinguished from other protagonists of Rhys on a few grounds. Frances is, to make the distinction clear, seen as “a harbinger of the more fully developed heroine of Rhys’s later novels” (Staley, Jean Rhys 34) and, she is also different from the other protagonists of Rhys in a way that her share of happiness is surprisingly larger than her sorrow, which is a trait quite rare among Rhys’s protagonists. Though sadness stalks her and has its triumph when Pierre loses “money, other people’s money”, it does not immediately get translated into the smothering gloom of depression that generally accompanies a Rhys heroine. Frances is happy, jovial and contented. Even when faced with a crisis, she—unlike the will-less heroine of Rhys—is capable of putting up a fight. She dissuades Pierre from giving up and flees. The catastrophic end to her dream-phase of life, surprisingly, does not breed depression and instead brings a romantic thrill so rarely experienced by others of her ilk.

“Temps Perdi” (1969) should be discussed here because this story—although published long after Left Bank—touchess upon the “Vienne” phase. Interestingly, this story is divided into three sections connected only by the randomness of memory. The first part opens with the typically lonely heroine of Rhys’s Paris stories, left alone on this occasion apparently in a country house sometimes during or after the World War. After a bitter struggle against the
cold and the anguish of loneliness—with a self-awareness which is the hallmark of Rhys’s heroines—she gradually takes refuge in the warmth of the memories. The brightly populated scenes of Vienna unfold before her. The characters are similar to the ones in “Vienne” with only most of the names changed, although we still find Pierre as the “secretary and confidential adviser” to the Lieutenant Colonel Matsu. Pierre of “Temps Perdi” does a job quite like the job Pierre did in “Vienne” (CSS 95). The heroine is still happy, obsessed with dress and hardly betrays any anxiety at all. They eat, dance, party and walk down the Viennese streets that smell of lilac and of the past: “Vienna still smelt very strongly of the past” (264). The third section begins with a chapter heading ‘3. Carib Quarter’. The setting is an estate near the Carib Quarter called Temps Perdi, meaning wasted time or lost labour. The narrator is accompanied by Nicholas, the overseer of the estate with a “handsome Negro face, a big chest, a deep, booming voice” (CSS 268). The narrative treads the delicate border of past and present of the Caribbean islands: its mysterious Carib past from when supposedly the Carib “women have a language that the men don’t know” (CSS 269) and its present marred by colonialism where Nicholas describes the killing of some Caribs by the British as inconsequential, sounding to the white protagonist like “an Englishman talking” (CSS 272). Memories converge in the end into the setting of the opening, ‘Rolvenden’, and the story ends with a strongly fatalistic tone:

    Before I leave ‘Rolvenden’ I’ll write them [the words ‘Temps Perdi’] up—on a looking glass, perhaps. Somebody might see them who knows about the days that wait round the corner to be lived again and knows that you don’t choose them, either. They choose themselves. (274)
The anonymous woman narrator of “Temps Perdi” is connected to the other literary projections of Rhys in two ways, first in the acute sense of loneliness that the woman narrator of the story is depressed with; and secondly, the narrator’s re-visit to the Caribbean islands, a phenomenon that happened with Rhys as well. The nostalgic relation with the Caribbean, the home someone has left behind, is a recurring theme in Rhys and so many works of Rhys (for example – “Mixing Cocktails”, “Again the Antilles”, Voyage in the Dark etc.) do have the Caribbean islands as their backdrop.

In Angier’s biography of Rhys the Left Bank story “Learning to be a Mother” is considered as strongly autobiographical, as Angier narrates the birth and eventual death of Rhys’s first child by mingling her biography with similar events found both in Good Morning, Midnight and in “Learning to be a Mother”. “Learning to be a Mother”, however, does not describe the death of the child: it rather ends with the institution of the first bond between the mother and the child. The story begins with the heroine’s entry into the private maternity hospital of Madame Laboriau, “a qualified maternity nurse” (CSS 55). The heroine passes through a series of images that reflect physical pain to reach her own labour room where fortunately she has “the right to moan in privacy” (CSS 55). After a painful labor, she gives birth to a child, a son. Physical pain is replaced by a sadness characteristic of Rhys’s heroines. The ambience of insecurity is another familiar addition. Soon after the birth of the child she is quizzed by the authority about possible Bolshevik link of her husband. She finds her sadness projected in the child too, and realizes that she does not like him. The story ends with a gush of happiness as the first bond between the mother and the child is instituted:

Little thing! I must kiss him. Perhaps that is why he looks sad—because his mother never had kissed him. (59)
What this story reveals to us is that, as usual, happiness in Rhys’s world is momentary, and its arrival sudden. There is no denying the fact that the mother-figure is almost the same one appearing on several occasions in Rhys: sad, insecure, alienated and emotionally extremely fragile. The other aspect of this character is her acute self-awareness, something which is not uncommon in Rhys’s woman protagonists.

Another story that Angier finds useful in relating Rhys’s Paris days of the 1920s is “Mannequin”. Angier uses this story to describe the odd jobs Rhys was forced to take up for money. According to Angier, “[b]eing mannequin was probably her best job in these years” (126). But characteristically Angier does not care to give any historical or factual evidence to prove Rhys’s involvement in this profession. Angier speculates that Rhys probably got this job because of her very lovely, slender legs:

Anna in the *Left Bank* story ‘Mannequin’ works at ‘chez Jeanne Verone, Place Vendome’. Jean’s shop wouldn’t have been very far away. Anna gets the job because of her legs (‘It was to her legs that she owed this dazzling, this incredible opportunity’); and Jean had very lovely, slender legs. (126)

As can be seen from the above quoted passage, Angier’s only evidence for the claim she makes about Rhys’s job as a mannequin is Rhys’s use of the theme of mannequin in “Mannequin”. The basis for such assumptions is perhaps the recurrence of these episodes throughout Rhys’s fiction. For instance, Sasha Jansen in *Good Morning, Midnight* had the same job at the Maison chose in the Place Vendome. In “Mannequin” Anna is among Madame Veron’s twelve mannequins who “with their sensual blatant charms and their
painted faces were watched covertly, envied and apart” (23). The world of the mannequins is described with Rhys’s characteristic zeal and irony. The life of the underdog, the life without respect is vivid as usual. A lunch-scene at the underground of Madame Veron’s takes us to the actual netherworld of Paris. The evening sets the mannequins free like ghosts and they are swallowed up by the Paris night. The description of the mannequins’ release from duty again contains a fair share of dark irony:

At six o’clock Anna was out in the rue de la Paix; her fatigue forgotten, her fatigue forgotten, the feeling that now she really belonged to the great, maddening city possessed her and she was happy in her beautifully cut tailor-made and beret.

Georgette passed her and smiled; Babette was in a far coat.

All up the street the mannequins were coming out of the shops, pausing on the pavements a moment, making them as gay and as beautiful as beds of flowers before they walked swiftly away and the Paris night swallowed them up. (CSS 26)

Angier obviously finds the mannequin woman-narrator an autobiographical projection of Rhys. What strikes our attention in “Mannequin” is the dark locale of this story, symbolizing undoubtedly the unknown side of the 1920s Paris, a place haunted by demimondes, spinsters with lowly or disreputable jobs; all exploited, insulted and humiliated by or before the rich or the fortunate upper-class. The narrator, again, has certain characteristics typical of Rhys- heroines: a keen eye for the detection of oppression and exploitation, a dark mood and, obviously, a sharp self-awareness.
“Hunger” in Left Bank reveals a continuation of the theme of lowly life of the underdogs in Paris. Angier speculates it to have been written after Rhys was pensioned off by Ford. Lack of evidence for such a belief clearly comes out of Angier’s tone of uncertainty:

For several of the stories of The Left Bank were probably written now, in the last months of 1926. ‘Hunger’ perhaps, though that may have been earlier… (162, italics mine)

The protagonist here is starving—or rather semi-starving—for several days, “coffee in the morning, bread at midday” (CSS 42). She has been a mannequin (CSS 43) among many other things, and in her trance-like interior monologue realizes that had she been “SENSIBLE” she “should have hung on to being a mannequin with what it implies” (CSS 43). But as it transpires, she is not fated to win this battle for survival, as she is not gifted with cunning. As we can see, the character of the protagonist as well as her self-analysis is as always flawed with self-pity, which, in fact, is seldom stronger anywhere else than in “Hunger”. Thomas F. Staley in his Jean Rhys: A Critical Study, however, finds a pattern in such abject suffering of women in Rhys’s fiction. Staley finds in Rhys’s continuous projection of women as victims, a post-Darwinian acceptance of human inequality which alone can explain the victimization of women for being weak:

Important for our consideration, however, is the fact that we see here emerging a fatalistic attitude toward the inevitable helplessness of women—a post-Darwinian acceptance of human inequality and the impossibility of confronting those forces which seem predisposed to annihilate the weak, however fiercely they struggle. This process of selection and rejection in human and social terms is seen through power-plays involving sex and money. Women are inevitable casualties… (29)
“Hunger”, it may be said, certainly conforms to this pattern by pitifully exposing the weakness and vulnerability of the narrator by the narrator herself. Now, if we are to accept this character as another literary representation of Rhys (as Angier unambiguously claims by showing how Rhys was dumped and pensioned off by Ford), then the traits of this character should be critically examined. The most noticeable trait of this woman protagonist of Rhys in “Hunger” is her acute and blatant self-pity that explodes especially in the end as she accuses the comfortably placed people of the society of relishing her abject condition and in a way begs to be noticed by the people whom she apparently hates for being cruel and negligent to her. The situation of extreme poverty that this character is immersed in is also something that connects Rhys to this character as such poverty was not unfamiliar to Rhys’s real life.

“From a French Prison” is another story that is marked out for its obvious connection with Rhys’s life. In this story a herd of people, mostly from the lower rung of the society, are queuing up before a French prison to visit their kin in prison. Among them are a fragile old man with a tiny child, two girls brightly painted and clothed, old women and the likes. Immediately, a sharp line of distinction is drawn between the worlds of these beaten, weak and vulnerable men and women and the world of the warder who is “important and full of authority, like some petty god. There he was, the representative of honesty, of the law, of the stern forces of Good that punishes Evil” (CSS 11). The story—which is apparently a product of Rhys’s own experience of visiting Lenglet in French prison at Fresnes—ends with a profound pity for the prisoners, defeated and marginalized. The old man walks out of the prison “walking sadly, his head bent, muttering to himself. By his side the little boy took tiny little trotting steps—three to the old man’s one. His mouth drooped, his huge brown eyes stared solemnly at an incomprehensible world” (CSS 12). “From a French Prison” has
decidedly autobiographical connection, as Lenglet’s imprisonment is a historical truth. But, this story is narrated by a third person narrator, someone who does not take part in the action, and as a result, there is no way to find a parallel between this narrator and Rhys. However, a few features of the narrator is his/her sympathy for the underdogs and, concurrently, a hatred for the authority, the representatives of authority and law, like the warder, the guards etc. and, as the ending suggests, a little hope that s/he shows for the beaten) make the narrator a typical narrator of Rhys’s fiction.

As writing novel calls for an even acuter eye for detail, especially for drawing a character which is to grow and unfold with all its complexities, conventional criticism considers the characters of Rhys’s novels to be containing more autobiographical elements than the characters of her short stories. We will embark on the task of studying Rhys’s novels with our primary attention fixed on an evaluation of what Francis Wyndham calls the ‘composite heroines’ of Rhys (qtd. in Owen v). We can begin by referring to Elgin Mellown’s essay, “Character and Themes in the Novels of Jean Rhys”, where Mellown says: “Although each novel centers upon one woman, the four individuals are manifestations of the same psychological type—so much so that if we read the novels in the order of their internal chronology, we find them one, fairly sequential story, albeit the principal figure suffers a change of name from novel to novel” (106). No doubt, Mellown’s opinion is backed by the repetitive occurrence of certain characteristics (some of which are already noted in our study of Rhys’s short stories) traced in the protagonists of Rhys. A meticulous analysis of the so-called representation of Rhys herself in the heroines of her novels is, hence, our next task. This analysis of literary representations of Rhys herself in her own novels will, however,
follow the chronology of the novels’ appearance and not the “internal chronology” Mellown speaks of.

Marya Zelli is the first of these heroines as she appears in Rhys’s first novel *Quartet*. Marya is described as a “blonde girl, not very tall, slender waisted (7)” Her face is “short, highcheek-boned, full-lipped; her long eyes slanted upwards towards the temples and were gentle and oddly remote in expression” (7). Apparently there is nothing much unusual in this physical description; but in order to understand the true significance of such a description we need to have a look at Rhys’s description of the other three participants of the love-quartet. These three others of the love-quartet are supposed to be characters modelled upon real life persons whom Rhys did not like. And, as if, as a consequence to that irony and sarcasm aimed at the Heidler-couple are too evident to be missed even by naked eyes. This is how Mr Heidler is described by Rhys:

Mr. Heidler, who was a very important person in his way, it seemed. He made discoveries; he helped the young men, he had a flair. (18)

Even the physical description shows a negative bias:

Mr. Heidler, indeed, was so very sturdy that it was difficult to imagine him suffering from a nervous breakdown of any kind whatever. He looked as if nothing could break him down. He was a tall, fair man of perhaps forty-five. His shoulders were tremendous, his nose arrogant, his hands short, broad and so plump that the knuckles were dimpled. The wooden expression of his face was carefully striven for. His eyes were light blue and intelligent, but with a curious underlying expression of obtuseness – even of brutality. (11–12)
Description of Mrs. Heidler is harsher and shows a mild level of hatred even. She was:

...a good deal younger than her husband, plump and dark, country with a dash of Chelsea, ... Her eyes were beautiful, clearly brown, the long lashes curving upwards, but there was a suspicious, almost a deadened look in them. (12)

Stephan, Marya’s husband, looked “thin after the well-fed Heidlers” (14). Stephan—when he first met Marya back in London—was “a short, slim, supple young man of thirty-three or four, with very quick, brown eyes and even an eager but secretive expression” (16).

Secrecy, from Marya’s point-of-view, is certainly the most obvious trait of Stephan’s character. She further holds:

Stephan disliked being questioned and, when closely pressed he lied. Not plausibly or craftily, but impatiently and absent-mindedly. (14)

Marya could see that:

He never explained his doings. He was a secretive person, she considered.

Sometimes, without warning or explanation, he would go away for two or three days, and left alone in the hotel, she dreaded, not desertion, but some vague, dimly apprehended catastrophe. (20)

In spite of Stephen’s secretive nature Marya sticks to Stephen. Marya’s weakness for Stephen is, however, explained in the following way:

Stephen was secretive and a liar, but he was a very gentle and expert lover. She was the petted, cherished child, the desired mistress, the worshipped, perfumed goddess.

She was all these things to Stephan—or so he made her believe. Marya hadn’t known that a man could be as nice as all that to a woman—so gentle in little ways. (20)
Interesting is the way Marya seems to complement such a character as Stephan appears to have—an unreliable, irresponsible husband, but an expert and pampering lover. She seems to have elements in her that create natural attraction for Stephan:

So Marya had long ago stopped questioning. For she was reckless, lazy, a vagabond by nature, and for the first time in her life she was very near to being happy. (14)

This description of Marya reveals a few very crucial aspects of her character—she is reckless, lazy, and vagabond. It seems that Marya’s attraction for Stephan may well be the natural attraction of a self-destructive woman toward a manipulative male who also lives off the edge. It is probably the thrill of that life that bonds her with Stephan. To elucidate Marya’s character further and especially to acquaint the reader with the gradual descent of her character to this state, the narrative in Quartet takes the reader to Marya’s past:

Marya, you must understand, had not been suddenly and ruthlessly transplanted from solid comfort to the hazards of Monmartre. Nothing like that. Truth to say, she was used to a lack of solidity and of fixed backgrounds. (14)

It all began long ago with her adventurous choice of independence she sought through a job in Mr Albert Prance’s chorus company:

There she was and there she stayed. Gradually passivity replaced her early adventurousness. She learned, after long and painstaking effort, to talk like a chorus girl—up to a point. Beyond that point she remained apart, lonely, frightened of her loneliness, resenting it passionately. She grew thin. She began to live her hard and monotonous life very mechanically and listlessly. (15)

After Marya got the chorus-girl job, came a period when Stephan Zelli was attracted to her, and it was probably Marya who considered that Monsieur Zelli “drew his own conclusions
from her air of fatigue, disillusion and extreme youth, her shadowed eyes, her pathetic and unconscious lapses into helplessness” (17).

Throughout *Quartet* Marya is projected as consistently sad, soft-hearted, fragile and, in worst cases, reckless, lazy, and vagabond; but it is also necessary to examine how Rhys represents the other characters in this novel, especially when *Quartet* is said to be a roman-a-clef. Mrs Heidler, Marya’s rival in the novel, for instance, is described as inevitably a strong and stubborn character:

A strong, dark woman, her body would be duskily solid like her face. There was something of the earth about her, something of the peasant. Her mouth was large and thick-lipped, but not insensitive, and she had an odd habit of wincing when Heidler spoke to her sharply. A tremor would screw up one side of her face so that for an instant she looked like a hurt animal. (13)

Similar are Marya’s observations on Mr Heidler:

When Marya looked across the table at Heidler, she noticed that he had oddly shaped eyelids, three cornered eyelids over pale, clever eyes. Not at all an amiable looking person. But nevertheless not without understanding... (33)

These one-sided observations of Marya make Katie Owen say in her introduction to *Quartet*:

However, the satire in *Quartet*, though often very funny, topples over into exaggeration because of Rhys’s bitterness and desire to place blame on others—there is too much self-pity and not enough self-irony. Her satire is bitchy and highly personal, whereas, in her later work, there grows a sense of social awareness and perspective. In
her later work, there grows a sense of social awareness and perspective. In *Quartet* her forays into the heads of others are generally unsuccessful, whereas in her next novel, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, she has already begun to see the man’s point of view.

The portrait of Heidler is almost uniformly aggressive and as a result unconvincing. (xvii)

That *Quartet* is to some extent handicapped by the lack of adequate emotional detachment from the whole real-life affair is acknowledged even by Rhys herself in a letter written to Francis Wyndham long after (on September 14th, 1959) the publication of *Quartet*:

I think it 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)

What Rhys writes here accounts for the distortion in the representation of and the departure from reality that this thesis seeks to underline. However, it is to be noted that the acknowledgement of anger is also a pointer toward the work’s anchoring in life/ fact/ reality.

*After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* is the second “of a closely linked ‘quartet’ of novels” (Owen v) and hence, is often considered as a sort of continuation of the earlier theme of *Quartet*. It begins with a similar kind of woman as its heroine—a tired, pensioned off by lover, mashed up figure—Julia Martin by name. The already mentioned self-pity, although supposed to be in check as “she [Rhys] has already begun to see the man’s point of view” by now (Owen xvii)—is apparent in the description of Julia’s character:
But Julia was quiet and very inoffensive. And she was not a bad-looking woman, either.

(9)

The physical description of Julia also highlights the fragility of her character:

As she read a strained, anxious expression never left her face, which was round and pale with deep bluish circles under the eyes. Her eyebrows were thin, finely marked; her very thick dark hair was lit by too red lights and stood out rather wildly round her head. Her hands were slender, narrow-palmed with very long fingers, like the hands of an oriental. (11)

In the following excerpts self-pity is even more evident:

She dressed herself and then went and stood by the window to make up her face and to put kohl on her eyes, which were beautiful – long and dark, very candid, almost childish in expression.

Her eyes gave her away. By her eyes and the deep circles under them you saw that she was a dreamer, that she was vulnerable – too vulnerable ever to make a success of a career of chance. (11)

She was the soft sort. Anyone could tell that. Afraid of life. Had to screw herself up to it all the time. (19)

Even Mackenzie is made to perceive Julia in a way that does not contradict the authorial comments on her portrayal:

Almost he was forced to believe that she was a female existed without a sense of self-preservation. (20)
It continues and even Mackenzie is made to see Julia through Julia’s consciousness; Mackenzie even finds her eyes sad and asking a question:

As she talked she looked at him unwinkingly, like a baby. Her eyes were very sad; they seemed to be asking a perpetual question. ‘What?’ thought Mr Horsefield. (31)

In fact, what Mackenzie is made to see in Marya is again the exact reflection of Julia’s conception of her own self—drawn with an excess dose of self-pity:

She had the look in her eyes of someone who is longing to explain herself, to say:

‘This is how I am. This is how I feel’. (37)

The important point to note in assessing such descriptions is the discrepant use of pity and irony, as pity is seldom used in delineating a character other than the woman-protagonist, whereas, irony is hardly ever employed on this woman-protagonist. The representation of Mr Mackenzie follows this simple pattern and is shot with irony and aggression, quite similar in vein to those of the Heidlers:

Mr Mackenzie was a man of medium height and colouring. He was the type which proprietors of restaurants and waiters respect. He had enough nose to look important, enough stomach to look benevolent. His tips were not always in proportion with the benevolence of his stomach, but this mattered less than one might think. (17)

In sharp contrast to Julia’s fragility stands the hardness of Mackenzie’s emotional bearing:

He hid behind a rather deliberately absentminded expression. Once, in his youth, he had published a small book of poems. But when it came to actualities his mind was a tight and very tidy mind. He had discovered that people who allows themselves to be blown about by the winds of emotion and impulse are always unhappy people...(18)
After Leaving Mr Mackenzie gets related to Quartet not only because of the contrast between the projections of the female protagonists and those of the other oppressing characters of these two novels but also because of the presence of some of the characteristics of Marya in Julia. The monotony of a depressed mind, worsened by a chronic fatigue, is clearly present again in Julia:

Then she would feel horribly fatigued and would lie on the bed for a long time without moving. The rumble of the life outside was like the sound of the sea which was rising gradually around her.

She found pleasure in memories, as an old woman might have done. Her mind was a confusion of memory and imagination. (9)

Julia is even resigned to some of the strongest attractions of a demi monde—men and love:

Nowadays something had happened to her; she was tired. She hardly ever thought of men, or of love. (10)

After Leaving Mr Mackenzie, therefore, very much like Quartet also shows a sort of patterned characterization, which presents the woman protagonist (who, according to Angier and some other critics, is the literary representation of Rhys) as a victim of the system, rightfully deserving sympathy, whereas the dominant male characters are most of the time roguish, or at least hard-hearted and well-suited to the system designed to crush the weak and the vulnerable. The impression that Rhys shows sympathy for the principal woman protagonist sometimes even becoming harsh to other characters of her novels, in fact, gets strengthened while reading After Leaving Mr Mackenzie.
“When Jean Rhys wrote *Voyage in the Dark* in the early 1930s”, wrote Carole Angier in her introduction to the novel’s Penguin Classics edition (2000), “she was in her early forties. She had returned to England from France, which she had sworn never to do. She made a second unhappy marriage; her daughter chose to live with her father, not with her; she fell into a deep pit of misery, and was drinking heavily. And yet this, her third novel, would be her youngest, warmest and most daring of all” (v). The warmth of the novel—of the young heroine Anna Morgan to be specific—is something that makes this novel different from Rhys’s other three pre-World War II novels. If *Quartet*, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* and *Good Morning, Midnight* are a sort of continuation of the same theme of loneliness, desperation, depression and poverty, *Voyage in the Dark* obviously is the prequel\(^5\) to them describing “with disarming simplicity” (Esther Freud back cover) the descent of Anna Morgan from youth to decay, from light to darkness. In spite of the refreshing presence of an eighteen-year-old good-looking heroine at the centre of the novel, sadness—it seems—is inseparable from a Rhys-novel. It flows like an undercurrent. Certainly it creates ‘two tunes’ [the title Rhys originally thought for this novel (Angier, *Voyage* vii)] like the narrative that weaves the West-Indian past with the colourless, cold present of Anna’s stay in England. Despite the occasional and sudden rush of youthful happiness in her, Anna is basically sad like most of the Rhys-heroines:

I was thinking it was funny I could giggle like that because in my heart I was always sad, with the same sort of hurt that the cold gave me in my chest. (14)

Sadness is probably the principal aspect in Anna’s character as her lover Walter Jeffries finds her often. Anna, however, makes a mock protest:

He said, ‘You mustn’t be sad, you mustn’t worry. My darling mustn’t be sad.’
... 

But he didn’t speak and I said, ‘I’m not sad. Why have you got this soppy idea that I’m always sad?’ (33)

She finds association of her sadness with unaccountable objects:

The feeling of Sunday is the same everywhere, heavy, melancholy, standing still. (36)

Anna’s sadness, as said earlier, is intertwined with her moments of happiness in a complicated manner. The following stream of thought will reveal that:

That was when it was sad, when you lay awake at night and remembered things.
That was when it was sad, when you stood by the bed and undressed, thinking, ‘when he kisses me, shivers run up my back. I am hopeless, resigned, utterly happy. ...’ (49)

Nevertheless sadness never stops haunting her:

When it was sad was when you lay awake, and when it began to get light and the sparrows started—that was when it was sad, a lonely feeling, a hopeless feeling. When the sparrows started a chirp. (64)

In the already mentioned introduction to this novel Angier has written that “Jean Rhys’s novels were a quest for the truth about her own painful life. Behind each of them lies the question she gives to Antoinette in the last one, Wide Sargasso Sea: ‘[w]hy do such terrible things happen?’”(v). Anna, according to Angier, “belongs to this answer’ (vi). Angier’s observation justifies the idea that as a prequel to her other novels, Voyage in the Dark marks
the beginning of the voyage for the Rhys-heroines. In it “she [Anna] has already moved from hurt child to vengeful woman; from herself to Julia, Sasha and Antoinette” (Angier, Voyage xii).

The character of Sophia Jansen in *Good Morning, Midnight* is revealed through her own narration in interior monologue mode. In the absence of the authorial voice or third person narration, the descriptions of characters—including the self—are less direct and as a result are not over-emphasised. Unlike Marya in *Quartet* or Julia in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, Sophia is not described explicitly. Her physical appearance and, more importantly, psychological frame are to be inferred from her monologues. The latter, however, is not difficult. Sophia, who changed her name to Sasha to see if it brings some luck back, is a lonely woman like Julia or Marya, and she also stays at hotels, sometimes drifting from one hotel to the other in search of ‘light’. With a paralyzingly acute self-awareness, Sasha dwindles on the limits of depression, desperation and sanity:

I stayed there, staring at myself in the glass. What do I want to cry about? ... On the contrary, it’s when I am quite sane like this, when I had a couple of extra drinks and am quite sane, that I realize how lucky I am. Saved, rescued, fished-up, half drowned, out of the deep, dark river, dry clothes, hair shampooed and set. Nobody would know I had ever been in it. Except, of course, that there always remains something. Yes, there always remains something. ... Never mind, here I am, sane and dry, with my place to hide in. What more do I want? ... I am a bit of an automaton, but sane, surely—dry, cold and sane. Now I have forgotten about dark streets, dark rivers, the pain, the struggle and the drowning. ... Mind you, I’m not talking about the struggle when you are strong and a good swimmer and there are willing and eager friends on the bank
waiting to pull you out at the first sight of distress. I mean the real thing. You jump in with no willing and eager friends around, and when you sink to the accompaniment of loud laughter. (10)

It must be said, though, that the self-awareness—although very typical of Rhys’s heroines—stands apart here by employing more of self-irony than self-pity which tinted Rhys’s earlier attempts like *Quartet* or *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*. The following line, for example, exposes some negative traits of Sasha in Sasha’s own terms:

> When you’ve been made very cold and very sane you’ve also been made very passive. (11)

Sasha wanders from one job to the other—she works as a receptionist at a fashion store, and then as a guide in American Express. The hypocrisy of the whole process stings her at times, and bores her to death most of the times. When Sasha is sacked there comes in her a strange sense of solidarity with her class and gender:

> I cry for a long time—for myself, for the old woman with the bald head, for all the sadness of this damned world, for all the fools and all the defeated... (25)

Her anger is directed at the oppressors represented by Mr Blank, the proprietor of the fashion store who sacked her:

> Well, let’s argue this out, Mr Blank. You, who represent Society, have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month. That’s my market value, for I am an inefficient member of Society, slow in the uptake, uncertain, slightly damaged in the fray, there’s
no denying it. So you have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month, to lodge me in a small, dark room, to clothe me shabbily, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings till you get me to the point when I blush at a look, cry at a word. (25 – 26)

The heavy drinking to escape reality is present in case of Sasha, as it is in other heroines of Rhys. She is drinking herself to death:

And when the Exhibition is pulled down and the tourists have departed, where shall I be? In the other room, of course—the one just off the Gray’s In Road, as usual trying to drink myself to death ... (30)

The notion that Sasha is trying to drink herself to death—also a sure sign of depression—keeps recurring in the novel:

It was then that I had the bright idea of drinking my-self to death. Thirty-five pounds of the legacy had accumulated, it seemed. That ought to do the trick.

I did try it, too. I’ve had enough of these streets that sweat a cold, yellow slime, of hostile people, of crying myself to sleep every night. I’ve had enough of thinking, enough of remembering. Now whisky, rum, gin, sherry, vermouth, wine with the bottles labelled ‘Dum vivimus, vivamus. ...’ Drink, drink, drink. ... As soon as I sober up I start again. (37)
It is at this point of depression that a hint of self-pity surfaces:

I must be solid as an oak. Except when I cry. I watch my face gradually breaking up – cheeks puffing out, eyes getting smaller. Never mind ... Besides, it isn’t my face, this tortured and tormented mask. I can take it off whenever I like and hang it up on a nail. Or shall I place on it a tall hat with a green feather, hang a veil over the lot, and walk about the dark streets so merrily? (37 – 38)

Even one of Rhys’s most mature novels is thus stricken by self-pity, which again results from depression.

As is clear from the textual excerpts quoted above, the principal women characters of Rhys manifest certain uniform qualities in them: they all have fragility, softness, sadness, depression, addiction to drinking, feeling of isolation and loneliness etc. These were, undoubtedly, some of the features of Rhys of the Quartet phase. In her analysis of four of these pre-War novels of Rhys, Mellown comes to the conclusion that “These women are forever alone outside the realm of everyday society and cut off from the ordinary patterns of life. In them we see a literal meaning of the term demimonde, for theirs is only a partial existence. They know that they are alive because they suffer and because money passes through their hands. The respectable world views such women as commodities to be bought and as hostages who must pay their way” (107). But, more significantly, Mellown argues that such a woman protagonist of Rhys is not static. Rhys’s heroine rather develops from novel to novel, and this development is informed by “Rhys’s movement away from autobiography toward an ever more complete, imaginative rendition of the single character” (106). Mellown makes her point by analyzing Rhys’ treatment of and hold over the important modernist tool of point-of-view. According to her, Rhys only learned to detach her own consciousness from the narration with time. Her first two novels with an omniscient narrator are actually in a way
failures (we have already discussed how the all knowing consciousness made a heavily prejudiced/one-sided representation of characters in these two novels) that helped her have a grip over the medium by introducing first person point-of-view in *Voyage in the Dark*. Mellown thinks that the development of Rhys as a novelist gains maturity in her perfect handling of the narrative in *Wide Sargasso Sea* where narration shifts along with points-of-view recurrently.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), the last of Rhys’s novels is not about the 1920s. It is rather about the post-Emancipation Jamaica which is lush, colourful, sensual and mysterious. But the out of the ordinary, temperamentally volatile heroine of the novel—Antoinette—is linked to her predecessors more often than not, and hence calls for a thorough examination. The novel—commercially the most successful—also marks a development in craftsmanship on Rhys’s part. It uses the least amount of self-pity and for the first time offers narration from a man’s point-of-view for a considerable portion of the novel. The anonymous English husband of Antoinette [Rochester] is puzzled by her as he is by the place:

I watched her critically. She wore a tricorne hat which became her. At least it shadowed her eyes which are too large and can be disconcerting. She never blinks at all it seems to me. Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either. (46)
Her manners seemed awkward to him, and he clearly does not want to make allowances for that:

This was Antoinette. She spoke hesitantly as if she expected me to refuse, so it was easy to do so. (47)

The disturbance within him seems to have a similar pattern for both Antoinette and her place she feels so much attached to:

Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near. And the woman is a stranger. Her pleading expression annoys me. I have not bought her, she has bought me, or so she thinks. (49)

It takes him long to realize that Antoinette is beautiful:

She was sitting on the sofa and I wondered why I had never realized how beautiful she was. Her hair was combed away from her face and fell smoothly far below her waist. I could see the red and gold lights in it. (57)

But then Antoinette’s beauty is not without the touch of melancholy—a typical trait of Rhys’s female protagonists:

Her mouth was set in a fixed smile but her eyes were so withdrawn and lonely that I put my arms round her, rocked her like a child and sang to her. (60)

Antoinette’s anonymous husband finds a strange relation between the beautiful but lonely and sad Antoinette and her equally beautiful but mysterious place:

It was a beautiful place—wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. (64)
In fact, Rhys’s heroine hardly sheds her melancholy even in *Wide Sargasso Sea*; neither does she develop the pluck to control her depression or bouts of madness. Although the male character, unlike the ones on the four previous occasions, reflects considerable emotional honesty, he can still hardly be compared to the heroine so far as sensitivity is concerned. Mellown has rightly observed that “Rhys’s men all have basically the same psychology: They are creatures with physical desires who have the power of simple, logical thinking” (114). Rochester hardly differs in this respect from any of Rhys’s previous heroes (Mellown 114).

It seems that Rhys may just be uniform in her presentation of her female protagonists (who are, according to Angier and a few other critics, representations of Rhys herself), but when she portrays others—characters who are supposedly based on Ford, Stella, Lenglet, Leslie or somebody else—there is hardly any uniformity in Rhys. Sometimes it even seems that she is abnormally harsh to these characters. Rhys’s portrayals of these characters—as Mellown’s observations indicate—seem to be truncated/handicapped/hamstrung by prejudice or a tendency to stereotyping/generalizing. In other words, Rhys seems extra careful and protective in portraying her female protagonists (with whom, critics claim, she supposedly feels in union with); whereas her representations of others are marred by, first, a lack of insight into the psychology of others, and second, by Rhys’s tendency to blame ‘others’ for the failure of her heroines. In the earlier chapter we have already shown that even Rhys herself was sceptic about the fully autobiographical nature of her fiction. This chapter further shows that any attempt at creating Rhys out of her works could really be fallacious. Even if we agree with Angier and others on the claim that the female protagonists of Rhys’s fiction are attempted self-representations of Rhys herself, the heavy bias that Rhys has shown for her heroines makes us doubt the authenticity of Rhys’s self-representations. If Rhys’s
heroines are Rhys herself, do they give us a true picture of Rhys? This question unquestionably disturbs us if we particularly think of Rhys’s fictionalization of the quartet phase. It is interesting to note that Ford’s *When the Wicked Man*, Stella’s *Drawn from Life* and Lenglet’s *Sous les Verrous* represent Rhys of the quartet phase, especially in the light of the Ford/Rhys affair. Ford, Lenglet and Bowen—who probably thought they were incorrectly represented in Rhys’s *Quartet* and therefore wrote back to it by writing novels and memoirs—were no doubt urged either by a sentiment of setting the record straight with Rhys (like Ford) or by providing others with their sides of the story. Whether their representations of Rhys and of themselves suffer from any bias or prejudice will really be interesting to examine.

The next chapter, hence, will examine in detail the representations of Rhys in the writings of Ford, Lenglet and Bowen with an aim of comparing these representations of Rhys with Rhys’s self-representations in her own fiction.
Notes

1. Left Bank is a district of Paris on the southern, or left bank of the Seine River. It is known for its artistic and intellectual life.

2. It specifically refers to a group of American writers who gained their fame in the 1920s. The group consists of writers like Hemingway, Archibald MacLeish, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hart Crane e.e. cummings, John Dos Passos and some others. The whole group made Paris their home in the 1920s.

3. Angier’s work, however, could not have influenced Staley as it appeared more than a decade after Staley’s work.

4. Elgin Mellown says, “The stories of The Left Bank are generally told by a sexually ambiguous persona who is alive to pathos, keenly aware of her own sensibilities, generally conscious of the emotions of others, and always completely amoral in her evaluations” (110).

5. According to Angier and some critics Voyage in the Dark, although appeared between After Leaving Mr Mackenzie and Good Morning, Midnight, actually, tells the events that precede Rhys’s marriage with Lenglet. In that way this novel is seen as a prequel to Rhys’s Paris-novels beginning with Quartet. The heroine Anna Morgan, however, is seen as a predecessor to Marya, Julia and Sasha.
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