

# Cognitive and Identitarian Aspects in Jean Rhys' Fiction<sup>1</sup>

Cristina-Georgiana Voicu

**Abstract:** From *Gnōthi seautón* ('Know Thyself') to cognitive theories of the self there has been a long time, but the paradigm has almost remained the same. This article proposes a reconsideration of their rediscovery filtered through Jean Rhys' post-colonial sensitivity. Between the 'core self' and its iridescent, exotic edges, broadly speaking, the thoroughly analyzed facets of cultural identity interpose.

**Keywords:** Jean Rhys, self, identity, cultural memory

## I

Jean Rhys' fiction seeks to circumscribe to a cultural paradigm that mirrors the search for a cultural identity so specific to postcolonial socio-cultural aspects. The writer is therefore representative for the cultural phenomenon generated by colonialism, and in turn by decolonization. By this writer's work, who emigrated from his native country (Dominica Island, part of Windward Archipelago of Caribbean) towards the former imperial metropolis, the postcolonial literature becomes thus part of the British culture.

Taking into consideration the various cultural locations that inscribe themselves into the postcolonial literary geography, the use of "postcolonial literatures" is more adequate. The topics of Jean Rhys' discourse focuses on the consequences of the colonial experience on the self-consciousness of the colonial society: de-territorializing from an original cultural matrix, marginality, subaltern, disorientation in terms of belonging, identitarian split caused by the existence of two cultures and by the clash reality of intercultural hybridization; the necessity of negotiating an interstitial space of identifying and assuming a hybrid identity. These leading topics for Rhys' discourse are the research framework of the present study.

The core idea is to discuss the way in which the 'Self' and 'Other' interferes and interact in Jean Rhys' fiction. This comes along with the main objective that of highlighting the concepts of cultural identity, de-territorialization and hybridity. Therefore, by applying the theory of cultural hybridization as a

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is supported by the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number POSDRU/159/1.5/133675.

mirror-space of the identitarian dynamics to Jean Rhys' fiction is an opportunity to demonstrate that postcolonial identity necessarily becomes a hybrid of two cultures, having a destruction through adaptation as its basis, not a total, metaphysical destruction, but a dialectical one (the colonizers destroyed, annihilated but they also retrieved from the ancient culture viable elements, hence the tetrad: take over, adaptation, promotion, development).

Using such hybridity theory as a conceptual framework, the paradigm which reflects the looking for a cultural identity is so specific to postcolonial literature. Jean Rhys carries out an examination of the relationship between hybrid identities, self and otherness and of several situations of existential ambivalence that work on the border between sign (colonial difference) and symbol (imperial authority) thus bringing to the fore issues as cultural hybridization, otherness, racism and colonialism in the context of transcending cultural boundaries. On the one hand, the racial and Creole identities existing within the postcolonial society are identified, being analyzed from an integrated perspective, both textual and cultural, and focusing on the identitarian fabric of the Rhysian text.

On the other hand, hybridity is seen as a metaphor of mixture, by which cultures are presented as if 'flowing' together (in the same way body fluids do), hence the existence of a 'fluid identity.' Recognizing that hybridity (cultural, especially) is paradoxical, in its essence, and that only an ambivalent attitude may comprise its contradictory wholeness led us to emphasize the concepts of racial identity, ethnicity and masculinity and how they contributed to rediscover those aspects specific to the Caribbean culture existing in Jean Rhys' fiction.

The study of identitarian phenomenon is related both to the notion of exteriority (out-there-ness) and interiority (in-here-ness) of the self in terms of neighborhood identity, detachment, distance, alienation, depersonalization, self-hyperbolization, self-centeredness etc.), concepts which in the case of Jean Rhys manifests itself by characters' refusing to allow the outside world to get close to their self. Focusing on the self and on corporeity by extension is not accidental, our interest being supported both by the capacity of the autobiographic self of revealing itself and especially by imposing a subject that seeks itself and who analyses its anxieties in relation to itself and reality, fully assuming the alterity. Thus, by each cognitive narration, the real self seeks to understand the relationship between being and non-being. Therefore, the use of the personal pronoun in the first person from the Jean Rhys' writings by the homodiegetic through narrative marks the point of articulation between the existing system and the repeatable language and the existence of the self as a unique and unrepeatable person in appropriate social and historical circumstances. In other words, the act of creating itself is not an option but an obligation: we must create ourselves because the self is not given, as Mikhail Bakhtin states that our self "has no alibi in existence." (Bakhtin 1981, 360) Jean Rhys thus lies on the border between cultures and mentalities, synthesizing elements in her creation of two

cultural heritages – original and adopted – so the spiritual elements of East and West merge in the hybrid space of a universal humanism, into a representation of the human condition that transcends the conventional barriers of nationality, race, and ethnicity. For Rhys, the post-imperial period has a double meaning. On the one hand, her characters, regardless of nationality, live the historical experience at the intersection between the colonizer and the colonized, and are often affected by uprooted feelings of social marginality, amid which they try to redefine their identity. From this perspective, we can consider that she shares the theme of de-territorialization (spatial, psychological, social or identitarian) as well as the hybridity specific to the postcolonial self and the human condition in its historical becoming, which justifies the inclusion of her novels to the critical objective of this research.

The idea that, in fact, culture is a postcolonial hybrid is attractive because it derives directly from the concept of de-territorialization, meaning that the more intense traffic between cultures brought by the colonization process suggests that the missing link between culture and place is accompanied by the mixing of the cultural rooted practices, producing new forms of culture, both hybrid and complex. Therefore, we propose the term “de-territorialization” in a broad sense, including to capture what Garcia Canclini called the “loss of the natural relationship” between culture and the geographical and social territories” (Canclini 1995). So, in terms of cultural experience, what becomes important is how this widening of the social relations affects its real place. The familiar nature of cultural backgrounds, including Jean Rhys’s characters that normally move, hides the influences of social forces and processes. In other words, the protagonists continue to be at ‘home,’ in which most often the familiar features are not unique only to that place, and they are no part of its organic development, but they are, rather, features that were ‘placed in’ that place by remote forces. In this regard, the ‘dis-location’ experience from the postcolonial society is not an experience of alienation, but of cultural identity ambivalence.

On the one hand, hybridity may include a space between two pure areas; on the other hand, it can be understood as a sine-qua-non condition of the human cultures, which do not contain areas of purity, as processes of transculturality constantly take place (mutual cultural borrowings). Moreover, the concept of ‘hybrid culture’ can be useful to understand the type of the unique cultural identity that emerged within the ‘transnational cultural space.’ Therefore, Jean Rhys proposes a hybrid analysis seen as a metaphor and in close relation to the cultural changes analysis suggested by de-territorialization, this perspective emphasizing the alienating, individualized and contractual aspect of the ‘non-places’ in the sense that the French anthropologist Marc Augé described them: “If the place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which can not be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity will be a non-place...” (Augé 1995, 63) Moreover, he

gives the example of the “anthropological place” (a place that provides identity and cultural memory). The concept of de-territorialization, therefore, surprises the novelty of the changing place – both its positive and negative traits – without succumbing to the temptation to interpret it as a simple depletion or dissolution of cultural interaction. In this sense, the inherent ambivalence of de-territorialization deepens, the concept being applied within the ‘lived experience’ of Jean Rhys’ characters.

## II

The undertaken analysis combines the perspectives and theoretical categories of the postcolonial and cultural criticism with the hermeneutic approach based on text, which is part of the practical and thematic criticism tradition.

From a general-theoretical perspective, in a concentrically critical step, Rhys aims to demonstrate both the belief in the concept of hybridization as space mirrors of the expression and identity formation, as well as the cultural boundaries variability, the opposition self / otherness, authenticity / fiction, trans-textuality, and the relevance of an integrated approach to multiple cultural identities as an encountering and negotiation space between writer, reader and work.

Using a theoretical approach and a critical summary, combining the perspectives in postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis and narratology with the tools of hermeneutics and deconstruction, we argue that Jean Rhys’s work can be subsumed under a poetics of cultural identity and hybridity. Moreover, the complexity of its ontological and epistemological representation involves an interdisciplinary approach that blends a literary interpretive approach to social, anthropological, cultural and historical perspectives.

Hybridity as an identitarian fractality, self-de-territorialization, followed by re-territorialization and metissage, etc) is rather an experience that escapes to incorporation (where the cultural hegemony restructures the subaltern cultures following their own self image).

Jean Rhys pays a special emphasis on the de-territorialization, separation and metamorphosing and creolization, starting from a psychological exploration of the relationship between the identity of the self and the identity of the other, thus the dichotomic relationship between self and alterity being established.

Taking into account the centrality of identity and alterity topic in Jean Rhys’ fiction concerned by the complex mechanisms of the cultural identity construction and of the image of the self in all its aspects (national, ethnic, racial and cultural identity), our argument is supported by the psychoanalytical approach. The processes involved in self-becoming and in the self-image are relevant and interpreted with respect to Freud’s theories and post-Freudian critics, especially Lacan.

### III

The historical dislocation or de-territorialization, followed by re-territorialization generates a consciousness of uprootedness, which the postcolonial text dissects in all its hypostases: the inadequacy and negation of its own identity; spatial or social alienation; feeling of marginalization; the escapist endeavour of the self to migrate towards the center of the imperial world; geographical dislocation and relocation; the identitarian and cultural disorientation of the immigrant; the feeling of uprootedness and the confusion of 'home;' inter- and intra-cultural conflicts; the conscious of difference and the image of alterity; minority identity; the avatars of the diasporic condition and the difficulty of self-adaptation to the new culture.

The consciousness of identitarian hybridity is cristalized through an exercise of internalizing the relationship between identity and alterity seen as an action to get to and to face the Other or Him/Herself, first on a cultural level, then as a projection at a cognitive level. The space where identities and alterities are born and function is the place where the Other must be seen as a necessary negation of a primary identity – cultural or psychical.

The postcolonial text is thus an approach of a historical and cultural recovering of the self-consciousness of the colonial society, often within the dramatic context of the national liberation movements, of decolonization challenges and self-government, as well as of defining its own identity on the background of a history labeled by the epistemological and cultural hybridizations of the colonialist project. In other words, the experience of postcoloniality places the individual between the reality of a space and of an undesirable identity, often perceived as peripheral and the fantasy of a space and ideal identity imagine and located in the center of the world: the imperial metropolis.

The consciousness of marginality, of the subaltern or of the minority condition is associated with an experience counterbalanced by the utopian image of the imperial center and of the Western civilization. The migration thus becomes a utopia of liberation and of becoming, of identity purification within the ideal space of the European civilization. The avatars of uprootedness become the facets of the same experience of alienation, dominated by the image of a 'home' always situated somewhere else. In Jean Rhys' fiction the aporetic experience of this reality is finally filtrated through the lenses of the self hybridity, of the reconciliation between perfection and imperfection, considered as an essential resort of the individual's becoming.

Taking into account the construction of cultural identity, the status of the self in Jean Rhys' fiction is reconsidered in terms of holism and fragmentarism. In the postcolonial literature, the self implies an individualist structure, pointed by the irreconcilable break towards the Other. Thus, the consciousness of alterity stirs into the self/Rhysian character a feeling of anguish and doubt, hence the necessary self escape and the quartering in a present which can offer only the

illusion of self-recovering. In this way, the fractal self rebuilds the holistic dimension of the existente, integrating its presence into a *constantly* fluid. Thus, the awareness of otherness as difference causes in Jean Rhys's self/character anguish and uncertainty, hence the necessary run itself and dwelling into a present which can only give the illusion of identity recovery. In this respect, the self is less an individual and more a *knot of relationships*, hence the *identitarian fractality*. The relationship between individual and socio-cultural space is thus sketched in its dual, hybrid hypostasis. Also, the self brings into discusion the complementary notion of fragmentarism, seen as a way of ontological structuring: the inherence of the Fracman hus becomes a huge puzzle of fragments imploseively updated, as the ontological detail regresively discovers an Other as complex as the previous one. This hypostasis of the self is found especially in Jean Rhys' fiction, where the narrator-character personajul-narator meditates on the fractal structure of the self and upon its place within the whole fractal system.

The images through which the feeling of de-territorialization and the cultural and identitarian hypostaseis of hybridity in the colonial space are emphasized. Rhys watches the colonial history as an alteration of the colonial subaltern's self-consciousness, described as the victim of several social dislocations. The social alienation of the self is represented as an uncertainty of 'home,' frequently symbolized by the metaphor of home in various hypostases: absence, privation, provisional, or as an ideal place of self-fulfillment.

It is very important to mention that, in Jean Rhys' fiction, the experience and the colonial hystory consequences are explored at the level of defining the self, which tries to go beyond the consciousness of a marginal existence and identity, by the immersion into the imperial culture or the fantasy of migrating towards the metropolis. Besides the endemic feeling of de-territorialization and marginality, the cultural mimesis is considered to be a fundamental agent in forging the self-image/the Creole identity of the colonial subject, frequently leading to extreme phenomena of acculturation or depersonalization.

The migration towards the center of the Western World is seen not only as a false mirage, a new 'shipwreck' of identity and self-consciousness, but also as a challenge by which the individual can discover a balanced space between two cultures, both the original and the metropolis.

On the other hand, the characters of Rhys' novels wear masks, they cannot reach the other, because they are haunted by an ectoplasmic identity. This is due to the permanent struggle that results from the attempt of the being-for-it to become being-in-itself. This shows that these are in fact some diasporic identities that spread from the struggle between the real self and the image imposed by the others.

## IV

To conclude, we can say that in the author's fictional universe, the cultural identity is represented as a general human experience that transcends the specific conditionalities different to the geographical, historical and cultural contexts. Beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of postcoloniality, cultural identity is treated as a phenomenon that defines the essential human condition and results in a perpetual search of an ideal area for anchoring or relocating the individual and collective identity. Jean Rhys's fictional discourse found itself between 'the anxiety of authorship' and 'the anxiety of influence' displays in fact the postcoloniality as an era of uprooting and migration in which the concept of national ownership is diluted by the image of a 'home' ambiguous located at the boundary between a myth of origins and a myth of becoming. The relationship between the individual and socio-cultural space is thus shaped in a dual hybrid position. Living in a present of indeterminacy, the cultural identity of Jean Rhys's characters transforms itself into a sum of pieces, puzzles which no longer form a convergent whole. The intertext is thus becoming not a process of writing, but a fractal ontological principle that generates the transformation of 'the text as texts' in 'texts as existence.' More than this, Marc Augé, in his book *A Sense of the Other*, states that "the individual is, by definition, composite: the relationship stays at the basis of identity. Alterity and identity are indestructible related, not only within the social systems, but also in the already known definition of the individual as part of these systems." (Augé 1995, 105)

The construction of identity in Jean Rhys's work is represented by the same dichotomist movement between the marginal identity and the identification with a human ideal designed either by the hegemonic discourse or metropolitan culture or by the dominant ideology. The identification with a pattern of cultural authenticity, of racial, ethnic, or national purism is presented as a purely destructive cultural projection, leading to the creation of a static universe in opposition to the diversity of human feelings and aspirations.<sup>2</sup>

### References

- Augé, Marc. 1995. *Non-Places: Introduction to the anthropology of supermodernity*. London: Verso.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. by Caryl Emerson. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Canclini, Nestor Garcia. 1995. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1977. *Écrits: A Selection*. London: Routledge.

---

<sup>2</sup> The extended version of the ideas exposed here was published in an Open Access Book entitled *Exploring Cultural Identities in Jean Rhys' Fiction* by Walter De Gruyter Inc. Publisher, Berlin, Germany in June 2014. For further details, please follow this link: <http://www.degruyter.com/view/product/246960?format=G>.