

EXISTENTIAL STRUGGLES OF THE SELF AND THE OTHER:
JEAN RHY'S *VOYAGE IN THE DARK* AND *WIDE SARGASSO SEA*
AS POSTCOLONIAL NOVELS

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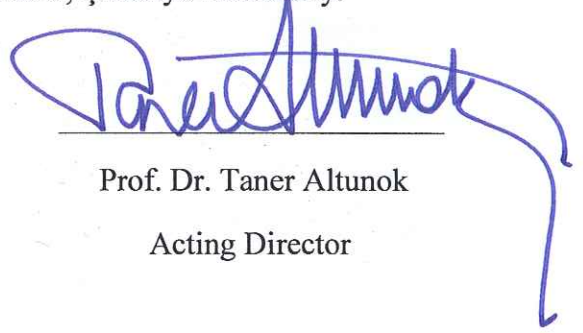
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ABSTRACT

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Born to a Creole mother and a Welsh father, Jean Rhys, in her novels, *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, reflects her own background and experiences in those of her characters. As both a white Creole and an English woman, and as the embodiment of postcolonialism, Jean Rhys, reflects her own dilemma and existential struggle in these novels. In her novels, *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she reveals the social, cultural and economic paradigms of two different nations and cultures that is to say, England and the West Indies. Her handling of her material identifies her with postcolonialism, which speaks for the 'oppressed' and 'silenced', as an aspect that reflects the existential struggles of the Self and the Other. This thesis seeks to analyze *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* as postcolonial novels through the perspective of existentialism. After a brief introduction, the first

chapter of the thesis examines Jean Rhys's own life alongside basic principles of postcolonialism and existential philosophy. In the second chapter, *Voyage in the Dark* is analyzed as a postcolonial novel representing existential characters. The third chapter applies the same existential and postcolonial perspectives to *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In conclusion, the existential struggles of the self and the other reflected in these novels are considered as postcolonial entities.

Keywords: Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Voyage in the Dark*, Postcolonialism, Existentialism.

ÖZ

BEN VE ÖTEKİNİN VAROLUŞSAL MÜCADELESİ: JEAN RHYS'İN SÖMÜRGEÇİLİK SONRASI ROMANLARI OLARAK VOYAGE IN THE DARK VE WIDE SARGASSO SEA

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Kreol bir annenin ve Gal'li bir babanın çocuğu olan Jean Rhys, kendi Kreol ve İngiliz benliğini *Voyage in the Dark* ve *Wide Sargasso Sea* adlı romanlarında yarattığı karakterler üzerinden yansıtmaktadır. Hem bir Kreol hem de bir İngiliz olarak, Jean Rhys sömürgeçilik sonrası şartlarından kaynaklanan ikilemini bu romanlardaki varoluşsal mücadelede yansıtır. *Voyage in the Dark* ve *Wide Sargasso Sea* adlı romanlarında iki farklı milletin ve kültürün, yani İngiltere ve Batı Hint Adaları'nın, kültürel ve ekonomik paradigmasını gözler önüne serer. Konusunu ele alış tarzı, onu ben ve ötekinin varoluşsal mücadelesini yansıtan bir özellik olarak “baskılanan” ve “susturulan”ın sözcüsü olarak sömürgeçilik sonrasıyla bağdaştırır. Bu tez, *Voyage in the Dark* ve *Wide Sargasso Sea*'yi sömürgeçilik sonrası romanlar

olarak varoluşçu bakış açısıyla ele alır. Kısa bir girişten sonra, tezin ilk bölümünde Jean Rhys'in kendi hayatı, sömürgecilik sonrasının temel prensipleri ve varoluşçu felsefe irdelenmiştir. İkinci bölümde, *Voyage in the Dark* adlı eser varoluşçu karakterleri yansıtan sömürgecilik sonrası bir roman olarak ele alınmıştır. Üçüncü bölüm ise, aynı varoluşçu ve sömürgecilik sonrası bakış açılarını *Wide Sargasso Sea*'ye uyarlar. Sonuç olarak, bu romanlarda yansıtılan ben ve ötekinin varoluşsal mücadeleleri sömürgecilik sonrası özellikler olarak değerlendirilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Voyage in the Dark*,
Sömürgecilik Sonrası, Varoluşçuluk

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INTRODUCTION

Jean Rhys, who was born to a Welsh father and a Creole mother in Dominica, where different cultures coexisted or struggled to exist, is a writer who reveals the West Indian paradigm of “[de]colonization” through her fiction. Being aware of this paradigm, as having lived in Dominica until she left it for England when she was seventeen, Jean Rhys reveals the socio-economic as well as political dynamics of both the West Indies and Britain in her fiction, especially in *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This aspect of her writing brings Rhys’s fiction within the scope of postcolonial writing, which problematizes the lives and experiences of individuals migrating from the former British colonies.

Jean Rhys’s autobiographical fiction also bears postcolonial elements. Her own experience of displacement and cultural dilemma is reflected in her culturally alienated characters. Her literary career is defined by her dislocation and sense of displacement:

Rhys writes of an in-between world, where identities are indecipherable, uncertain, confused. In her metropolitan fictions, her characters live in transitory, anonymous boarding houses and hotels, surrounded by strangers, strangers to those who surround them. Instead of homes they can only go ‘back to the hotel[s].’ (Carr, 1996: 29)

Jean Rhys created characters engaged in an existential struggle stemming from cultural differences. Her characters, like Jean Rhys herself, stand for the certain immigrant culture in Europe. Considering Rhys's own and her characters' individual struggles as existential, and the fact that existentialism favours individual freedom, this concept is a key theory to be applied in this thesis. The term 'existentialism' conforms to the condition, motivation, and the struggle of the self in a postcolonial context, which involves notions such as culture shock, identity crisis as well as adaptation into a new culture, culture of "the other".

Though all of Rhys's novels depict displaced characters struggling to survive in an alien society, *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, especially, portray characters who have to survive in a culture "other than" their native one. Anna Morgan, in *Voyage in the Dark*, is a young woman who is drawn into a financial and emotional struggle to exist within English society, where she is brought by her English step-mother from her native West Indies. Antoinette Mason in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, however, experiences alienation not only in England, where she is brought by her English husband against her will, but also amongst the emancipated slaves in the West Indies. Both characters have to endure such difficulties as social pretentiousness and the malice of colonial politics in order to survive in the presence of "the other". Considering both characters' in-between situation as the descendants of Creole ancestors, both in England and the West Indies, this thesis explores Anna's and Antoinette's postcolonial experience as an existential struggle for "self-fulfilment". It is claimed that Anna's and Antoinette's Creole backgrounds set them within a postcolonial context in which they are othered both by the black in the West Indies and by the English in both England and the West Indies. Anna's lonely

struggle, as she drifts from one place to another in London, and Antoinette's final rebellious attempt to burn the attic in which she is imprisoned are considered as existential reactions and a means of asserting their existences against their postcolonial subjection.

After an analysis of Jean Rhys's own Creole background and her deep attachment to the West Indies, the first chapter will go on to give brief accounts of both postcolonial discourse and existentialism. Though it is a mode of thinking dating back to earlier times, existentialism emerged as a certain philosophy in the mid-twentieth century. It is possible to refer to a series of philosophers, from Kierkegaard to Albert Camus, who contributed to the development of existentialism into a modern philosophy that deals with human experience in general.¹ Individualism is privileged against the institutions that hinder the individual's development in social and cultural circumstances. Therefore, existentialism asserts the freedom of the "self" and extends this freedom into the boundaries of "Existential Sociology", which deals with the experiences of an individual in social terms. Bringing the "being", his feelings and his achievements to the fore, existentialism favours individuals over society. The basic tenets of existentialism, thus can be referred to as "the study of human experience", attending to "feelings and emotions", representing the individual "in action, yet free to create his or her own life-ways" (Smith, 1984: 101-102). Existentialism handles such ontological issues as "how problematic most of life's meanings and understandings" are, and suggests that "human experience is best understood via direct personal experience" (Smith, 1984: 101-102).

¹ For a general discussion of the existentialist philosophies of Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Heidegger, and Jean Paul Sartre, see: **Blackham, H. J.** (1967), *Six Existential Thinkers*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, London.

Existentialism and postcolonialism coincide in this point, as both of them call for authenticity and freedom. Postcolonialism, like existentialism, refers to the dissolution of individuals into their “authentic” origins.

Jean Rhys herself represents the individual dissolution by going back to the “mother country/land” at seventeen, an experience which makes her the embodiment of postcolonialism. As the descendant of Creole parents, Rhys herself had been exposed to cultural and identity problems just as her characters are. Growing up in a multicultural environment, Jean Rhys witnessed the tension between the blacks and the Creoles, as well as the othering attitude of the English towards the Creoles. Mary Lou Emery defines the white Creoles as “in-between”:

...White Creoles are divided precisely within the context of the island’s histories and cultures. They descend from a class that no longer exists and whose history is morally shameful. They feel close to a black culture that they cannot be part of and that can only resent them, and they may still look to a “mother” country that long ago abandoned them and still considers them inferior. (1990: 13)

Jean Rhys projects her memories and her “in-between identity” onto her characters in her novels, especially *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The main characters in both novels are from a slave-owning Creole background, and they both struggle to exist against the challenging circumstances which threaten their existence and individuality: “Rhys’s fiction registers the sense of disorientation and the uncertain identity of those who live the ambivalent, uncentred, dislocated existences...” (Carr, 1996: 23).

Jean Rhys, as both a postcolonial and an existential writer, reveals the condition of the characters along with their paradigms, and develops them within a

postcolonial world in which they struggle to exist in the face of many impediments, either as “the self” or “the other”. Postcolonialism is the natural outcome of colonization and it gives voice to the once repressed and colonized. Jean Rhys “... wrote of women (and sometimes men) acutely conscious of their lack of power, unsure of how to act, feeling themselves silenced or unheard, what she does in writing her novels is to assert the right and power to speak on their behalf” (Carr, 1996: 6). In the sense of giving voice to the silenced or oppressed, postcolonialism resembles existentialism, which is a theory that brings forth the acknowledgement of human existence and freedom. The characters in both novels are in a postcolonial world, which is shaped by the aftermath of the colonization, necessitating the struggle of the othered self in order to exist. Explaining an individual’s motivation as a need to maintain freedom and self-actualization, existentialism can be used as a key theory to reveal the paradigm of once colonized side and to explain the struggle of both the colonizer and the colonized.

The second chapter discusses the character of the West Indian Creole, Anna Morgan, and her existential struggle in England. Brought to England at a very young age, in a way similar to that of the author herself, Anna Morgan cannot adapt to English culture. Jean Rhys achieved self-realization through writing, especially *Voyage in the Dark*, which is partly autobiographical:

Voyage in the Dark was a re-presentation of a part of Rhys’s life in words, a re-vision of the dialogue that constituted the affair and is its central drama. What she is “shaping” is “life” – her own life – the better to present what seemed to her fundamental to its expression. In writing that life in her diary she “remembered” what he *said* and what she *felt*; however, in re-writing it as a reader of her own life in order to shape the novel, what Rhys accomplishes is the *re-constitution* of

the self that was and the constitution of the self that now writes the life. (Harrison, 1988: 112)

Voyage in the Dark shows Jean Rhys's experience, which is existential in its own terms, in England as a Creole. English culture and Jean Rhys's inability to adapt to it made her vulnerable. On the other hand, Rhys, through her writing, "reconstituted" her self by projecting her life in England onto the novel. In this respect, the process of creating her novel is the product of her own existential struggle.

Since Anna Morgan comes from a more flexible and comforting West Indian culture, she faces many impediments in the form of social norms and conventions that restrain her achievement of self-actualization: "*Voyage in the Dark* is riddled with metaphors of a mortified reality which stands in sharp contrast with the lush natural world of Anna's virgin island" (Maurel, 1998: 93). By migrating to England Anna Morgan finds herself in an alien world whose system and formation work differently than that of her Creole culture; and it is this difference between the two cultures that leads her into an existential struggle.

In the third chapter, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is analyzed from an existential perspective as a postcolonial novel revealing the existential motivations of not only Antoinette but also of her English husband, as well as those of the native people in the West Indies. In each of the three parts of the novel, one of these parties is presented in an existential struggle against circumstances, which clash with their authentic selves and cultures. The first part of the novel, narrated by Antoinette Cosway, reveals the existential struggle of the black against the white, the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized. In the second part, Antoinette's husband, who represents English culture, struggles to exist against West Indian culture. In the final

part, Antoinette is depicted as asserting her own existence within the culture of the other. Antoinette struggles against all the impediments as a white Creole both in the West Indies and England. Despite her passivity and repression at the beginning, Antoinette manages to exist in the end of the novel, even though it is through destruction. She proves to be brave enough to make a choice.

It is concluded that in both novels it is the characters' own cultures that are caught into a struggle to preserve their entity by trying to exist authentically. Both novels represent individual struggles to exist in the presence of the culture of "the other". In this sense, postcolonialism and existentialism complement each other. That is to say, the elements of existentialism are present in postcolonial writing and the issues raised within postcolonialism can be analyzed through existentialism.

CHAPTER I

JEAN RHYS, EXISTENTIALISM AND POSTCOLONIALISM

Born as Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams to a Welsh father and a Creole mother in Dominica in 1890, Jean Rhys reflects her mixed identity in her novels. Dominica, where Jean Rhys spent the first sixteen years of her life, has an important influence upon the formation of her identity. Her mother's descent from the "granddaughter of James Gibson Lockhart who had arrived at Dominica from Scotland at the end of the eighteenth century" (Rhys, 1981: 33) allied Rhys with the story of "the other side" which involves slave-owning Creole culture and black slaves. Her father, William Rees Williams, who came to Dominica as a doctor on a "Government post", represents the European extension of her existence. Jean Rhys witnessed discrimination both in Dominica, against the 'black' or 'mixed race' during her childhood, and in England, where she spent rest of her life as a white Creole.

The characters in her novels are in an ongoing clash in which they try to exist in terms of their individuality:

Rhys's heroines are also caught in that 'unwinnable war': this is perhaps the root cause of their sense of powerlessness and paralysis. Not that they feel that way all the time: the rhythm of the novels

follows their swings between resistance and defeat. If they didn't resist, it would not be a war. (Carr, 1996: 30)

Set against this background, it has not been easy for critics to categorise Jean Rhys as a writer. Jean Rhys's personal dilemma, originating from her in-between situation in Dominica as well as in England, is paralleled by her authorial identity: "For Rhys the problems of situating herself as a subject are multiplied: within which cultural discourse does she belong, either at home in the Caribbean or in England, the mother country? It has been Rhys's fate to be regarded as an outsider in both cultures" (Howells, 1991: 21). So has been her literary life. Even though the autobiographical content of her fiction conforms to such labels as modernism, postmodernism, and feminism, postcolonialism explains her best, as all her novels reflect an alienation originating from a cultural non-conformism. The deeds as well as the motivations of the characters somehow reflect the paradigm of her own in-between situation and the dynamics of her own *existence*:

What Rhys constructs through her fiction is ... a feminine colonial sensibility becoming aware of itself in a modernist European context, where a sense of colonial dispossession and displacement is focused on and translated into gendered terms, so that all these conditions coalesce, transformed into her particular version of feminine pain. Her texts are all versions of a fragmented female subjectivity, as Rhys shows her heroines trying to construct an identity for themselves in radically unstable situations where traditions and social conventions prescribe certain rituals but are emptied of meaning. (Howells, 1991: 5-6)

As Coral Ann Howells discusses in the quotation above, Jean Rhys's female characters struggle to construct their identities in an alien world, which is marked either by male dominance or by cultural and social conventions. In this sense, considering the existential struggles of the self and the other in postcolonial context,

Jean Rhys provides us with a proper example of both existentialism and postcolonialism. Postcolonialism is a broad term that involves cultural as well as political issues emerging out of the political and cultural interactions between the former colonizer and the colonized. Following the dissolution of the British Empire, once colonized cultures re-established the dimensions of their relation to the mother land, correspondingly, the nature of their relationship was transformed. The politics as well as the cultural differences between the former colonizer and her colonies are reflected in literature of postcolonialism². Postcolonial literary theory explains the issue of colonialism and its aftermath.³ On account of the fact that there are basically two binary oppositions as far as the cultural differences are concerned, it is possible to name those two different cultures or binary oppositions as ‘the self’ and ‘the other’.⁴ That is to say, the self and the other within postcolonialism refer to the two different cultures. The cultural difference which is a fundamental base for the creation as well as the clash of ‘the self’ and ‘the other’ is explained by Homi K. Bhabha as “a process of signification through which statements *of* culture or *on* culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity” (1995: 206). Edward W. Said, in *Orientalism* (1978), refers to the relation between the self and the other as the paradigm of the

² For further discussion about postcolonial literature, see: **Ashcroft, B. G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin** (eds.), (2005), *The Empire Writes Back*, Routledge, London and New York.

³ For a discussion of the “colonial discourse and postcolonial theory”, see: **Williams, P., Chrisman L.** Eds. (1994), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Salisbury.

⁴ See also: **Bhabha, H. K.** (1995), *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London and New York.

relationship between Occident and Orient.⁵ He states that [Orientalism] “tries to show that European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self...” (1995: 89). Said asserts that the Occident refers to the Orient as a means of explaining its own status:

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. (1995: 87)

Edward Kamau Brathwaite explains colonial discourse as the disregard of the colonized, the weak, by the othering attitude of the colonizer. He goes on to state that:

Blinded by the need to justify slavery, white Jamaicans refused to recognize their black labourers as human beings, thus cutting themselves off from the one demographic alliance that might have contributed to the island’s economic and (possibly) political independence. (1995: 204)

As opposed to the othering context of colonization, postcolonialism provides a wider perspective of the changed roles of the subject (the self) and the object (the other). While colonialism marks only one way of interpreting the relationship between the parts, that is between the colonizer and the colonized, postcolonialism provides a wider and more sophisticated interpretation of this relationship. In colonialism, the colonizer does not only dominate and degrade “the other” to an inferior position in order to justify his own dominance, but also convinces them of their own inferiority as an important strategy:

⁵ See: **Said, E. W.** (1995), *Orientalism*, Penguin Books, England.

Colonialism is perpetuated in part by justifying to those in the colonising nation the idea that it is right and proper to rule over other peoples, and by getting colonised people to accept their lower ranking in the colonial order of things – a process we can call ‘colonising the mind’. It operates by persuading people to internalise its logic and speak its language; to perpetuate the values and assumptions of the colonisers as regards the ways they perceive and represent the world. (McLeod, 2000:18)

Postcolonialism, on the other hand, deconstructs the basis of colonialism, suggesting new perceptions of the colonizer and the colonized by means of voicing the oppressed. Thus, it constructs a new existence for the formerly non-existent cultures. This point is one of the essential ideas that will be developed in this thesis: “In an important sense, postcolonial theory marks not only the return of the repressed, or the return of the native, but the return of class as a marker of difference” (Gilbert, 1997: 3). One of the main factors that identify Jean Rhys as a postcolonial writer is her ability to give voice to all kinds of repressed people in her novels, regardless of their nationality and cultural background.

Jean Rhys also justifies and favours the culture which was once oppressed or colonized by the European powers.

Shielded by European security and lulled by their national achievements, the Western writers remained oblivious of the ruthless political rivalries, the brutal slave trade, and the blind exploitation that had been let loose into the Caribbean basin by the European colonizers. But the natives, who had tasted the whip and suffered inhuman dignities, remembered the degradation of their ancestors at the hands of planters and their overseers. The modern Caribbean discourse is, therefore, generated by a dialectical interaction between a pastoral nostalgia and a national nightmare. (Chauhan, 1996: 45)

Therefore, Jean Rhys’s novels can be usefully analysed from a postcolonial perspective, as they reflect the existential struggle of the “repressed”, the “native”,

and formerly ignored “classes”. Rhys manages to recreate the postcolonial dynamics in the West Indies with reference to not only the political and cultural atmosphere there, but also its geographical and climatic aspects. In her personal accounts, she associates the fertility and scenic attractions of the island with its colonial exploitation.

The sun shines hotter and the moon brighter here than anywhere in Europe. Rain falls more quickly and night comes more quickly. Colours are brighter, smells stronger; trees and flowers and insects grow bigger. So much grows so quickly that almost everything has a parasite, even people. Species overflow, individuals don't count. (Rhys qtd. in Angier, 1990: 3)

Jean Rhys's familiarity with the West-Indian culture and European paradigms provides her with a multicultural perspective and awareness that reflect the social, cultural and economic dynamics of the West-Indies as well as Europe. She understands and favours the othered, that is the once oppressed and colonized, even though she herself is a descendant of the colonizers:

Sometimes she hated her family's slave-owning past so much it made her 'sick with shame'; sometimes she thought with pride of her great-grandfather's rich estate, and longed to have lived in that fabulous time, full of splendour and cruelty. But no – the end of her thoughts was always the same: 'to be identified once and for all with the other side, which of course was impossible.' She felt akin to them, but they didn't like white people. 'White cockroaches they called us'; and she didn't blame them. (Angier, 1990: 22)

Jean Rhys is bold enough to represent the feelings and resentments of the oppressed in her fiction, despite the fact that her own ancestors were the oppressors themselves. Jean Rhys's dilemma originates from her Creole identity consisting of two conflicting elements. Her paradoxical feelings about the slave-owners, her own ancestors, and the suffering slaves, the blacks, work against each other throughout

all of her novels, especially the two novels under consideration. Both her nineteenth-century character, Antoinette, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and the twentieth-century character, Anna Morgan, in *Voyage in the Dark*, can exist neither in England nor in the West Indies. In other words, their struggle for existence is a struggle to neutralize themselves first as inhabitants of the island rather than slave-owners, then to exist as individuals. Antoinette's and Anna's dilemmas reflect Jean Rhys's own dilemma in that she felt both sympathy and envy for the black in Dominica. Their way of life fascinated her greatly. Observing their total conformity to nature, Jean Rhys thought that the black people belonged to the island more than the white people. In *Smile Please*, Rhys reveals how black people reflect their harmony with nature, either during hard work or while entertaining themselves:

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. (1981: 50)

While colonizing West Indies, as they did with all their colonies, the English preferred to impose their own culture on the natives rather than adapt themselves to theirs, which is how a distinct Creole culture, neither English nor native, came into being:

...They [the whites] lived in a little England, and thought always of England, not *here*, as home. Even after many generations they brought their clothes and food, their books, newspapers and ideas out from England; they went back to England themselves to rest or retire, and sent their children back there to school. If they had any money they often sent that back to England too. (Angier, 1990: 5)

The British and West Indians' commitment into social and economic life, their religion, and their family structure were different from each other. Growing up in a society where these different values and cultures coexisted provided Jean Rhys with the opportunity to compare and contrast two different cultures. She observes that the native family life, for example, is highly different from that of the English. She reveals in *Smile Please*, that "Black girls on the contrary seemed to be perfectly free. Children swarmed but negro marriages that I knew of were comparatively rare. Marriage didn't seem a duty with them as it was with us" (1981: 51). This multi-cultural perspective, however, didn't help her to avoid an identity crisis. As opposed to her Protestant family, Jean Rhys was attracted by Catholicism, which was practised by the native people in Dominica. In *Smile Please* she reveals that "the older I grew the more things there were to worry about. Religion was then as important as politics are now. Would I insist on knowing more about Catholicism or would I stick to the English church?" (1981: 62). Not only their religion but also other important elements of West Indian culture, such as supernatural stories, influenced Rhys's identity formation. Jean Rhys had, for instance, a nurse named Meta who thrilled her with horror stories. "It was Meta who talked so much about zombies, souciantis, and loups-garoux... Meta had shown me a world of fear..." (Rhys, 1981: 30). The black, however superstitious their fears are, "... express their fear in *obeah*, the black magic of the islands" (Angier, 1990: 5). The influence of black culture on Jean Rhys was so strong that she remembers her childhood desire to be black "... I prayed so ardently to be black, and would run to the looking-glass in the morning to see if the miracle had happened? And though it never had, I tried again. Dear God, let me be black" (Rhys, 1979: 42). Her admiration of Dominica is

not only limited to the black culture but also includes the natural beauty of the island. Her deep admiration of the nature of the island is also strongly expressed in *Smile Please*: “[t]he earth was like a magnet which pulled me and sometimes I came near it, this identification or annihilation that I longed for. Once, regardless of the ants, I lay down and kissed the earth and thought, ‘Mine, mine’ (1981: 81-82). The importance of the island as well as everything native about it in the formation of her identity associates her with the black culture rather than her native English culture. Witnessing both cultures simultaneously, she achieved the chance to compare the cultures and traditions of these two different entities.⁶ Her enjoyment of the black culture might be considered a proof that Rhys regarded English culture as more overbearing, bigoted and conservative than that of the native West Indian.

She had had such high hopes, such romantic dreams; but now she was homesick, unhappy, she trailed around London ‘in a state of complete disappointment which almost amounted to hatred.’ Nothing was *grand*, nothing was beautiful or exciting, as she’d been so sure it would be. The streets were narrow, the people were ordinary, the whole city was shabby and grey. The women especially looked so ugly, and so *poor*. (Angier, 1990:39)

Her multicultural perspective thus, is reflected in the postcolonial handling of her characters, whose deeds and motivations are marked by historical facts and paradigms such as imperialism and emancipation, which are present in the background of her characters’ struggle for acknowledgement and existence against oppression and denial. It is possible to see Rhys’s own existential search throughout all of her novels: “Her fiction, dealing as it does with those who belong nowhere, between cultures, between histories, describes an existence which is becoming paradigmatic of late twentieth century life. As Heidegger said, ‘[h]omelessness is

⁶ See: **Thomas, S.** (1999), *The Worlding of Jean Rhys*, Greenwood Press, USA.

coming to be the destiny of the world’, and ‘homelessness’ is the terrain of Jean Rhys’s fiction” (Carr, 1996: xiv). As a philosophy which deals with individual experience, existentialism explores the meaning of being an individual in the modern world. Even though it appears as a certain philosophy in response to man’s ontological problems in the twentieth century, it is possible to trace existentialism back to the nineteenth century, even into the antique times. Existentialism was first initiated to the modern philosophy by the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard who gives priority to human experience that is shaped by the individual’s own decisions and choices. Despite his strong belief in Christianity, Kierkegaard is sceptical of the abstract and metaphysical domains of the religion as he regards them as misleading an individual and his free thinking. For example, he attacks the idea of sin in Christianity:

Only the consciousness of sin is the expression of absolute respect, and just for this reason, ie. because Christianity requires absolute respect, it must and will display itself as madness or horror, in order that the qualitative infinite emphasis may fall upon the fact that only consciousness of sin is the way of entrance, is the vision, which, by being absolute respect, can see the gentleness, loving-kindness, and compassion of Christianity. (1941:72)

Kierkegaard criticizes and attacks those institutions which disregard the idea of man’s individual choice on behalf of Christianity. For Kierkegaard, the right of choice means one’s being or self-actualization. He asserts that “there is no direct communication and no direct reception – there is a choice” (1941: 140). Depending on the Christian idea of “free will”, Kierkegaard asserts that by making a choice, an individual achieves self-realization as an individual in society:

The constantly recurring theme in all the writings of Kierkegaard is ‘choice’. Since it is very personal, the community or the society does

not have a big role to play. If choice is not exercised, it is almost equivalent to death. When the choice is made in the right direction, it is for life itself, viz., to be an authentic Christian. Even the very titles of some of his writings highlight this idea of choice. (*cf. Either Or*). (Manimala, 1991: 19)

Kierkegaard puts forth the idea of choice as well as the disregard of metaphysics and abstract notions of Christianity in order to emphasize the meaning of existence in the world. All in all, to Kierkegaard, self-realization is directly related to making free choices⁷.

Friedrich Nietzsche, who initiates the idea of “the dead God” to the modern philosophy, also suggests the concept of the idea of “free will”, this time not as an extension of Christianity, but as a reaction against the dominance of society over the individual. He considers society as an egocentric crowd that disregards the individual:

Nietzsche bemoans the fact that herd instinct is ruling over men. In place of the dead God it is the gregarious instinct which speaks. It wishes to be master: hence its “thou shalt.” It will allow the individual to exist only as a part of the whole, only in favour of the whole. The herd is characterized precisely by mediocrity. It can tolerate nothing great, nothing exceptional. It is egalitarian and levels everything to the familiar and harmless. Crowd is just as intolerant of weakness as it is of strength, of inferiority, as of superiority. (Manimala, 1991: 27)

Nietzsche attacks Christian morality, considering it “decadence morality”. Moreover, he denies two basic things in Western civilization: “first a type of man who has hitherto counted as the highest, the *good*, the *benevolent*, *beneficent*” ... “secondly a kind of morality which has come to be accepted and to dominate as morality in itself” (1985: 128). Furthermore, Nietzsche attacks the priest “who with

⁷ For the philosophy of Kierkegaard, see: **Kierkegaard, S.** (1959), *Either/Or*, trans. D. F. Swenson and L. M. Swenson Anchor Books, USA.

the aid of morality has lied himself up to being the determiner of mankind's values" (1985: 132). Nietzsche argues further by referring to other influences that oblige man to morality: "...the teachers, the leaders of mankind, theologians included, have also one and all been *decadents*: *thence* the revaluation of all values into the inimical to life, *thence* morality." (1985: 133).

Karl Jaspers develops Kierkegaard's and Nietzsche's existentialist ideas in the twentieth century by replacing society with the mass culture. Varghese J. Manimala refers to Jaspers' ideas about how modern societies, which are shaped by science and technology, affect individuals: "[t]he rule of the masses affects the activities and habits of the individual. The individual is called to fulfil a function 'which is regarded useful to the masses'" (1991: 39). He goes on to explain Jaspers' ideas on the evils of technology: "Modern man cannot forsake science but at the same time technocracy brings in untold mixed evils: he has become a slave of the technology which is his own creation. As an effect of technocracy mass-rule has come into existence and the individual is without a foot-hold" (1991: 39).

Jaspers develops the concepts of "transcendence" and communication, which can be defined as a need to transcend difficult situations. Through transcendence, man achieves freedom. Jaspers states that:

For I am free only when I attain with myself independence from all world-being and from my own existence, i.e., when – in distinction to all existence, consciousness-as-such, and spirit – I stand before transcendence as that which authentically is. I can surrender completely only to transcendence, while any surrender to a world-being, regardless of the unconditionality of the commitment to it, remains under the conditions which issue from transcendence through the absolute consciousness of Existenz. (1994: 175)

Jaspers brings forth the importance of interaction between self and others in order to exist: “In communication I become manifest to myself together with the other. At the same time, however, this manifestation is the actualization of the I as a Self” (1994: 76).

Another twentieth century philosopher, Martin Heidegger, asserts that the existence of the others is essential for individual existence. It is possible to refer to an individual as long as there are others; otherwise the individual existence does not make any sense.

One belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power. ‘The Others’ whom one thus designates in order to cover up the fact of one’s belonging to them essentially oneself, are those who proximally and for the most part ‘are there’ in everyday Being-with-one-another (Heidegger, 1962: 164)

Manimala defines the need for the other: “[b]eing-with-others is a basic structure of each man’s self; man exists essentially for the sake of others” (1991: 35). Heidegger puts forward the necessity and importance of man’s relation with the world concerning man’s existential condition: “...Being-with is an existential constituent of Being-in-the-world. Dasein-with has proved to be a kind of Being which entities encountered within-the-world have as their own” (1962: 163). Robert G. Olson, likewise, refers to Martin Heidegger’s definition of man’s relationship with the world as “[m]an is the being who is immediately present to the world and who must live out his life in and through his inescapable relationship to the world” (1962: 135).

Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus are two important thinkers who developed existentialism into a precise philosophy defining modern man’s condition in the

midtwentieth century. Existentialism reached its peak in the period following the Second World War. The destructive effects of the war led man into a chaotic existence and a sense of meaninglessness, resulting from a spiritual void caused by a loss of belief in almost everything. Corrupt institutions, as well as rotten bureaucracy and authority, threatened man's personal integrity. Sartre and Camus, in this process, reformulated existential ideas to replace the loss of belief and sense of meaninglessness.

Sartre conceives the individual and the other as the basic components of existentialism. For him, both are necessities complementing each other. According to Sartre, the existence of the other is crucial since it complements the self. He tries to prove that the self feels ashamed in the presence of the other. Moreover, Sartre reformulates the need for the other as "I need the Other in order to realize fully all the structures of my being" (1989: 222). He goes on to define his ideas related to the self and the other as follows:

At the origin of the problem of the existence of others, there is a fundamental presupposition: others are the Other, that is the self which is not myself. Therefore we grasp here a negation as the constitutive structure of the being-of-others.... The Other is the one who is not me and the one who I am not. This not indicates a nothingness as a given element of separation between the Other and myself. Between the Other and myself there is nothingness of separation. (1989: 230)

Concerning the exercise of choice or freedom, Sartre argues that freedom shall not necessarily be achieved through act, rather it is important to dream about freedom or motivate oneself towards freedom: "Freedom is nothing but the existence of our will or of our passions in so far as this existence is the nihilation of facticity; that is, the existence of a being which is its being in the mode of having to be"

(1989: 444). Sartre emphasizes individual choice, but not at the expense of violating others' choices. Similarly, he attributes the individual with the responsibility to practise freedom in relation to the whole world. That is to say, the choice of the self affects the other. "Man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world and for himself as a way of being" (Sartre, 1989: 553).

As opposed to Sartre's emphasis on the outcomes of individual free choice on society, Camus favours an individual freedom that calls for rebellion against the absurdities of human existence.⁸ Bestowing the individual with an infinite freedom, Camus makes man his own master at the cost of acknowledging the meaninglessness of his existence:

In every act of rebellion, the man concerned experiences not only a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights but also a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself. Thus he implicitly brings into play a standard of values so far from being false that he is willing to preserve them at all costs. Up to this point he has, at least, kept quiet and, in despair, has accepted a condition to which he submits even though he considers it unjust. (1984: 19)

David Sprintzen defines man's rebellion against the absurd as a means of self-realization and freedom:

Rebellion attests to the demand for the preservation of one's integrity, often expressed in terms of the demand for justice or the maintenance of dignity. It is *implicitly* a claim, as yet inarticulate, that the human being must have, and has a *right* to have, sufficient space for action. Whatever the *explicit* justification of the fact of rebellion, implicitly it attests to this need and to the feeling that "one has a right" to its being respected. (1988: 128)

⁸ For further discussion about Camus, see: **Knapp, B. L.** (1988), *Critical Essays on Albert Camus*, G. K. Hall & Co., Boston.

Giving priority, thus, to human dignity Camus attributes man with the choice to take action in order to be free. Considered from this perspective, existence means action and revolt.

He acts, therefore, in the name of certain values which are still indeterminate but which he feels are common to himself and to all men. We see that the affirmation implicit in each act of revolt is extended to something which transcends the individual in so far as it removes him from his supposed solitude and supplies him with reason to act. (Camus, 1984: 21)

Considered as a philosophy mainly centering on the individual, existentialism conforms to such individual-based-disciplines as psychology and sociology. Existentialism, in this sense, unites with postcolonialism, which has emerged as an important concept to define the power-politics of the colonizing countries with their former colonies after emancipation. The after-effects of the dissolution of the colonies led to new paradigms, at each end of which individuals and their cultures were involved. Postcolonial theory emerged at this stage as a way of evaluating problems of individuals who struggled to exist in the presence of “the other cultures”.

Postcolonialism deals with such issues as cultural clash, identity crises, the sense of non-belonging, and many other problems associated with the after-effects of colonization. Such existential problems as “alienation and estrangement” are also applicable to postcolonial considerations of the individual. The following quotation highlights the basic problems of the modern man: “[a]lienation and estrangement, the importance of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat, were seen in clear light” (Manimala, 1991: 5). This refers to evils threatening

modern man's personal integrity, not only in existential terms but also in postcolonial terms. In other words, existentialism is a means or key theory that can explain the problems derived from the issue of colonialism and postcolonialism. Existential sociology, which is defined "as the study of human experience-in-the-world (or existence) in all its forms," (Douglas, 1977: vii) especially conforms to individuals struggle for existence in postcolonial circumstances.

CHAPTER II

EXISTENTIALISM AND POSTCOLONIALISM IN

VOYAGE IN THE DARK

Voyage in the Dark, which is set mainly in Europe, reflects the struggle of its Creole heroine, Anna Morgan, to survive in England. Even though she is English, despite her Creole background, the novel reflects her struggle with social and financial problems in England, where she is brought from the West Indies at a quite young age, like Rhys herself. Anna consistently fails to get over her sense of displacement and non-belonging. She can never achieve a full adaptation to English culture, ironically her “native culture”. Jean Rhys also realized, soon after she arrived in England, that she was not a part of the English culture, supposed to be her mother culture. Her first arrival in England is marked by a sensation of coldness, namely, climatic difference, which is developed later in her writing into an ontological coldness. This initial climatic shock is developed throughout Jean Rhys’s life and writing career into a cultural shock that is embodied in the contrast between her happy memories of West-Indian childhood and her miserable adult life in Europe. When considered to be a whole, all of Rhys’s autobiographical and fictional writings are full of traces of her own struggle to exist as an individual in an alien culture.

Rhys's first memories of England are related with Perse School, where she was very unhappy because of its strict rules. "Compared to many other schools – and compared especially to Jean's convent - it was a formidable place. The mistresses, especially in the upper school, were high-minded and strict, teaching methods were old-fashioned, standards of behaviour high" (Angier, 1990: 40). Her experiences there shaped her feelings about England, and emphasised the gap between her West Indian identity and English identity. Although Rhys grew up witnessing cultural differences, she had to face even stronger clashes and restrictions in England:

Jean had come from a lazy corner of the tropics straight into a stronghold of correctness. It was a shock she would never forget. Ever after England seemed to her cold and unwelcoming, full of clever, critical, respectable people. Ever after it seemed to her like a prison, where you could never be free, never be yourself, without breaking dozens of incomprehensible and arbitrary rules. (Angier, 1990:40)

The cultural shock that she experienced in the school developed further into an existential crisis in the following phases of her life. Later, she attended the 'Academy of Dramatic Art', which she left after the death of her father. In *Smile Please*, Rhys defines her passage from the Academy into work as a chorus girl:

During vacation from the Academy I went to Harrogate to visit an uncle. It was there that I heard of my father's death. My mother wrote that she could not afford to keep me at the Academy and that I must return to Dominica. I was determined not to do that, and in any case I was sure that they didn't want me back. My aunt and I met in London to buy hot-climate clothes, and when she was doing her own shopping I went to a theatrical agent in the Strand, called Blackmore, and get a job in the chorus of a musical comedy called *Our Miss Gibbs*." (Rhys qtd. in Angier, 1990: 104-105)

Rhys broke all her domestic ties with her family, her native culture as well as the culture of the society in which she had been living. Therefore, she found herself in an existential emptiness. Mary Lou Emery highlights the difficulties that

marginalized her English life: "...Rhys experienced a specifically female alienation and sexual vulnerability that intensified when her father's death forced her in 1908, a year after her arrival, to leave London's Academy of Dramatic Arts to earn her own living" (1990: 3). Her struggle to survive in the new circumstances brought her to the verge of a new mode of existence. Devoid of the makings and components of her former life totally, Rhys realized the need for material and existential struggle to survive as an individual. During this struggle, however, Jean Rhys found herself on the margins, when she performed in theatres as a chorus girl. "Chorus girls were her first friends in England. They weren't snobs; they couldn't be. They were the opposite, poor and exploited. Yet at the same time they were self-sufficient, mysteriously privileged" (Angier, 1990: 59). Her involvement in theatre provided Rhys with the money she needed to survive on, as well as the opportunity to "act", both on the stage and in her real life.

As a space in between what the Victorians perceived as the feminine domestic sphere and the masculine public realm, the theatre institutionalizes female marginality... The theater can make legitimate and pleasurable the fractured identities of socially displaced women, yet it cannot give them the "solid" class background they may lack or have lost by entering the theater. It disguises women whose social status might be questioned, and yet it immediately renders questionable their social status, especially their sexual respectability." (Emery, 1990: 3)

Her existential struggle, beginning in the theatre, ironically dragged her into an in-between situation that paralleled her in-betweenness as a Creole trying to survive and exist as an active individual in English culture. Rhys, as she admits in her memoir, achieves self-realization through her writing in which she combines her postcolonial status with existentialism. "I must write. If I stop writing my life will

have been an abject failure” (Rhys, *SP*, 163). Her writing, in this sense, becomes a re(action) against the process of acculturation, which she experiences after she comes to England. She starts writing as a means of asserting her own existence in such an alien culture and society. Akin to her fiction the characters are unique and revolting in their struggle for existence. “Just as Rhys constantly describes her protagonists’ struggles to refuse the definitions others thrust upon them, so her fiction was her attempt to reject the hegemonic view of her existence, or of existences like hers, and to find terms of her own in which to tell her story” (Carr, 1996: 31). By giving voice to her characters as a means of providing them with active existences, Jean Rhys asserts her own identity through her fiction.

Excepting *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which was published after a thirty year break, each of her four novels (which were written within a decade, 1929-1939), reflect a female character struggling to survive within a European context. The main character’s, Anna Morgan’s struggle to exist in her adult life in Europe parallels Rhys’s own experience in Europe.⁹ Jean Rhys projects her own alienation onto Anna Morgan, who functions as the mouthpiece of herself. Her speaking, either literally or metaphorically, and even her silence implies different modes of existence as the representation of the author’s struggle for self-realization. Nancy R. Harrison claims that “[s]aying what she did not say out loud in the “real world” was what her writing was; and in *Voyage in the Dark* there is a representation of that very cross-hatching of saying and not-saying” (1988:116).

⁹ See Rhys’s letters: **Rhys, J.** (1985), *Jean Rhys: Letters 1931 – 1966*, Eds. Wyndham, F., Melly, D., Penguin, Suffolk.

The novel opens with Anna Morgan's first person narration, deploying the metaphor of a curtain separating her two different existences, her West-Indian reality and the English one. The beginning of her life in England makes Anna feel as follows: "It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again" (Rhys, 1982: 7). This reference to the beginning of her "acculturation" develops further into an existential gap in her identity. In spite of the sudden break that she feels with her native culture, images of her native culture emerge within English reality in the process of her adaptation to this new, yet alien culture:

The colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different. Not just the difference between heat, cold; light, darkness; purple, grey. But a difference in the way I was frightened and the way I was happy. I didn't like England at first. I couldn't get used to the cold. Sometimes I would shut my eyes and pretend that the heat of the fire, or the bed-clothes drawn up round me, was sun-heat; or I would pretend I was standing outside the house at home, looking down Market Street to the bay. (Rhys, 1982: 7)

This leads her to a split in identity, which is marked by her marginal life, identified with defiance of the moral norms of English society. Coral Ann Howells explains Anna's nonconformity with her immigrant status when she says that "Anna fails to adapt to her new environment because she is operating out of a different symbolic order, and all that she learns through her immigrant experience is the full extent of her loss" (1991: 70). The reality of her English existence, unavoidably, is less strong than the images and memories of her West-Indian existence. Howells defines the dominance of her West Indian identity over her existence in these terms: "[t]hat native culture of the marketplace [in West Indies] is described so vividly that the lost

place of 'home' assumes all the vitality of presence, shutting out England entirely" (1991: 74). The ontological reason for her failure to adapt to England is reflected in her rejection of the English climate, which is excessively cold for her. England is depicted as a place where Anna does not feel comfortable and warm. She admits that "[a]fter a while I got used to England and I liked it all right; I got used to everything except the cold..." (Rhys, 1982: 8). As opposed to the dull and dim England, the West Indies is remembered in more colourful and warm images:

It was funny, but that was what I thought about more than anything else – the smell of the streets and the smells of frangipani and lime juice and cinnamon cloves, and sweets made of ginger and syrup, and incense after funerals or Corpus Christi processions, and the patients standing outside the surgery next door, and the smell of the sea-breeze and the different smell of the land-breeze. (Rhys, 1987: 7-8)

Even the streets in Dominica are livelier than the grey streets in England:

There was always a little grey street leading to the stage – door of the theatre and another little grey street where your lodgings were, and rows of little houses with chimneys like the funnels of dummy steamers and smoke the same colour as the sky; and a grey stone promenade running hard, naked and straight by the side of the grey-brown or grey-green sea; or a Corporation Street or High Street or Duke Street or Lord Street where you walked about looked at the shops. (Rhys, 1982: 8).

As a matter of fact the colour grey, which Anna identifies with everything English, symbolizes Anna's own identity. The greyness that defines Anna, in her English existence refers to her own mixed culture. Anna feels her in-between position as the daughter of a Creole mother married to an English man. Born in the West Indies, on the other hand, she has adopted the mixed culture from which she is cut off when she migrates to England. Anna feels both spiritually and materially exhausted in England, supposedly her motherland, where she is brought to be

cultivated into English culture after her father's death, by her stepmother, Hester. After she is disinherited by her stepmother, Anna feels rootless, ironically, in her "mother country", since she is cut off from her native culture upon which her identity was constructed. Being a typical English woman, Hester believes that Anna can get a better education in England. Typifying the colonial attitude, she simply disregards the West Indian culture in which Anna has been brought up and takes her to England with her. Hester's othering attitude towards the native culture dates back to Anna's childhood. Coming to the West Indies from England, Hester is far from understanding the dynamics of Anna's Creole upbringing; moreover, she victimizes Anna by expecting her to adapt to a place about which Anna says "...- oh I am not going to like this place I'm not going to like this place I'm not going to like this place -..." (Rhys, 1982: 17).

Hester, and the way she treats her stepdaughter, represents the dominance of one culture over the other in a parallel way to the imperialistic paradigm of the colonizers' attitude towards the colonized. "Hester lives rather ungraciously in the islands until the death of Anna's father, at which point she takes his daughter to England, enrolling her in school in an attempt to "civilize" her" (Kloepfer, 1989: 67). Hester's critical attitude to the West Indian culture manifests itself in her plans for Anna, whom she takes to England with the intention of making "a lady" out of her. Hester disregards Anna's Creole identity by believing that she can transform Anna's "authentic" essence into that of a young British lady. Hester complains about Anna by saying that "I tried to teach you to talk like a lady and behave like a lady and not like a nigger and of course I couldn't do it" (Rhys, 1982: 65). She not only complains about Anna's intimacy with the natives, but also tries to degrade her by

identifying Anna with them: “Impossible to get you away from the servants. That awful sing-song voice you had! Exactly, like a nigger you talked – and still do” (Rhys, 1982: 65).

In postcolonial terms, thus, it is possible to argue that the stepmother, Hester, represents Britain, which maintained a distance from the native culture of her colonies, either not caring for them properly or not setting them free completely. Both Britain and Hester, as stepmothers, care about their stepdaughters as long as they are able to abuse their roots. Hester tries to take decisions about Anna’s life and manipulate her into accepting them.

The novel comes within the scope of existentialism at this point when Anna’s individuality is under threat. In this respect, concerning existentialism, Anna, as an individual, cannot achieve self-realization, as she is under the influence and dominance of “the other”. Sylvie Maurel defines Hester’s destructive influence upon Anna’s life:

After Hester’s intrusion, the natural order is forever disrupted and culture rushes in to dispense a series of inhibitions and prohibitions that alienate Anna from her body, from now on associated with a set of prescriptions. This onslaught of symbolic meaning on semiotic continuity coincides with the end of Anna’s Arcadian life, with the moment when she is expelled from her childhood Eden. (1998: 87)

As opposed to Anna’s problematic existence in England, her “Edenic” existence back in the West-Indies is identified with another motherly-figure, Francine. A loving and caring figure rather than an othering one, Francine is a black servant on Anna’s father’s estate, Morgan’s Rest. The love that she feels for Francine makes her reveal that “I wanted to be black, I always wanted to be black. I was happy

because Francine was there...Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad” (Rhys, 1982: 31). Even as a child, Anna is aware of the comfort of the “authentic culture” as opposed to the imposed culture. The image of the mother, in this context, symbolizes culture, and in Anna’s case the authentic culture is represented by Francine, whereas the imposed culture is represented by Hester.

Anna’s problematic existence, however, extends back to the West Indies, where she represents the oppressor. Anna feels responsible and somehow guilty because of the othering attitude of the dominant culture when she observes it from the perspective of the blacks. Projecting herself into Francine’s personality Anna identifies herself unwillingly with Hester. Thus, she admits that “... she [Francine] disliked me ... because I was white; and that I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white. Being white and getting like Hester...” (Rhys, 1982: 72). The “whiteness”, which is characterised by Hester’s negative attitude towards the native culture, encompasses Anna’s whole existence after her forced migration to England.

Uprooted from the culture in which she has existed so far, Anna undergoes a long process of self-alienation while trying to adapt to England. The following quotation explains how an individual can suffer estrangement and a sense of meaninglessness when exposed to an “inauthentic existence” according to the existentialist philosophy of Sartre and Camus:

The futility of inauthentic existence, the starkness of the boundary situation, are all accompanied by a terrible sense of isolation and alienation from any sustaining reality, social, moral or metaphysical. Inevitably, man comes to feel abandoned and homeless, and finally sees himself as a stranger because of the ‘thrown’ character of his

existence. Sartre, Camus and others make estrangement, absurdity, etc., fundamental to their thought. Man experiences tremendous alienation, forlornness and meaninglessness. (Manimala, 1991: 6)

Considered from this perspective Anna's existential problems are revealed in the metaphor of "suffocation." Anna's remembrance of *Iron Shroud*, a story about the enclosing room, represents her "nausea", a response to the existence she is subjected to:

I lay down and started thinking about the time when I was ill in Newcastle, and the room I had there, and that story about the walls of a room getting smaller and smaller until they crush you to death. The Iron Shroud, it was called. It wasn't Poe's story; it was more frightening than that. 'I believe this damned room's getting smaller and smaller,' I thought. And about the rows of houses outside, gimcrack, rotten-looking, and all exactly alike. (Rhys, 1982:30)

Everything about England suffocates her both physically and spiritually. The more she feels discomfort, alienation and sense of meaninglessness, the more she is distanced from everything English. The colour metaphor, which appears in Anna's dialogue with Walter, the Englishman with whom she has a relationship, reflects Rhys's own perception of England.

'I'm sure it's beautiful,' Walter said, 'but I don't like hot places much. I prefer cold places. The tropics would be altogether too lush for me, I think.'

'But it isn't lush,' I said. 'You're quite wrong. It's wild, and a bit sad sometimes. You might as well say the sun's lush.'

Sometimes the earth trembles; sometimes you can feel it breathe. The colours are red, purple, blue, gold, all shades of green. The colours here are black, brown, grey dim-green, pale blue, the white of people's faces – like woodlice. (Rhys, 1982: 54)

These contradictory ideas reflect Rhys's own discontent and dissatisfaction with the English environment. Rhys's own existential struggle in Europe also originates from

her having to maintain her existence in a place that is completely alien to her native land. Jean Rhys uses the metaphor of contrasting colours, “red, purple, blue, gold, all shades of green”, to represent the West Indies, and “black, brown, grey dim-green, pale blue” to represent England, not only in *Voyage in the Dark*, but also in her autobiography, and in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Despite her strong feelings about her West Indian culture, Anna’s self-alienation does not only originate from her cultural displacement, but also emerges with her gradual realization of the discriminatory attitude introduced to the West Indian culture by the English, to whose culture she is expected to adapt.

Anna Morgan’s victimization through her forced immigration to England initiates, paradoxically, her process of self-realization. The cultural shock, identity crisis, sense of non-belonging and the society that hinders her from self realization, all of which have been recognised as paradigms of postcolonial existence, ironically help Anna to become aware of her existence, leading her to question her personal background. In other words, Anna’s becoming aware of her victimization as a consequence of the cultural shock she has experienced in England, leads her to a wider sense of awareness through which she reconsiders and reevaluates her own background. This process is explained within “existential sociology”:

For some, the awareness of the victimized self may begin with a relatively dramatic event, a “turning point,” perhaps similar to what anthropologists have termed “culture shock,” that heightened existential awareness associated with meeting persons from foreign cultures, when attempts at communication lay bare the artificiality of social conventions. For others, the process may be more gradual. In either case, the result is similar: for the individual, an awareness, an awareness of the social reality previously taken for granted. For all individuals, almost all of the time, daily life has a certain obdurate,

taken-for-granted quality to it. The substance of what is taken for granted varies from culture to culture, even between individuals within a given culture, whether one is an artist or a hod carrier. But for all persons, most of their lives have this taken-for-granted quality, which is occasionally interrupted or broken by crises of one sort or another. The effect of such crises is to reacquaint the individual with the precariousness of this taken-for-granted reality. This is a time of heightened self-consciousness, when things and events, previously assumed to have an “objective” character, seem to be merely human in their nature. Individuals who experience this crisis in their daily life commonly begin elaborate reconstructions and reinterpretations of past events and individuals in their lives. (Johnson, Ferraro, 1987: 125)

John M. Johnson and Kathleen J. Ferraro identify the individual’s recalling and re-evaluating past events as a marker of the individual’s self-awareness. An individual, after facing some impediments as a result of migrating to a foreign land, for example, achieves a sense of realization. This self-realization and self-awareness involves the “reconstruction” and “reinterpretation” of people as well as events in the past.

Jean Rhys deals not only with postcolonial shock and trauma but also criticizes the politics of imperialism through her fictions, which depict dislocated characters suffering due to imperial politics. The politics that define English imperialism are criticized through Anna Morgan who says that “[t]his is England, and I’m in a nice, clean English room with all the dirt swept under the bed” (Rhys, 1982: 31). “The dirt” refers, obviously, to imperial evils that English exerted on their colonies and the aftermath of colonization which made many people suffer just to contribute to the prosperity of England. No matter how self-satisfied the English look, it is impossible to deny the traumatic events caused by imperialism, and Jean Rhys tries to unveil the oppression and tragedies it caused. Anna’s struggle for

existence, which is developed as the basic theme in *Voyage in the Dark*, stems from the former colonial practices of slavery and oppression. Anna's existential paradox, in this sense, is evoked by her in-between status, involving both her slave-owning past and a realization of the human essence of the former slaves. Anna remembers seeing a slave list that belonged to her ancestors at her family estate, Constance:

I saw an old slave-list at Constance once,' I said. 'It was hand-written on that paper that rolls up. Parchment, d'you call it? It was in columns – the names and the ages and what they did and then General Remarks.' ... Mailotte Boyd, aged 18, mulatto, house servant. The sins of the fathers Hester said are visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation – don't talk such nonsense to the children Father said – a myth don't get tangled up in myths he said to me . . . (Rhys, 1982: 52, 53)

Even though Anna stands for the slave-owning past, as the victimizer, when recalling to this "list of slaves", she is on the other side of the scale, the victimized, when considered from her present situation. The mentioned slave's being "mulatto", an in-between, and of the same age as Anna, asserts Anna's own in-betweenness, and identifies her with a metaphorical slavery in her postcolonial existence. Anna's remembering of Caribbean history, as she learned it in the West Indies, represents a dramatic account of the history of colonisation and slavery. Anna recalls that

The Caribs indigenious to this island were a warlike tribe and their resistance to white domination, though spasmodic, was fierce. As lately as the beginning of the nineteenth century they raided one of the neighbouring islands, under British rule, overpowered the garrison and kidnapped the governor, his wife and three children. They are now practically exterminated. The few hundreds that are left do not intermarry with the negroes. Their reservation, at the northern end of the island, is known as the Carib Quarter. They had, or used to have, a king. Mopo, his name was. Here's to Mopo, King of the Caribs! But, they are now practically exterminated. (Rhys, 1982:105)

This brief reference to the struggle between the natives of the Caribbean Islands and white colonizers draws a parallel between the native Caribs and Anna herself. Oppressed by the dominant forces and their culture both Anna and Caribs are forced to give up their authentic identity that can be explained in postcolonial terms as the struggle between “the other” and “the self.”

By approaching the Other, the Self wishes to transform it into facticity. The Self wants to act upon the Other as an object. But the freedom of the Other annihilates the Self’s goal and the Other always seems to escape and flee. The Self cannot appropriate the Other’s freedom or even grasp it. The Other’s reality is beyond the Self’s reach. It is the ideal of the for-itself to possess the Other as freedom, but this is only an ideal. (Hayim, 1980: 42).

Like the Caribs, Anna also faces the impediments or metaphorical wall that hinders her from self-actualization. Like the Caribs, again, who lost their land and lived under the domination of the white colonizers, Anna loses her virginity and becomes a prostitute in the process of material survival under the dominance of English culture, which is identified with patriarchy and masculinity. Sylvie Maurel defines this parallel between the Caribs and Anna: “... [Anna] succumbs to the imperialistic sign system with which she clashes, mostly in England” (1998: 94-95). Anna’s interaction with the English system changes her in a negative way rather than positive way. Anna’s problematic struggle for existence within English culture can be explained in terms of the process of existential adaptation to society, which is explained by Johnson and Ferraro:

In existential sociology the self is not fixed but continually changes and adapts to new situations. The self essentially opens to the world of experience, both positive and negative. When the existential self is confronted with challenging or taxing circumstances, it does not

usually recoil or shatter. Instead, it struggles to incorporate new experiences into its evolving reality. (1987: 119)

Anna's negative change, which is mentioned above, exemplifies this fact in the process of which she is victimized. The dialogue that takes place between Anna and Joe (Adler), an American introduced to Anna by her friend Laurie, signifies her especially easy acceptance of standards of the society, its conflicts included. This change in the self also indicates the victimization process of the self. Joe, who sees Anna's naivety, despite her fallen position, asks "Why do you go around with Laurie? Don't you know she is a tart?" (Rhys, 1982: 127). Anna's response; however is "Why shouldn't she be a tart? It is just as good as anything else, as far as I can see" (Rhys, 1982: 127). Anna presents a full adaptation to this bitter reality.

Jean Rhys's criticism of the society and its corrupt institutions in *Voyage in the Dark* parallels existential philosophy, which considers corrupt institutions and discriminating and separatist attitudes of society causes of the individual's metaphorical death. This metaphorical death, or "not being" as an individual, is what Anna experiences in England:

Anna never really leaves her island; she finally becomes like it – insular and apart. And like the island, a dependent colony, she is subsumed and intimidated by the mother country – in Rhys, always male-identified. But Anna's personal stance and posture has wider implications: the individual self bears the burden of society, of culture, and of political realities, and becomes their index. In *Voyage in the Dark* those realities locate themselves in the person of Anna Morgan. (O'Connor, 1986: 140)

Anna is victimized on two levels: first by her stepmother's bringing her to England, second by English society, in which she has to survive without spiritual or financial support. Having to start a new life by leaving her familiar landscape and

circumstances as well as the comfortable life in the West Indies, she finds herself in an alien environment where she is constantly disrespected and manipulated as a chorus girl. As a West Indian, she has to bear discriminative discourses of even her friends in England, which can be considered as a threat to the self in terms of existentialist sociology:

The *threat of self-degradation* is a lesser form of threat to the self, but it has somewhat similar effects. The self is threatened with degradation when the individual believes he may have to do or endure things that produce severe embarrassment, shame, or guilt. In their most extreme forms these three powerful emotions actually arouse some dread of ontological insecurity, of nonexistence. ... Degradation commonly threatens one's social existence by threatening one's sense of competence (if one experiences embarrassment) or one's worthiness and lovability (if one experiences shame and guilt). All forms of extreme stigmatization threaten the individual with self-degradation and commonly lead, just as the stigmatizers intend it to, to anguished soul-searching (reexamining the core self) and to reconstructions, and possibly transformations, of the self. (Douglas, 1987: 78)

Even though the feelings of “embarrassment”, “shame” and “guilt” do not show up on an individual level in Anna's case, it emerges in the representation of her slave-owning Creole background. Anna realizes her ancestors' enslavement and degradation of the black people as an existential evil, which she realizes only when Anna herself is exposed to a similar enslavement and degradation.

Uprooted from her native land, Anna has to face many difficulties to make a living in England. She becomes financially dependant on others, especially on men; thus, she is exiled not only physically but also emotionally. Her physical homelessness and repeated moves emphasize her existential stance, which is reflected in the title of the novel. The voyage that Anna takes to exist in English

society is represented by her constant physical and emotional movement from one place to another. This voyage is a “voyage in the dark”, as it takes Anna no further than her present position. “A voyage in the dark is a hazardous affair; the prospect of reaching the destination must remain in doubt, and this uncertainty hangs over the entire text, bestowing, for us, a sense of futility on all of Anna’s actions, in anticipation of their leading nowhere” (Gallez, 1990: 95).

As darkness makes all existences invisible, it is not possible then to talk about a past or a future. Maurel defines Anna’s “absence of past and future”: “by moving to England, Anna has entered the deadlock of a hypersymbolic island, an intransitive sign system offering no escape route, in which signs and people alike go round in circles, ‘in the dark’” (1998: 95). Anna is trapped in the darkness of her English existence in a way which ironically reverses the images of “black and white”. The wintry darkness of England represents Anna’s acculturation and sense of alienation in which she is entrapped. Anna’s having to cope with an existence other than her authentic self, is associated with many images in the novel. The picture she sees at her friend Ethel’s home, for example, brings back images of her authentic existence: “I got into bed and lay there looking at it and thinking of that picture advertising the Biscuits Like Mother Makes, as Fresh in the Tropics as in the Motherland, Packed in Airtight Tins, which they stuck up on a hoarding at the end of Market Street” (Rhys, 1982: 148-149). The image of the advertisement reflects Anna Morgan’s need to become herself. The detailed depiction of the picture, however, reveals England as the main obstacle between her existence and her real self.

There was a tidy green tree and a shiny pale-blue sky, so close that if the little girl had stretched her arm up she could have touched it. (God

is always near us. So cosy.) And a high, dark wall behind the little girl. Underneath the picture was written:

The past is dear,

The future clear,

And, best of all, the present.

But it was the wall that mattered. And that used to be my idea of what England was like. ‘And it is like that, too,’ I thought. (Rhys, 1982: 149)

Identifying with the little girl in the picture, Anna is obstructed by the wall in this escapist dream. In other words, she fails to assert her existence at this stage. Her sense of exile and displacement is characterized by her constant change of places; she makes a new move every time she fails to cope with her circumstances. Lohman defines this as a futile attempt:

If one’s life involves a series of frequent and major dislocations, the process of grief and acculturation may never be worked through to completion in any one place; and the person may make a number of partial accommodations to several homes without ever making a firm commitment to any of them...At worst, he may discover that he does not belong anywhere, or to any group of people; and if he tries to protect himself against the pains of grief and rejection ... by refusing to become too deeply involved, he may find that his defenses have isolated him and left him unable to communicate fully and happily with anyone or to participate unselfconsciously as a member of any society. (1990: 221)

Lohman goes on to comment on the “loneliness and isolation”, generally identified with “multiple exile” as “the problems of Existential man” (1990: 221). Despite her exile, Anna does not give up her “will” to reject the dominant culture of “the other”.

Like almost all Rhys’s characters, Anna exists at the margins. The way Anna and her friends in England, that is to say the chorus girls, live and the way society

expects them to behave contradict each other¹⁰. In this sense, though subjective, the voice Jean Rhys gives to Anna to reveal a detailed account of her inner experiences displays not only Anna's marginalisation, but also that of the English themselves. The characters such as Maudie, Laurie, Walter, Joe, Carl and Ethel who Anna meets and befriends in this process, all exemplify extreme opposition to mainstream English culture. Conversely, their landlady, who criticizes them for their clothes, represents English conservatism. She complains that "[s]howing yourself at my sitting-room window 'alf naked like that ... And at three o'clock in the afternoon too. Getting my house a bad name" (Rhys, 1982: 8 - 9). The landlady's perspective, as the microcosm of the wider society, provides the reader with the paradigm against which individuals have to struggle in order to exist in such a society.

Andrea Fontana defines the individual and social context of existing:

The self is "existential" because it is in an incarnate self, filled with rational thoughts, sudden emotions, deeply felt anxieties, biological urges, and cultural elements. The self is "in society" because it is a self-embodied-in-the-world; therefore, it is studied in its natural settings, in its *interacting* stance, and in its experiential confrontation with society. (1987: 11)

Considered from the social perspective, Anna's case exemplifies a victimized and pacified West Indian woman going to extremes to disrupt society. Emery defines "dreams, hallucinations, memory, and madness" as the only means victims have of "resist[ing] social violence and degradation". She defines this interaction between the victim and the society as a self-supporting mechanism. "The formal devices that structure these apparently subjective events allow the heroines to create and re-create

¹⁰ For the relationship between the self and society, see: **Kotarba, J. A.** (1987), A Synthesis: The Existential Self in Society, *The Existential Self in Society*, ed. Stanford M. Lyman, The University of Chicago Press, USA, 222 – 234.

their displaced selves, defiantly refusing a one-dimensional reduction of identity.” (Emery, 1984: 419).

Anna’s displacement makes her an easy prey to Walter’s pleasure-seeking aims. As opposed to Walter’s sensual interest in her, Anna Morgan places him at the centre of her emotional life as a compensation for her physical and emotional exile. Anna finds refuge in the happy memories of her past in West Indies, which comes up in dreams and memories kept in her unconscious. At the most critical moment in her life in England, when she is deserted by Walter, she escapes into her memories as a means of coping with her misery. Anna imagines herself back in West Indies:

I would put my head under the water and listen to the noise of the tap running. I would pretend it was a waterfall, like the one that falls into the pool where we bathed at Morgan’s Rest.

I was always dreaming about that pool, too. It was clear just beyond where the waterfall fell ... Those big white flowers that open at night grew round it. Pop-flowers, we call them. They are shaped like lilies and they smell heavy-sweet, very strong. You can smell them a long way off. Hester couldn’t bear the scent, it made her faint.” (Rhys, 1982: 90)

Her escapism, whether into memories or into dreams, is obstructed by the English reality which clashes with her own authentic reality. Another important example of her escapism, which ends up in clashing realities is reflected in a dream that she has after she becomes pregnant. It is possible to trace her worries about how to cope with a baby, in a place where she finds it difficult to survive herself, in this dream about a dead baby. Her anxieties are expressed again in images of her native land.

I dreamt that I was on a ship. From the deck you could see small islands – dolls of islands – and the ship was sailing in a dolls’ sea, transparent as glass.

Somebody said in my ear, 'That's your island that you talk such a lot about.'

And the ship was sailing very close to an island, which was home except that the trees were all wrong. These were English trees, their leaves trailing in the water. I tried to catch hold of a branch and step ashore, but the deck of the ship expanded. Somebody had fallen overboard. And there was a sailor carrying a child's coffin. (Rhys, 1982: 164-165)

As reflected in the quotation above, even Anna's memories and dreams are oppressed and restricted by the English reality: in Hester's person, in her memories, in the image of English trees in her dream, just like the wall in the advertisement. Considered from a postcolonial perspective Hester, the wall, the island with English trees, all represent the colonial existence of the English in the West Indies, which forms the essence of Anna's existence, an existence that is denied and destroyed by the English. Anna's escapism into dreams and memories is an important aspect of Anna's existential struggle, since her existence is denied by the culture of "the other". The escapist condition of the self is caused by the other's intrusive and judgemental motivations towards the self. Her intentional abortion of her baby can be seen as an important existential attempt, as she challenges the society and its norms which forbid abortion. In terms of "the self", Anna's struggle is with society, which represents "the other" in this paradigm. Anna's existential struggle is her struggle against "the other" which paradoxically refers to the same forces that create her "self", as well as other her at the same time.

CHAPTER III

EXISTENTIALISM AND POSTCOLONIALISM IN

WIDE SARGASSO SEA

Written after a gap of thirty years following her other four novels *Wide Sargasso Sea* is unique among all Jean Rhys's fiction for it reconstructs the character of Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. *Voyage in the Dark* and Rhys's other novels up to *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) depict heroines struggling to exist within European culture. However, the heroine in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is exceptional, as she is presented within her West Indian background for most of the novel. Bertha Mason, Edward Rochester's West Indian wife, who is locked in the attic because of her insanity, is given an individual voice in *Wide Sargasso Sea*¹¹. She is recreated as a character who tells her own story of subjection both in the West Indies after the Emancipation Act that deprived her and her family of all their property, and in England where she is brought against her own will and locked up in the attic of her husband's estate. Unlike Bertha Mason, Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a heroine who recounts her struggle for existence, first against the British system in

¹¹ For the relevance of *Jane Eyre* and *WSS*, see: **Thorpe, M.** (1990), "The Other Side": *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre*, *Critical Perspectives on Jean Rhys* ed. Pierrette M. Frickey, Three Continents Press, USA, 178–185.

colonial terms, then against her English husband in individual terms. The novel is set in the early decades of the nineteenth century, which covers the period just after the Emancipation Act that passed as law in the British parliament in 1833. The novel opens with Antoinette Cosway's account of her early life, which is marked by poverty, loss of wealth as well as respect, and tension between the Creoles and the native West Indian people. The Emancipation Act led many plantation owners into poverty since they did not receive any compensation, which was promised by the British after their slaves were emancipated.¹²

The tension reflected in *Wide Sargasso Sea* between the slave-owning Creole planters and the ex-slaves, which leads to the burning down of their estates by the emancipated blacks, was experienced by Jean Rhys's own family. In *Smile Please*, Jean Rhys writes that "It was during my grandfather's life, sometime in the 1830s, that the first estate house was burnt down by the freed negroes after the Emancipation Act was passed" (1981: 33). Antoinette Cosway and her family cannot avoid the harsh consequences of the Emancipation Act, which has led to destruction of many of their sort, such as one of their neighbours, Mr. Lutterell, who commits suicide because he does not receive the compensation promised by the British government. After Antoinette's own father's death, her young mother finds it difficult to overcome her financial problems as well as the enmity of their former slaves.

¹² The Emancipation Act is a law passed in 1833 by the British government aiming at freeing the slaves who worked in the plantations and granting a compensation for the ex-slave owners. However, the effects of this law became so harsh in that it brought trouble into the society since the act had failed in granting the promised money to the owners in return of freeing the slaves.

Wide Sargasso Sea opens with the “Jamaican ladies” intolerant and harsh references to Antoinette’s Creole mother. The first person narrator, Antoinette, reveals that “[t]hey say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks. The Jamaican ladies had never approved of my mother, ‘because she pretty like pretty self’ Christophine said” (Rhys, 1992: 15). The slaves or black people in Jamaica detest Antoinette’s mother, Annette, who is from another island, Martinique. The hatred of the black people towards the whites in Jamaica goes far beyond this indictment. Their hatred becomes so strong that they do not even restrain themselves from poisoning Antoinette’s mother’s horse, the riding of which has been left as one of her only consolations remaining from her luxurious life in the past.

Antoinette and her family’s in-between situation bring the novel within the scope of postcolonial discourse. The first accounts of Antoinette’s story reveal her mother’s gradually disturbed psychology while her circumstances change in a negative way. Devoid of her mother’s love and care, who gives all her attention to Antoinette’s sick brother, Antoinette feels vulnerable and becomes a target for the abuses of both the natives and the English. John Hearne suggests that “Antoinette Cosway and her mother are outsiders” (1990: 188), which refers to their in-between situation considering Antoinette as the descendant of former slave-owners and her mother, Annette, as a Martinique woman. Hearne explains Antoinette’s easy conformity to her circumstances:

[Antoinette’s] only strength lies in her dry acceptance of the pitiless historical fact that not only she and her mother, but the entire society - white and black, and everything on which they had built their

pathetic, fragile pretensions-has also been cast out, castaway (1990: 188)

Thus, both Antoinette and her mother can be considered to be victimized by the new system, the social dynamics of which clash with the dynamics of former system in West Indies. Degraded into such a grim position, white but poor, and hated by the blacks for their slave-owning background, they are identified with such oxymorons as “white cockroaches” or “white niggers”, both of which refer to their in-between situation. It is possible to follow the change in Antoinette’s mode of existence from the beginning of her narration till the end of the first part of the novel. She mentions, first, the sense of loss of security: “My father, visitors, horses, feeling safe in bed – all belonged to the past” (Rhys, 1992:15). This loss of a sense of safety is paralleled in the novel by the condition of the Coulibri Estate, which is also ruined and abandoned due to the loss of workpower resulting from the abolition of slavery. “All Coulibri Estate”, which has been sumptuous and very productive in the past, “... had gone wild like the garden, gone to bush. No more slavery – why should *anybody* work? ... I did not remember the place when it was prosperous” (Rhys, 1992: 17).

The dilapidated condition of the family estate functions as a paradigm for Antoinette’s psychology, which is torn between her sympathy for as well as fear of their former slaves. Despite her constant love for and understanding of their former slaves, especially Christophine, her black nanny and her constant mentor in her difficult life, Antoinette admits that “I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches. Let sleeping dogs lie. One day a little girl followed me singing, ‘Go away white cockroach, go away, go away.’ I walked fast,

but she walked faster” (Rhys, 1992: 20). This exchange of the roles of the oppressor and the oppressed is developed further by Antoinette’s friendship with Tia, a black girl, who is Antoinette’s only friend in her isolated childhood. Antoinette likes and relies on Tia very much during their friendship, which they spend walking in the woods and swimming in the nearby river. During one of their swimming excursions, however, Tia cheats Antoinette, to Antoinette’s astonishment, first by taking her money, then by running away with her clothes and leaving her own old clothes for Antoinette. This exchange of clothes symbolizes the change of power - politics in the West Indian society. Moreover, Tia reinforces Antoinette’s awareness of their in-between situation once again:

She [Tia] hear all we poor like beggar. We ate salt fish – no money for fresh fish. That old house so leaky, you run with calabash to catch water when it rain. Plenty white people in Jamaica. Real white people, they got gold money. They didn’t look at us, nobody see them come near us. Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger. (Rhys, 1992: 22)

Tia’s indictments reveal not only the impoverishment of Antoinette’s parents but also the gradual change towards capitalism from the black people’s perspective. As opposed to the Creole, the new-comers, represented first by Antoinette’s stepfather Mr. Mason, then by her nameless English husband (supposedly Mr. Rochester based on Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*), are ignorant of this tension, and its potential danger. Their failure to understand the changing social dynamics of West Indian culture leads both Antoinette and her mother towards their tragic destinies. Referring to Antoinette’s mother and her English husband, Kenneth Ramchand suggests:

... Jean Rhys prepares us for the mutual incomprehension of Antoinette and her husband by pre-figuring it in the lack of understanding between the girl’s mother and her new husband from

England, Mr Mason. Antoinette's mother senses danger in the stirrings among the black population and wants to go away, but Mr Mason's complacency and his prejudices will not be touched by the fear and understanding of the slave-owner's daughter... (1990: 196)

Unlike Antoinette's mother and aunt, who are more familiar with dynamics of the place, Mason is far from perceiving West Indian reality. Because of their imperialist prejudices towards the blacks, the English consider the natives either as evil savages or as primitives who are easy to handle. Annette tries to warn Mason that his perception of the natives is false:

'You don't like, or even recognize, the good in them,' she said, 'and you won't believe in the other side.'

'They're too damn lazy to be dangerous,' said Mr. Mason. 'I know that.'

'They are more alive than you are, lazy or not, and they can be dangerous and cruel for reasons you wouldn't understand.' (Rhys: 1992: 29)

This dialogue, especially with reference to "the other side", explains the gulf between the reality of the West Indies as perceived by Creoles as opposed to the reality as perceived by the English. On one side, there are the blacks with whose culture the Creole are familiar; on the other side, there are the English who are supposed to share the same culture with the Creole, but live in a completely different reality. Their in-between situation leads to the point of tragedy when the natives burn down Colubri Estate after Mason's prejudiced treatment of them. Mason fails to understand the interdependence of different "colours" of Jamaican society.

Mason is so ignorant about the potential of his black workers that he complains and reveals his intention to replace them in the presence of the house servants. The workers' vindictive attack on Colubri Estate causes Annette to lose her

sanity after her son dies in the fire. Annette complains that the black servant left her son on his own, blaming Mason for this tragedy: ““She left him, she ran away and left him alone to die ... [Then she goes on blaming Mason] calling him a fool, a cruel stupid fool” (Rhys, 1992: 36). Mason prepares not only Antoinette’s mother’s end but also Antoinette’s own first experience of a sense of displacement.

Although the burning of Colubri initiates Antoinette into a traumatic and tragic reality, the fire also represents rebellion, when considered from the other’s, the blacks’, perspective. In other words, this fire is the reflection of the blacks’ struggle for existence and desire to maintain their freedom and authenticity:

Revolt is characteristic of only certain societies, specifically those societies in which the theoretical state of affairs is in contrast to an actual state of affairs, where a supposed equality stands in contrast to an actual inequality; where a theoretical social justice stands against an actual state of social injustice, where a proclaimed freedom is belied by the fact of slavery. Such contradictions are seed beds of revolt (Manimala, 1991: 49)

Wide Sargasso Sea provides an intercultural setting by bringing the colonizers, the whites and the Creole and their former slaves, the blacks, together. Rather than revealing only one side through a partial perspective, Jean Rhys explores the culture and paradigms as well as backgrounds, of both sides; the exploiting and the exploited. The first part of the novel which consists of Antoinette’s first person narration reveals Antoinette’s fragile and in-between existence. Antoinette is exposed to the after-effects of the colonization and exploitation of the blacks as the descendant of the former exploiters.

In the second part of the novel, narrated by Antoinette’s English husband, however, Antoinette’s own exploitation by the descendants of imperialism is

depicted. The coexistence of cultures, representing different elements of the colonization process, is present throughout the novel and these elements are presented in a kind of struggle to exist. This mechanism is defined, in postcolonial terms, as the clash of cultures. Thus, it is impossible in multicultural societies to avoid the clash of cultures as each culture struggles to keep its unity, preserve its entity and maintain its freedom in the presence of other cultures.

Considered as a struggle to exist in the presence of “the other”, cultural clash is also an existential struggle. On account of the fact that each culture wishes to preserve and maintain its own existence, each one of them tries to justify its own motivations and rationale. Regarding this, postcolonialism is a notion that involves the causes and effects of cultural clash. If colonialism is defined as a way of capturing a culture by interfering into the boundaries of that particular culture, any response of the colonised culture to this invasion can be considered as an existential struggle. The colonizer justifies this clash by suggesting that his interference is enlightening and civilising, while the invaded culture is othered as “uncivilized” and “primitive.”

Under colonialism, a colonised people are made subservient to ways of regarding the world which reflect and support colonialist values. A particular value-system is taught as the best, truest world-view. The cultural values of the colonised peoples are deemed as lacking in value, or even ‘uncivilised’, from which they must be rescued (McLeod, 2000: 19).

As a postcolonial novel which reflects the after-effects of the British colonization of the West Indies, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is marked with many examples of cultural clash, between either blacks and whites or between the English and Creoles. The cultural perceptions of the native people, their conception of time for example, are

completely different from those of the English. As opposed to the whites' limiting perception of time, the blacks live in a timeless reality. On their way to their honeymoon house, for instance, Antoinette and her husband meet a man called Emile, who seems to be past his fifties. Living in a distant village, this man is not certain about his age. 'Ask him how old he is,' suggested the Young Bull. [Another black] Emile said in a questioning voice, 'Fourteen? Yes, I have fourteen years master.' 'Fifty-six years perhaps.' He seemed anxious to please" (Rhys, 1992: 62).

The native inhabitants are colonized not only physically but also mentally. Young Bull's reaction to Emile and the way that he tries to please the white represents the blacks' "colonized mind" "The Young Bull laughed loudly. 'He don't know how old he is, he don't think about it. I tell you sir these people are not civilised' (Rhys, 1992: 62). Although he is a native himself, 'Young Bull' looks down upon his own culture as "uncivilized". McLeod defines this cultural distancing of the blacks from themselves as an extension of the British colonial politics: "To be blunt, the British Empire did not rule by military and physical force alone. It endured by getting both colonising and colonised people to see their world and themselves in a particular way, internalising the language of Empire as representing the natural, true order of life" (2000: 19).

Antoinette's English husband, who comes to Jamaica to marry her for her money, represents the other extreme of this cultural clash. As far as his financial and social status is concerned, the English husband's problematic situation within Jamaican culture victimizes him into the position of a colonized subject. No matter how paradoxical it is, as a victim himself, he victimizes Antoinette in the process of

his own existential struggle. Both Antoinette and her husband are the victims of the same patriarchal English system, which disowns the Creole in Antoinette's case and disinherits the younger son in her husband's case.

Jean Rhys's autobiographical allusions are not limited to female experience only, but also recall the male disinheritance as experienced by her own father. Jean Rhys's father, who preferred a life away from home at sea, was also disinherited by his own father, an Anglican clergyman. In her memoir, Jean Rhys describes the hierarchy in terms of the allocation of the inheritance among brothers. As the British tradition suggests, the elder brother inherits the property, depriving the younger of everything: "One day I came in unexpectedly and saw him standing in front of the photograph shaking his fist and cursing. My mother's version of this was: 'The old man grudged every penny spent on Willie. Everything must go to the eldest son, his favourite'" (Rhys, 1981: 68).

Antoinette's husband experiences instances of sickness and resentment throughout his narration of his visit to Jamaica for an arranged marriage to Antoinette. In all the letters that he writes or considers writing to his father, he reveals that "I have sold my soul or you have sold it, and after all, is it such a bad bargain?" (Rhys, 1992: 64). In the background of his narration, which covers the whole second part of the book, it is possible to see Antoinette's husband's revolt against the English system reflected through the letters he means to write or literally writes to his father. In one of these letters, which he speaks out loud rather than writes, he tells his father: "I know now that you planned this because you wanted to be rid of me. You had no love at all for me.... Your plans succeeded because I was

young, conceited, foolish, trusting. Above all because I was young you were able to do this to me..." (Rhys, 1992: 146 - 147).

Expelled from his native country, Antoinette's husband feels degraded and threatened in a foreign climate and culture. Everything around him, the natives, the landscape, the strong colours of the plants on the island, even his wife, Antoinette, turn out to be disturbing and overwhelming.

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 (Rhys, 1992: 63).

He suffers since he feels degraded in a place to which he came to marry a woman for her money only. Brought up as a typical Victorian man, within the nineteenth - century English society, the narrator is convinced of his superiority to women both materially and spiritually. Faced with a wife, who is self-confident and sexually assertive, Antoinette's husband undergoes an existential crisis. He reveals his feelings about the West Indies: "... this place is my enemy and on your side" (Rhys, 1992: 117). This idea of opposing "sides" is his own perception, which is distorted by his arrival to a place where all the values and social dynamics are completely different from those of Victorian society. Antoinette tries to ease her husband's fears:

'You are quite mistaken,' she said. It is not for you and not for me. It has nothing to do with either of us. That is why you are afraid of it, because it is something else. I found that out long ago when I was a child. I loved it because I had nothing else to love, but it is as indifferent as this God you call on so often.' (Rhys, 1992: 117 - 118)

Brought up according to strict Victorian values he is threatened by Antoinette's culture, which is completely different from his native culture in terms of black and white relation as well as gender roles. This fact makes the clash of the two completely different cultures inevitable.

Antoinette disrupts her husband's perception of women not only through her individuality but also through her sexuality. Coming to the West Indies as a representative of the dominant culture, supposedly as a colonizer, who comes there to benefit from Antoinette's money, Antoinette's husband undergoes a cultural shock which destroys his sense of identity. His patriarchal attitude and materialism clash with Antoinette's spirituality and the love she feels for him. On their arrival at their honeymoon house, Granbois, "Two wreaths", which are important ceremonial decorations for the native culture, are put on their bed.

Two wreaths of frangipani lay on the bed. 'Am I expected to wear one of these? And when?'

I crowned myself with one of the wreaths and made a face in the glass. 'I hardly think it suits my handsome face, do you?'

'You look like a king, an emperor.'

'God forbid,' I said and took the wreath off. It fell on the floor and as I went towards the window I stepped on it (Rhys, 1992: 67)

As suggested in this quotation, Antoinette takes her husband as a king or an emperor, to sublimate her love for him. His rejection of the wreath offered to him, and his stepping on it, symbolizes his rejection of everything related with Antoinette, and foreshadows Antoinette's further maltreatment by him. His ultimate resistance to Antoinette and everything related to her alienates and isolates him. With reference to Fromm, Douglas associates isolation with anxiety: "...[The] awareness of isolation is the ultimate source of all anxiety, and the human beings's primary

psychological task in all ages has been to overcome this anxiety” (Douglas, 1987: 90).

The individuals’ perceptions as well as the value judgements in a certain society are shaped by the very paradigms of that society. Both Antoinette and her husband suffer due to the fact that they represent different cultures. One is identified within a culture in which s/he is situated to such a position, where any culture other than that of his/her own culture is othered almost into non-existence. In other words, one’s reality is limited to one’s cultural perspective. Similarly, Antoinette and her husband perceive each other’s culture as imaginary, almost a dream.

‘Is it true,’ she [Antoinette] said, ‘that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so. She said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes. I want to wake up.’

‘Well,’ I answered annoyed, ‘that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream.’

‘But how can rivers and mountains and the sea be unreal?’

‘And how can millions of people, their houses and their streets be unreal?’

‘More easily,’ she said, ‘much more easily. Yes, a big city must be like a dream.’

‘No this is unreal and like a dream,’ I thought (Rhys, 1992: 73).

Their marriage is transformed into a platform for the clash of cultures, which results in identity crises for both husband and wife. Teresa F. O’Connor emphasises how difficult it is for individuals to adapt to a new culture, a difficulty which is experienced not only by Antoinette’s husband but also by almost all of Rhys’s characters.

The island, for Rochester, threatens suffocation and enclosure, the same danger to which Rhys's heroines are exposed in England. As England is male-identified in Rhys and the West Indian tropics female-identified, one might contend that this very fear of suffocation may well be connected to the fear of annihilation by the other, by the powers of the opposite sex which are for Rhys's women- and in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for Rochester too- both seductive and repellent. (O'Connor, 1986:148)

Identifying West Indian culture with femininity, as opposed to masculine English culture, O'Connor defines Antoinette's husband's experience in West Indies as an existential struggle to assert his own masculinity against femininity.

The self is seen as fundamentally social. A person is seen to be socialized and to exist in and through the various components of culture and social structure. More specifically, self can be viewed as the center of a configuration of social categories, social statuses, and social roles. In turn, these are dependent on the larger culture and on the availability of certain categories, statuses, roles, and groups in a society. At the most basic level, culture and society define individuals. And, through socialization, the individual comes to share the culture of a society and the groups within it and to use their precepts both in action and in defining self. (Lester, 1984: 21).

On account of his failure to adapt himself to the alien environment and culture, Antoinette's husband cannot achieve self-realization. He consequently feels suffocated, as reflected in his dream: "I woke in the dark after dreaming that I was buried alive, and when I was awake the feeling of suffocation persisted" (Rhys, 1992: 124).

Even though Antoinette's husband is the representative of the dominant culture, the fact that he is never named throughout the novel is a way of demeaning him into non-existence. Moreover, namelessness reduces him to a type only; a British man coming to West Indies to marry a Creole girl out of economic interests. From then on, this man who comes to Jamaica for financial interest starts his

struggle for existence by asserting his masculine dominance throughout the novel. Antoinette's husband's struggle for existence begins, first, with his resistance to West Indian culture on physical and social grounds. He continually others the whole landscape as well as its inhabitants. "I hated the mountains and the hills, the rivers and the rain. I hated the sunsets of whatever colour, I hated its beauty and its magic and the secret I would never know. I hated its indifference and the cruelty which was part of its loveliness" (Rhys, 1992: 156). Antoinette's husband's existential crisis, which originates from his exile from his masculine culture into the feminine colonial culture of the West Indies, is reflected in his denial and rejection of Antoinette on an individual level. The love he feels for Antoinette transforms into hatred in the process of his existential struggle, a struggle for an existence which necessitates almost the non-existence of "the other."

... I hated her. For she belonged to the magic and the loveliness. She had left me thirsty and all my life would be thirst and longing for what I had lost before I found it.... No more false heavens. No more damned magic. You hate me and I hate you. We'll see who hates best. But first, first I will destroy your hatred. Now. My hate is colder, stronger, and you'll have no hate to warm yourself. You will have nothing" (Rhys, 1992: 156, 154).

This reflection of the cultural clash between Antoinette and her husband foreshadows Antoinette's approaching annihilation by displacement on the individual level. Gila J. Hayim defines this struggle between the "self" and "the other" in existential terms:

The relationship between Self and Other is circular, and equally affects both members of the dyad. It contains many states of being, ranging from love and cooperation to vengeance and destruction. Within the relationship the Self may strive to assimilate the Other's freedom or it may attempt to petrify the Other and turn it into an object (1980: 42).

Regarded from this perspective, the struggle of Antoinette's husband, representing the self, and Antoinette, representing the other, is reflected in a pattern, which repeats itself; first, through the husband's struggle for existence, in which he feels alienated, and then in Antoinette's struggle for existence in a place where she also feels alienated. Correspondingly, the husband's non-existence, which is represented by his namelessness in West Indies, is balanced by Antoinette's non-existence by the transformation of her name into 'Bertha Mason' in England. Her husband achieves his existence by denying Antoinette's existence:

I did it too. I saw the hate go out of her eyes. I forced it out. And with the hate her beauty. She was only a ghost. A ghost in the grey daylight. Nothing left but hopelessness. Say die and I will die. Say die and watch me die (Rhys, 1992: 154)

In striking contrast, Antoinette, brought up in a multicultural society, representative of both the oppressor and the oppressed, is more able to appreciate the culture of "the other". This aspect of her personal culture as an in-between character turns out to be another significant reason for her victimization by her husband. Her bona fides and indulgence, even love for black people irritate and enrage him as he cannot understand the dynamics of relationship between these people who have been living together for centuries. His imperialist culture dictates his sense of superiority over the black people, in contrast to Antoinette's intimacy with these people as human beings only.

As a descendant of a slave-owning family, Antoinette is subjected to the same colonial power on two different levels: on the one hand, she becomes subject to the black's resentment and hatred because of her family's slave owning past; on the other hand, she becomes subject to the English culture from which they are

estranged because of their centuries long interaction with the native culture. Antoinette does not know how to assert her existence, an existence of neither a black, nor an English, nor a mix of both, as an English adapted to the native culture. She reveals herself to be conscious of this paradigm of her existence with reference to “a song sung about a white cockroach” by the natives as follows:

. . . . That’s me. That’s what they call of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I’ve heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all. Will you go now please. I must dress like Christophine said. (Rhys, 1992: 93)

Her identity crisis that is highlighted in this quotation originates from her Creole background, whose existence is triggered by the Emancipation Act. Her struggle for existence after this act is not only limited to a physical struggle against poverty, but also represents a struggle for existence in a society in which Creoles are othered by the black and whites alike. The English who set their slaves free, as well as the blacks, their former slaves, in colonial terms, and her husband and Daniel Cosway, in individual terms, ally to demean her into non-existence.

The blacks’ hatred for their former owners, Antoinette’s ancestors, results in Antoinette’s first displacement after they burn the Colubri Estate down. This same vindictive act is paralleled in Antoinette’s later life in Daniel Cosway’s letter, which not only displaces her but intensifies her ontological crisis. Antoinette’s husband’s sense of insecurity in the West Indies, and Daniel Cosway’s awareness of English prejudices against the blacks combine to threaten Antoinette’s existence. Antoinette’s husband, who already sees Antoinette and everything around her as a threat and challenge to his existence, finds refuge in Daniel Cosway’s letter. Even

though Antoinette tries to justify herself by telling her own story, he rejects her account. Concerning Daniel Cosway, Antoinette says,

He hates all white people, but he hates me the most. He tells lies about us and he is sure that you will believe him and not listen to the other side.'

'Is there another side?' I said.

'There is always the other side, always.' (Rhys, 1992: 116)

As the representative of typical English culture, Antoinette's husband fails to understand and appreciate the existence of the culture of "the other". Representing a culture which defines madness as a hereditary illness, as well as caused by the excess of sexual drive in women, her husband chooses to believe Daniel Cosway's manipulative discourse even though the husband himself can see that Daniel Cosway is a liar. This letter transforms his marriage with Antoinette from the ground of cultural clash into a process of total annihilation of Antoinette's existence, including her name. Antoinette's husband dedicates himself to destroying her existence after the letter, which can be considered a turning point for this collision between Antoinette and her husband. However, Antoinette is aware of his victimization of her and revolts against his strategies by saying that "Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeh too" (Rhys, 1992: 132). This naming of Antoinette is only one of her husband's strategies to deny her existence. It is possible to trace a process in which Antoinette's husband is first challenged by Antoinette and everything that she represents, then his attempt to annihilate her, whom he takes to be a threat to his own existence. In the third part, however, we learn through Antoinette's own narration how she is subjected to destruction by her husband who takes her to England against

her own “will”. Narrating her own account of the story of the supposedly “mad woman in the attic”, Antoinette, in fact, reveals an existential consciousness rather than madness. Despite her shattered sense of time and place she goes on, somehow, struggling against her circumstances rather than accepting them passively. Unable to realize her whereabouts, she believes that they lost their way somewhere on their voyage to England. There is a transitional moment starting with her being locked into the cabin on the journey, which she describes as follows: “When I woke it was a different sea. Colder. It was that night, I think, that we changed course and lost our way to England. This cardboard house where I walk at night is not England” (Rhys, 1992: 163).

Her literal captivity in the attic in England as “a mad woman” represents, ironically, Antoinette’s self-assertion, as she takes practical action for the first time in her life. Just like the symbolic image of the “Sargasso Sea”, which represents the apartness of hers and her husband’s cultures, the fire functions symbolically as Antoinette’s struggle for existence. As for the “Sargasso Sea”, literally, “the name of the region is derived from the floating masses of brown gulfweed (*Sargassum*) that accumulate there.” (*The Encyclopedia Americana*, 265)¹³ The coldness of the sea, like the coldness she feels in England, represents the strictness of the English culture as opposed to the warmer and more flexible West Indian culture. Antoinette and her husband, representing different seas, are unable to “transcend” their own cultures, therefore, they fail to unite and achieve self-realization. The fact that the cold sea and the warm sea cannot co-exist provides a paradigm for the impossibility of the co-existence of Antoinette and her English husband. “Both Antoinette and

¹³ *The Encyclopedia Americana*. International Ed. Vol. 24. Grolier Inc.: USA, 1984.

Rochester contain within themselves aspects of the Sargasso Sea. Empty, stagnant, and bereft of “normal” life, they are isolated and separated, like alien and watery islands, neither land nor sea, caught between two “realities”” (O’Connor, 1986: 157).

The title of the novel, which symbolizes Antoinette and her husband’s impossible co-existence, represents, at the same time, the image of the water that is contrasted with the image of the fire in the novel. As an important means of exploitation and colonization of the weak by the powerful, the water (sea) is also an important image in postcolonial novels. Similarly, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rochester comes to Jamaica via the sea and [ab]uses the sea in abducting Antoinette to England. Fire, on the other hand, functions as a purifying and regenerating force in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The first fire, the burning down of Colubri by the former slaves in the novel, represents the blacks’ revolting and putting an end to the oppressive imperial system, despite its traumatic consequences for Antoinette. The second fire in the novel, however, is started by Antoinette herself who reveals it to be a means of her existential self-realization: “Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do” (Rhys, 1992: 171). This fire, which is started in the attic where she is a captive, highlights Antoinette’s own existential struggle, as it does in the blacks’ case.

Antoinette’s final act parallels Prometheus’s story in Greek mythology. This story reflects the sublimation of mankind by fire, which is brought to mankind by Prometheus, who “... went to heaven, to the sun, where he lit a torch and brought down fire, a protection to men far better than anything else...” (Hamilton, 1998: 86).

Even though it seems to be destructive, just like the former fire in the novel, the burning down of the attic represents Antoinette's first existential action. Defining the 'rebel' as "a man who says no: but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation", Camus identifies the reasons for the individual rebellion: "he [an individual] rebels categorically refuses to submit to conditions that he considers intolerable and also because he is confusedly convinced that his position is justified, or rather because in his own mind he thinks that he 'has the right to...'" (1984: 19). Antoinette's negation of her captivity is achieved through the fire, which at the same time puts an end to the chain of colonization that is started by the English, carried out into the West Indies through water by Antoinette's ancestors, then ended by Antoinette herself in England. Metaphorically, Antoinette achieves self-realization by putting an end to her Creole existence as a means of breaking the chain of colonization, which starts and ends in England. Her endowment with fire sublimates her into a heroic figure, who achieves self-realization and freedom as well as brings an end to her colonized, captured and passive existence. Her final words "There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage" (Rhys, 1992: 171) reveal an enlightenment, a consciousness throughout her captivity.

Homi Bhabha refers to resistance within the postcolonial context of the struggle of the cultures as "effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power – hierarchy, normalization, marginalization, and so forth" (1995: 33). Similarly, McLeod refers to Bhabha's reformulation of Freud's concept of the "uncanny" in

postcolonial theory: “Bhabha’s use of Freud’s sense of the ‘uncanny’ keeps open the possibility that oppressed voices maintain the agency to make their (absent) presence felt, to menace the scene of representation” (2000: 221). Antoinette’s burning down of her prison, in which she is annihilated, and her transformation into a ghost, is an act of self-assertion, an act that makes her existence felt. “The very process of taking practical action inevitably diminishes the individual’s sense of victimization and in many cases even brings the emotional career of the victimized self to an end” (Johnson and Ferraro, 1987: 129). From an existentialist perspective, though destructive, her commitment to real action ends her victimization. Antoinette’s commitment to the act of destroying her prison reflects her use of “free will” as the only means of existence. She “chooses” to exist.

In the face of nothingness man can choose to act or not to act. Whatever it be, he has to exercise his choice, and there is no escape from it; in exercising his choice he exercises his freedom. This choice at its deepest level is a commitment. Failure to choose and commit oneself is to remain in ‘bad faith’. (Manimala, 1991: 7)

Antoinette Cosway Mason is transformed from a captive ghost, Bertha Mason, into a real being, who says “no” to wrongs done to her by asserting her “self” through action.

Jean Rhys, who projects her own problematic existence upon Antoinette as a character gives voice, at the same time, to “the other side”, enabling them to speak for themselves¹⁴. For instance, in *Christophine* she creates an anti-thesis of the restricted and oppressed English woman, the role into which her husband tries to push Antoinette. *Christophine* is an individual who has her own values and

¹⁴ See: **Wilson, L.** (1990), “Women Must Have Spunks”: Jean Rhys’s West Indian Outcasts, *Critical Perspectives on Jean Rhys*, ed. Pierrette M. Frickey, Three Continents Press, USA, 67–74.

judgements as well as freedom of choice of a man, regardless of any official commitment. 'No police here,' she [Christophine] said. 'No chain gang, no tread machine, no dark jail either. This is free country and I am free woman' (Rhys, 1992: 145).

The characters' being given a voice to tell their own paradigms parallels both existentialism and postcolonialism, which emphasise the importance of freedom as well as the assertion of existence, which requires practical action or rebellion. Jean Rhys, who is the embodiment of both postcolonialism and existentialism, thus, dissolves into her authentic existence through her fiction.

CONCLUSION

Despite their different approaches, there is a conformity between postcolonialism, a critical approach investigating colonial politics and their consequent influence on individual lives, and existentialism, a philosophy explaining the meaninglessness of modern man's existence. Jean Rhys reflects her own Creole background through her two protagonists, Anna Morgan in *Voyage in the Dark* and Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as Creole descendants situated into a postcolonial position in England where they are brought against their will. Both characters again, despite their suffering, do not give in and they struggle to exist as individuals.

Anna Morgan's existential struggle, mainly based in England, is discussed within the postcolonial context, as her difficulties with the English society and its othering culture are balanced by memories of her native island. Her memories of her native West Indies are also considered as reflections of this cultural tension between her English step-mother, Hester, the representative of the othering English culture and reactive othering of the whites by the blacks after they are emancipated. Anna's struggle for survival, identified with her literal homelessness and status as a postcolonial subject within English society, is conveyed as an existential struggle which is accomplished by Anna's final act of decision - making about her own life,

by her abortion. Antoinette Cosway's process of transformation into Bertha Mason, the "mad woman in the attic" in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is evaluated in postcolonial terms as the double subjection of the English culture of its own once agents of the subjection of the black. Antoinette's double subjection is developed through her relation to the othered black, and to her husband who others her. Antoinette's final commitment in setting fire to the house where she is locked up in England is read as an existential act that signifies her revolt against her individual oppression. Through the fire, she achieves self-realization and freedom.

Both *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are fictional representations of Jean Rhys's own Creole experience that is divided dramatically between her happy West Indian childhood and youth, and painful European adulthood. Anna Morgan and Antoinette Cosway are the embodiments of their postcolonial background on the one hand, and existential victimization on the other. Both characters, however, succeed in existing by taking practical action in the end.

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APPENDIX

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