

CHAPTER III

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

A. Jean Rhys (1890-1979)

Jean Rhys was born in Roseau, Dominica, West Indies on 24 August 1890 as Ella Gwendolyn Rees William (Atkinson, 1999, u.p.). Her father was a Welsh doctor and mother was a Dominican Creole. At the age of seventeen, her passion for the place that she only read on books brought her to England in 1907. She attended the Perse School in Cambridge (1907-08) and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London (1909). When her father died, she was forced to abandon her studies. During 1909-10 Rhys was touring as a chorus girl to support her life. In 1919, she married Jean Lenglet and moved to Paris on 29 December 1919, then gave birth of a son who died three weeks later. Three years later, she met Ford Madox Ford in Paris and began writing under his patronage. Their relationship developed into an affair and Rhys's marriage with Lenglet ended in divorce. Two marriages came soon afterward; to Leslie Tilden Smith who died in 1945 and to Max Hamer who died in 1966. Rhys had been writing Wide Sargasso Sea since 1957 and finally was published in 1966.

B. Jean Rhys in Her Wide Sargasso Sea

Much of the action in the novel takes place in the West Indies. It has been part of Rhys literary consciousness and her feeling of differentness and rootedness that marked her work. It can be said that her birthplace shaped her sensibility. Her Dominican background is important to her works. Wide Sargasso Sea is set on Dominica, the most rugged of the Caribbean islands (Litvack, 1997, u.p.). Dominica is the violent contrasts between dense vegetation, deep gorges, waterfalls and stretches of arid wasteland. The irreconcilability of the landscape is evoked in Wide Sargasso Sea when Rochester's attitude to the beauty is to mistrust its lushness —'What an extreme green!'

The character of Christophine represents Rhys's nursemaid in her childhood and indeed through her life, Meta. Her attempted friendship with the blacks is to envisage the Negro community and its vitality and often contrasts the sterility of the white world with the richness and splendour of black life. Tia, a character in her book is an obvious example.

Another fact in Jean Rhys's life is that her great-grandfather, John Potter Lockhart, acquired a plantation in Dominica in 1824. After his death in 1837, his widow was left to run the estate. The riots in 1844 following emancipation led to the destruction of the estate and the burning of the house. This is exactly what Antoinette's family have been through. Her father who had died left his wife to run the estate alone. Eventually, they are getting poorer and poorer, and then the house is set up on fire by the former slaves, who are also burn up with hatred.

There is no doubt that Wide Sargasso Sea is based largely on Rhys's childhood experiences in Dominica. Although she set the novel in Jamaica, much of the landscape and many of the people described were taken from her memory. Rhys's own mother, like Antoinette, married a man who came from off the island and did not quite understand its politics. Rhys's father, like Rochester, was an unlucky second son, exiled from his home in part because of a difficult relationship with his father. Rhys herself, like Antoinette, left a childhood paradise, albeit a treacherous one, for the cold, damp, and cheerlessness of England.

C. Wide Sargasso Sea: Beyond the Story

In his acknowledgement in *Frontiers of Caribbean Literature in English*, Birbalsingh mentioned about the difference between pre-1950 and post-1950 writers. Pre-1950 writers tended to illustrate specific features of colonial society mainly as a reflection of reality. The post-1950 writers probed these features in a more enquiring manner that drew attention to challenging issues of personal and national identity, and their implication of political nationalism and freedom from colonial rule (194-5). This is exactly what Rhys has done. She dealt more exclusively with post-colonial recovery, or concentrate on general themes of exile and loss as they emanate out of the lives of immigrants on their particular frontiers of the Caribbean. Rhys' writing about colonialism has traditionally brought out aspects of economic exploitation and of the enormous physical abuse of slavery, which can be obviously seen in Wide Sargasso Sea. Moreover, her writing in Creole about erotic experiences is a very

sensuous pursuit. It helps the readers of the book to strip away the surfaces of colonial relation and reveal what takes place at the basest level of human emotions and actions.

In Wide Sargasso Sea, we can find the idea of different voices: the first part is narrated by Antoinette, describing her childhood in Jamaica; the second part is largely narrated by Rochester, describing his honeymoon in Dominica; and the third is narrated partly by Antoinette's jailer, Grace Poole, and partly by Antoinette herself. It is easier to write in a first person and this is something to do with the nature of the Caribbean experience (Birbalsingh 94). As so far as Rhys did feel strongly that to adopt an authorial position of third-person narrator would somehow reduce the complexity of the Caribbean. It can be said that diversity is the essence of Caribbean. It is almost impossible to easily apply an authorial position of the third-person narrator to a society, which is made up of so many different voices and experiences (Birbalsingh 95). There is something about writing in the first person, whether one interchanges narrator or not, which seems to give a more urgent and lyrical voice to Caribbean experience. In broad outline, Rhys would not be able to produce such a work without having the experience of living in the Caribbean.

In writing Wide Sargasso Sea, it was Rhys' ambition to create a history and understanding of the character Bertha Rochester (Antoinette Mason). In order to do so, Rhys sets herself up to appropriate Brontë's story, the consciousness of a woman who goes insane (Antoinette), and the perspective of an English gentleman (Rochester). It took Rhys nine years to create these characters and this story that

emphatically provided culturally accurate defence for both Bertha and Rochester. This time-commitment in itself is evidence that Rhys was dedicated to a responsible creation of this story.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS