

The Plight of Not Belonging: Jean Rhys's "Let Them Call It Jazz" and "The Day They Burned the Books"*

CARMEN LAGUARTA BUENO

Institution address: Universidad de Zaragoza. Depto. de Filología Inglesa y Alemana. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras. Pedro Cerbuna 12. 50009 Zaragoza. Spain.

E-mail: sed3004@unizar.es

ORCID: 0000-0002-3056-2608

Received: 31/07/2017. Accepted: 19/04/2018.

How to cite this article: Laguarda Bueno, Carmen. "The Plight of Not Belonging: Jean Rhys's 'Let Them Call It Jazz' and 'The Day They Burned the Books'." *ES Review. Spanish Journal of English Studies*, vol. 39, 2018, pp. 157–72.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.39.2018.157-172>

Abstract: This paper offers an analysis of the short stories "Let Them Call It Jazz" (1962) and "The Day They Burned the Books" (1960), set in London and in the Caribbean respectively, with the aim to demonstrate that, no matter their origin, Rhys's protagonists are often confronted with a feeling of non-belonging that sometimes makes them fluid, unstable beings. Furthermore, it aims to demonstrate that, although in some of her writings Rhys seemed to be very critical of the attitude of the colonizers and to align herself with the colonized Others instead, her attitude towards the empire can also be very ambivalent at some points. Ultimately, the analysis of these two short stories suggests that the ambivalence present in Rhys's works could be a direct consequence of her peculiar positioning as somebody in between two different cultures, and, consequently, uncovers to what extent the process of colonization affected those involved in it.

Keywords: Jean Rhys; postcolonial literature; Caribbean literature; alienation; ambivalence.

Summary: Introduction. Alienation and postcolonial resistance. Ambivalence. Conclusions.

Resumen: El presente artículo ofrece un análisis de los relatos "Let Them Call It Jazz" (1962) y "The Day They Burned the Books" (1960), ambientados en Londres y en el Caribe, respectivamente, con el objeto de demostrar que, con independencia de su origen, los protagonistas de Rhys frecuentemente se ven sometidos a un sentimiento de no pertenencia. Este los convierte algunas veces en seres fluidos e inestables. Además, este trabajo nos muestra que, aunque en algunas de sus obras Rhys se critica la actitud de los colonizadores y parece sentirse más cercana a los colonizados, su actitud hacia el imperio también puede ser muy ambivalente en algunos momentos. El análisis de estas dos historias breves sugiere, en última instancia, que la ambivalencia que hallamos en las obras de Rhys podría tener su origen en la peculiar posición de la autora entre dos culturas diferentes y, como consecuencia, dicha

*The research carried out for writing this paper forms part of a project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (MINECO) (project FFI2015-63506-P). The author is also thankful for the support of the Aragonese Regional Government and the European Social Fund (ESF) (code H03_17R), and the Spanish Ministry of Education (FPU) (reference FPU15/02576).

ambivalencia revela el grado en que el proceso de colonización afectó a aquellos que se vieron involucrados en él.

Palabras clave: Jean Rhys; literatura poscolonial; literatura caribeña; alienación; ambivalencia.

Sumario: Introducción. Alienación y resistencia poscolonial. Ambivalencia. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Jean Rhys was a fourth-generation creole born in Dominica, then a British colony in the West Indies. It was in this island that Rhys spent her childhood and adolescence, a period which Elaine Savory refers to as her “formative years” (3). According to the same critic, Rhys’s upbringing in Dominica was of crucial importance as it was precisely there that “her views on race, class and nationality . . . began to be formed” and that she came in contact with different “races (black, white, mixed, Carib), languages and cultures,” learning that “meaning and truth can be multi-layered” (2–3). However, most critics agree that there was also a problematic side to her peculiar positioning: being a descendant of white settlers, Rhys never managed to feel completely at home in the Caribbean. When she was sixteen she moved to London, also a city in which she felt displaced. Thus, throughout her life, the writer found herself trapped between two different cultures and ultimately “unable to entirely belong anywhere” (Savory 3). It is precisely this feeling of double alienation or “unhomeliness” (Bhabha 141) that permeates most of her fiction, and, in both her novels and short stories, the author presents heroines who, wherever they come from, are “all strangers or foreigners forever in transit, forever not belonging” (Maurel 53).

This paper offers an analysis of the short stories “Let Them Call It Jazz” (1962) and “The Day They Burned the Books” (1960), set in London and in the Caribbean respectively, in order to explore the reasons why, no matter their origin, Rhys’s protagonists are often confronted with a feeling of alienation and non-belonging that makes them fluid, unstable beings. Making use of the critical frameworks provided by trauma studies and postcolonial studies, I will analyze, first, how Rhys exposes and denounces the discrimination to which the non-white characters of the two short stories selected are subjected—more specifically, Selina Davis in “Let Them Call It Jazz” and Mrs. Sawyer in “The Day They Burned the Books.” I will focus mainly on the ways in

which these characters are racially oppressed, yet always bearing in mind that there are other variables, such as gender and class, which undoubtedly “magnify the effects of racism” (Weedon 74). By focusing on the ways in which Selina and Mrs. Sawyer are discriminated against, and on the feelings of non-belonging they develop as a result of this ongoing discrimination, my aim is to prove that, being a creole herself, in some of her writings, Rhys seemed to be very critical of the attitude of the colonizers and to align herself with the colonized Others instead. However, as mentioned above, I then aim to demonstrate that Rhys’s non-white characters are not the only ones who suffer from this feeling of non-belonging. The second part of this paper will deal precisely with the double alienation experienced by the protagonists of “The Day They Burned the Books”—both of British descent—in the Caribbean. My analysis of this short story aims to demonstrate that, far from always being as straight-forward as in “Let Them Call It Jazz,” Rhys’s attitude to the empire can be very ambivalent at some points, which is best exemplified by the white protagonists’ love-hate relationship towards the metropolis. Ultimately, the analysis of these two short stories suggests that the ambivalence present in Rhys’s works could be a direct consequence of her peculiar positioning as somebody in between two different cultures, and, consequently, uncovers to what extent the process of colonization affected those involved.

1. ALIENATION AND POSTCOLONIAL RESISTANCE

“Let Them Call It Jazz” is a short story in which Rhys, through an autodiegetic narrator, adopts the patois dialect to tell the story of Selina Davis, a Martiniquais woman who, after moving to London in search of a job, finds herself submerged in a society in which her personal characteristics make her face a triple oppression. First of all, she comes from the colonies and is neither black nor white, but rather mulatto. Secondly, she is a woman living in a time when many gender stereotypes remained prevalent. Thirdly, she comes from the lower classes; therefore she has no job and little prospects for progressing in life. The combination of these markers of difference—race, gender and class—does nothing but enhance her position as somebody who belongs to the Other of white patriarchal society.

From the very beginning of the narrative, readers may be aware of Selina’s difficult situation, which does not become any better as the story

progresses. On the one hand, the discrimination to which she is subjected for being racially different can be clearly perceived through her interactions with the other characters in the short story. Most of these characters consider Selina inferior and they all either use or abuse her. The story begins with Selina narrating how her British landlord evicts her for not being able to pay a month's rent in advance, while initially he had agreed to be paid weekly. From Selina's words readers learn that what really bothers her is not the landlord's abusive language towards her but his wife's kicking one of her dresses out of her suitcase and laughing at her. Her constant remembrance of this event throughout the story can lead readers to interpret the dress as a symbol, as an embodiment of Selina herself, who is treated with contempt and in some way kicked out by her white landlady.

Furthermore, the protagonist narrates how her white neighbours look down on her. At one point in the story she says "good evening" to a neighbour but the latter turns away her head, while her husband stares at Selina as if she were "a wild animal let loose" (47). Here comes into play one of the crucial elements of racism: the white gaze (Fanon 82–85). Rhys's views of the trauma resulting from racism seem to fit well with postcolonial critic Frantz Fanon's ideas. In his work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon describes racism as an ongoing trauma which cannot ever be overcome, precisely because any attempt the black man makes at working through his trauma is outweighed when he is faced with the white racist gaze. Like Fanon, Rhys seems to be aware of the devastating power of the white gaze, as evidenced by the episode mentioned above, and also by the following one, also narrated by Selina: "Then I feel eyes on me and it's the woman and her husband in the next door garden watching. The man make some remark and she look at me so hateful, so hating I shut the front door quick" (49). Another character in the story who contributes to Selina's oppression is Mr. Sims who, when Selina is evicted from her former house, offers her an empty flat, inviting her to stay as long as she wants. Although at first readers might think that he is just being generous, at one point we discover that he is using her to his own benefit: he wants someone to occupy the flat in order to prevent the timeworn house from being pulled down.

On the other hand, the short story conveys the idea that racial discrimination is something that permeates every other aspect of Selina's life. This is reflected, for example, in the fact that, even though she is very good at hand sewing, she has trouble finding a job as a hand sewer.

Her careful sewing skills are disregarded by employers, who care about the speed rather than the quality of the sewing. Discrimination also takes the form of institutional racism in the narrative. More specifically, the short story conveys the idea that some institutions, such as the police, “are far from neutral” (Weedon 70). As Selina herself states, “all I can say about police, and how they behave is I think it all depends on who they dealing with” (51). Selina’s powerlessness when having to deal with the authorities becomes most evident when she is sent to jail for breaking her neighbours’ glass window. When she is arrested, Selina expresses her wish to tell the magistrate that she broke the window because the woman next door had been provoking her and calling her bad names for a long time. However, she remains silent because she knows that nobody will believe her: “Prove it. That’s all they will say” (57). Furthermore, once in jail, she gives her handbag to one of the female prison officers, who takes her purse and throws her compact, her comb and her handkerchief, as Selina comments, “like everything in my bag is dirty” (58). In contrast, the officer is nice and half-smiles to the white girl who stands in line in front of Selina. This is yet another example of the unequal treatment based on ethnicity on the part of the authorities that can, furthermore, be related to the idea of “pollution,” which according to Stuart Hall is usually associated to racial hybridity (243).

The fact that readers are only offered Selina’s perspective on the events is not without implications. According to Chris Weedon, in *Black British writing*, the first person narrative functions as an “apparently transparent testimony to experience” (74). Furthermore, it has the effect of eliciting empathy on the part of the reader. In fact, when reading the short story, readers become witnesses to all the instances of racism and discrimination to which Selina is subjected, and, because of the constant references to her feelings of alienation and loneliness—such as “I can’t bear the way I feel” (53) or “I stop and I feel the tears on my face” (57)—the reader is able to empathise with her. At first it might seem that Selina adopts a passive attitude and that she does nothing to change her situation. In LaCapra’s terms, in the first half of the short story she merely seems to be acting out her trauma, a trauma resulting from racism: she stays home all day drinking, she cries and she forgets things, such as how she got to the flat.¹ Then, she suddenly remembers, but her

¹ “Acting out” and “working through” are two terms used by Dominick LaCapra to refer to the different stages in the traumatic experience. “Acting out” makes reference to the

memory is fragmented. As she states: “it comes to me, but in pictures—like the landlady kicking my dress, and when I take my ticket at Victoria Station” (53). Mr. Sims is concerned with Selina’s apparent passivity, and tells her that if she does not care about money—and, by extension, about improving her situation—she will “get pushed around all her life and die like a dog.” Then, he states: “I’m disappointed in you, Selina, I thought you had more spirit” (49).

However, Selina is far from being a passive character, which becomes most evident when readers are presented with the above-mentioned incident with her neighbours. One day, after having had a few drinks, Selina starts singing and dancing in the garden. For her, singing is a way of forgetting. In her own words, “when I sing all the misery goes from my heart” (46). Furthermore, she sings one of the songs her grandmother used to sing, which could be interpreted as an attempt to recover her sense of identity and belonging by going back to her roots in La Martinique. But singing is also an act of resistance, a way to demonstrate to the colonizers that she has nothing to be afraid of. When her neighbours see her singing and dancing, they tell her that she should be ashamed of that behaviour. The husband tells his wife: “at least the other tarts that crook installed here were *white* girls” (54), a racist remark that makes Selina lose her temper and throw a stone at their glass window. Afterwards, she wonders why she has done it and she comes to the conclusion that “if they treat you wrong over and over again the hour strike when you burst out that’s what” (55). In this way, this incident can be interpreted as an act of retaliation on Selina’s part. As Brooks Bouson suggests, when a group of people is persistently considered as racially inferior, they eventually internalize this judgement; in some cases, this results in violent actions on the part of the oppressed group (6–12). This could be the case of Selina who, after having been persistently mistreated by the white community—and by her neighbours, more specifically—could have tried to get rid of her shame by throwing a stone at their beautiful glass window. This is perhaps the most evident episode of resistance to colonial power that we can find in the short story. However, we can find many other strategies of resistance which, although maybe

stage in which “the past is compulsively repeated as if it were fully present” (*Representing the Holocaust* 48), while “working through” refers to the assimilation of the traumatic memories. In order to recover from trauma, victims should evolve from the “acting out” stage to the “working through” stage.

not so evident, are equally powerful because they subvert colonial power from within.

As Helen Carr states, one of the positive things of being on the margins is the possibility of looking at the homeland from a detached and critical position:

Yet the colonial experience, for Rhys as for others, does not only bring dislocation: the position on the margins gives a perspective, a difference of view, what Iain Chambers calls the “oblique gaze of the migrant,” from which the homeland’s values and institutions can be appraised and judged: it leads not just to “pain” but to anger and resistance. (25)

It is precisely at this critical position that Jean Rhys stands, as well as the one at which she locates Selina. Adopting the voice of Selina, the writer deploys some strategies to subvert colonial power, such as questioning the values and customs of the colonizers by indirectly comparing them to those of Selina’s own country. According to Selina, English people have a “heart like stone” (44) and they “take a long time to decide” (44–45). Regarding work, they “want somebody to work quick and to hell with the small stitches” (51), while what really matters to her is the quality of the work. The idea that is indirectly conveyed in the short story is, therefore, that the values of the colonized are somehow superior to those of the colonizers.

Another strategy used by Selina to contest colonial power is that of accusing the colonizers of precisely the same things that they accuse the colonized of, or, in Stuart Hall’s words, “reversing the evaluation of popular stereotypes” (271). At one point, the protagonist tells the police that someone has stolen her money. The police talk with her landlady and Selina hears her say: “She certainly had no money when she came here. . . . These people are terrible liars” (50). However, as readers have access to Selina’s thoughts, they know for certain that she is telling the truth, and the effect is that they see the landlady as a liar instead. In addition, Selina is accused by her neighbours of being an alcoholic, which is peculiar, considering that at the very beginning of the story her white landlord is “drunk already at that early hour” (44). So, by using this strategy in a reiterative manner, the writer leads readers to think that very often the colonizers project their own fears and repressed desires on the colonized. As McDermott and Kripal state, “the colonizers project a kind

of negative anti-type of themselves in the mirror of the colonized Other” (183).

At this point, it is worth mentioning something that happens to Selina while she is in jail. One day she listens to a woman singing a Holloway song, which urges “the girls cheerio and never say die” (60). Listening to this song gives her strength and, as she states: “I know now that anything can happen, and I don’t want to stay lock up here and miss it” (61). In fact, it is precisely in prison where Selina’s final transformation begins. She realizes that playing up to the stereotypes is not useful, and she even advises another girl not to cry, because that is what is expected of them. When she is released from prison, readers realize that she has clearly experienced a transformation. She is now depicted as more resilient than ever, to the point that she starts to imitate the way of acting of the colonizers because she knows that it is the only way of surviving in the metropolis. She states: “I’m not frightened of them any more—after all what else can they do? I know what to say and everything go like a clock works” (62). According to French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan, “the effect of *mimicry* is camouflage, in the strictly technical sense. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background but, against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare” (99; my emphasis). Mimicry is, therefore, another strategy of resistance used by Selina in the short story; Selina does what the colonists want her to do not because it is the right thing to do, but because she knows that it is convenient for her. In fact, in the end, by pretending to have worked in a very expensive shop in New York, she manages to get a job in a big store altering women’s dresses.

All in all, because it denounces the alienation that Selina suffers in London for being a woman, a mulatto and a member of the lower classes, and portrays the values of the colonized as clearly superior to those of the colonizers, among other things, this short story seems to confirm Helen Carr’s view that Rhys could be considered “a colonial in terms of history” but a “postcolonialist in her attitude to the Empire and in her employment of many postcolonialist strategies” (18). In fact, in spite of the inability to identify completely with either of the communities, in some interviews Rhys suggested being somehow closer to the black community: “I longed to be identified once and for all with the others’ side which of course was impossible. I couldn’t change the colour of my skin” (Burrows 33).

Rhys's tendency to position herself on the side of the colonized Other can also be perceived in "The Day They Burned the Books," the other short story selected for analysis. This short story's main theme is the alienation experienced by the narrator and his friend Eddie—both of British descent—in the Caribbean, an issue that will be dealt with later on in more detail. Yet, even if the story is told from the point of view of a white character and deals mainly with the alienation of the white settlers, the presence of constant references to racism throughout the short story shows that, behind this apparent focus on the trauma of the white settlers, there is a second and yet equally powerful layer of trauma in the story, which is the trauma of the colonized. In the colonial context, very often the colonized were considered inferior and they became the victims of an ongoing discrimination with devastating effects. Maria Root's concept of "insidious trauma" (Root 240) is of special relevance here. According to Laura Brown, this concept makes reference to the "traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at any given moment, but which do violence to the soul and the spirit" (130).

In this respect, Mrs. Sawyer—Eddie's mother—is a crucial figure, as she becomes the very embodiment of Otherness in the short story and she is subjected to many instances of racism and discrimination along the narrative. As Bel Hooks argues, not all women experience oppression in the same way (5) and, in fact, as happens to Selina Davis in "Let Them Call It Jazz," being a coloured woman, Mrs. Sawyer is doubly discriminated against. Rhys, through the voice of a white narrator who seems to share her own critical stance, exposes and denounces the racism to which this character is subjected on a daily basis. Mrs. Sawyer is mistreated by her white colonialist husband—Mr. Sawyer—who shows an aggressive behaviour towards her and utters all sorts of racist remarks, such as "nigger," "damned, long-eyed, gloomy half-caste" (37). Furthermore, he accuses her of not smelling right and further humiliates her in front of other people by pulling her hair to demonstrate that it is not a wig. Not only is Mrs. Sawyer discriminated against by her own husband, but the short story also shows how she was considered inferior by the narrator's mother—and, by extension, one can infer by the whole white community. "My mother won't take any notice of her," the narrator states, to which Eddie answers: "Why not? Because she's... because she isn't white?" (42).

Not only does Rhys portray and denounce the discrimination to which non-English inhabitants of the Caribbean—embodied in the character of Mrs. Sawyer—were subjected but, as happens in “Let Them Call It Jazz,” she also deploys a wide range of strategies of resistance to colonial power throughout the short story. First of all, from the very beginning of the story, Eddie’s father—Mr. Sawyer, the very embodiment of Britishness—is far from being portrayed in a positive light. He is presented as a “strange man” who “detested the moon and everything else about the Caribbean” and, according to the narrator, people “never decided why he had chosen to settle in a place he didn’t like and to marry a coloured woman” (37). Furthermore, Mr. Sawyer is accused of drunkenness and his aggressive behaviour seems to be questioned by the narrator several times throughout the narrative. As it is common knowledge that the colonized have often been accused precisely of these two things, among others, by reversing the stereotypes, Rhys is once again overriding the tendency of colonizers to project their own fears and repressed desires on the colonized and, therefore, putting colonial power to the test.

Another strategy of postcolonial resistance deployed by Rhys in both short stories is criticizing the values of the homeland and portraying the culture and values of the colonized as superior to those of the colonizers. As Elaine Savory points out, although Jean Rhys “was sometimes markedly contradictory about her relation to black and white racial identities in Dominica” (23), she sometimes “separated herself from the white Creole society,” longing “to cross over, making of the black community an image of all she felt she lacked” (29), and this is something which can be clearly perceived in most of her fiction. In “The Day They Burned the Books,” it is the values of the non-English inhabitants of the Caribbean that are privileged.

On the one hand, in this short story—as happens in “Let Them Call It Jazz”—English values are often put to the test. At one point the narrator uses the sentence “heads I win, tails you lose—that was the English” (39) to criticize English narrowmindedness and supremacy. On the other hand, the main characters’ affiliation with the natives can be best seen in their attraction to the Caribbean landscape. Mr. and Mrs. Sawyer’s garden is described by the narrator in a very positive light. It is described as big and as having “a *fine* mango tree, which bore prolifically” (38; my emphasis). Mangoes are described as “small, round, very sweet and juicy—a lovely, red-and-yellow colour when it was ripe”

(38). Readers are presented, therefore, with a very positive description of the garden and the mango tree which contrasts greatly with Eddie and the narrator's dislike of strawberries and daffodils. As well as this attraction to the Caribbean landscape, throughout the short story the narrator seems to be more attached to Eddie's mother—the main representative of Caribbean culture—than to her own white mother, who is only mentioned once in the narrative. This can be seen, for instance, when Eddie tells the narrator that his mother is prettier than hers: "She's prettier than your mother. When she's asleep her mouth smiles and she has your curling eyelashes and quantities and quantities and *quantities* of hair" (42; original emphasis). The fact that the narrator agrees with Eddie straight-forwardly, with no hesitation, is remarkable: "'Yes,' I said truthfully. 'She's prettier than my mother'" (42).

Finally, it is worth commenting on the burning and selling of Mr. Sawyer's books, which could be considered one of the clearest symbols of resistance to colonial power Rhys deploys in the short story. Mr. Sawyer had built a library in his house where he kept all sorts of books imported from England, from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to Lord Byron's poems. While Mr. Sawyer held the books in high regard because they were a symbol of the homeland and the Western world, Mrs. Sawyer "hated the room and hated the books" (38) because, for her, they were a reminder of the Western oppressors. One day, after Mr. Sawyer's death, Mrs. Sawyer decides to pile the books into two heaps: some of them will be sold and the unimportant ones will be burnt. According to Helen Tiffin, "Rhys had always understood the radical importance of text, of the English *book* in the capture and control of colonial world. And she had understood as well the crucial importance, to textual and political decolonization, of resistance to those texts and their colonialist readings" (67). Although Tiffin is speaking metaphorically, and refers more to the rewriting of canonical texts as an act of resistance, in the context of "The Day They Burned the Books," her statement can be taken literally. The burning of the books becomes a very symbolic act by which Mrs. Sawyer—the colonized subject—challenges colonial discourse. Furthermore, in the context of Rhys's fiction, fire has been interpreted as "an image that symbolizes the destruction and renewal of the world" (Johannessen 883). Therefore, the burning of Mr. Sawyer's English books could also be read as an expression of Mrs. Sawyer's fervent wish to put an end to the colonial world and to white supremacy in the Caribbean.

2. AMBIVALENCE

In view of all the above-mentioned strategies used by Rhys to criticize and dismantle the whole colonial enterprise, it may seem clear that, as happens in “Let Them Call It Jazz,” in “The Day They Burned the Books” the writer also seems to share the culture and values of the colonized rather than those of the colonizers. Nevertheless, Rhys’s fiction is far from being one-sided. At some points her attitude toward the empire is not that straight-forward. In fact, cultural ambivalence—understood here as the ability to “experience intense oppositional emotions that co-exist and can remain in fluctuating opposition to each other” (Burrows 11)—is a key feature of her works. “The Day They Burned the Books” is a clear example of this because, as contended in the following pages, this short story is not devoid of contradictions that invite readers to deeper reflection.

In spite of the fact that Rhys is, as I hope to have demonstrated, deeply concerned with the alienation experienced by her non-white characters, they are by no means the only ones to experience difficulties in fitting in. Returning to “The Day They Burned the Books,” the theme of alienation is also exemplified in the difficulties its white protagonists experience in finding their place in the Caribbean. Being in between two cultures and not being able to completely identify with either of them, these characters are subjected to a double alienation which sometimes results in contradictory attitudes on their part. Although Eddie’s mother is a coloured woman, his father seems to be the very embodiment of Britishness, and both Eddie and the narrator—in spite of being born in the Caribbean—seem to have been raised following the values of the metropolis. Although Eddie is described as “the living image of his father,” it is precisely him who first infects the narrator with “doubts about ‘home’ meaning England” (38). The narrator admires Eddie for not being afraid to say that he does not like strawberries or daffodils—two quintessentially British things—and she herself admits being “tired of learning and reciting poems in praise of daffodils” (39), a possible reference to Wordsworth’s poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” which may underscore the narrator’s aloofness towards British culture and its values.

Not only are the narrator and Eddie not able to identify with the values of the motherland, but they are also rejected by the few English boys and girls they meet, who tell them at one point that they are not

English but “horrid colonial[s]” (39). To this, the narrator reacts saying “Well, I don’t much want to be English” (39), making it evident that her attachment to the metropolis is practically inexistent. However, if these two characters are alienated from their fellows back in the metropolis, they are not fully accepted by the black Caribbean kids either. This becomes most evident at one point when, after stealing some books from Mr. Sawyer’s library, the narrator and Eddie walk “sedately,” fearing “the black children’s ridicule” (42). Therefore, as happens in many of Rhys’s works, the protagonists experience a situation of double alienation which could mirror Jean Rhys’s own situation in Dominica.

This situation of double alienation results in the main characters showing a contradictory attitude towards the metropolis. For instance, even though most of the time the narrator and Eddie seem to reject the values of the motherland and to feel closer to Caribbean culture—which, as previously mentioned, is evidenced by the narrator’s attraction to the Caribbean landscape and her attachment to Eddie’s mother, for instance—other times they seem to be attracted to London. This attachment to the metropolis becomes most evident when, after Mr. Sawyer’s death, the narrator and Eddie take possession of his library, which, because it holds the most representative English works, could be regarded as a kind of temple of Western discourse. Furthermore, when Mrs. Sawyer decides to either sell or burn the books, they try to prevent her from doing so, to the point that Eddie even uses violence to save, at least, one of the books: “He snatched the book out of her hand and gave her a violent push. She fell into the rocking-chair” (41).

The ambivalence present in this story is further enhanced by some of Rhys’s narrative devices. Thus, the author provides an unreliable narrator who offers contradictory and highly ambivalent descriptions of the main characters. Although Eddie is at one point described by the narrator as “bold, and stronger than you would think” (39) and as clearly at ease in the Caribbean heat, at other points he is described in a very different light. For instance, towards the end of the story, after stealing the books, the narrator describes Eddie as a clear reflection of his white colonial father: “He was white as a ghost in his sailor suit, a blue-white even in the setting sun, and his father’s sneer was clamped on his face” (42). As a result, the picture that readers get of Eddie is that of a fluid and unstable character showing a dynamic rather than a fixed identity. Not only are the descriptions of the white characters contradictory, but also Mrs. Sawyer’s. Although most of the time she is placed in a good position,

towards the end of the narrative she is portrayed as a rather dubious character, who burns Mr. Sawyer's books in spite of her son's interest in them. Additionally, she is presented as a character full of hatred and there are hints that she could have got rid of her husband by means of Obeah, a kind of black magic practiced by West African slaves. It is worth mentioning here that, if there is one character that is always described in negative terms, it is Mr. Sawyer. As stated above, his attitude towards the Caribbean and its inhabitants is questioned throughout the whole narrative. Yet, Mr. Sawyer's attitude contrasts with the more positive behaviour adopted by other white colonizers, "resident romantics who had fallen in love with the Caribees" (37). By defining these colonizers as "gentlemen" (37), the short story seems to be pointing to the fact that not all the colonizers were clearly evil. This, in turn, brings to the fore the narrator's contradictory relationship towards the motherland which, as mentioned earlier, could be a direct consequence of her double alienation.

CONCLUSION

In sum, we could say that, although in her writings Jean Rhys very often aligned herself with the colonized Other and denounced the discrimination and alienation to which this collective was subjected, as the first part of this article demonstrates, her fiction is not devoid of contradictions, a feature that can be easily perceived when analysing "The Day They Burned the Books." On the one hand, this short story denounces the racism to which the colonized were subjected, sometimes portraying the culture and values of the Caribbean as superior to those of the motherland. On the other hand, the main white characters are not able to fully identify with those values and they even seem attracted to the metropolis at some points.

Rhys's short stories are, therefore, highly ambivalent and her characters tend to be, regardless of their origins, fluid, unstable beings who often find it difficult to show an unflinching attachment to the culture in which they see themselves immersed. Delving deeper into the writer's life experiences, readers realize that the alienation experienced by her characters could perfectly well reflect the writer's own troubled situation as a fourth-generation creole. Born and raised in the Caribbean but an adopted Londoner, Rhys never managed to feel at home in either of these places or to show an unflinching attachment to either of these cultures.

Thus, her peculiar positioning made the writer a “sustainedly contradictory” person (Savory 35), and, as I hope to have demonstrated, these contradictions sometimes translated into her writings. However, it is precisely these contradictions that make Rhys’s works worth studying, as they show to what extent the process of colonization affected those involved in it. Not only were the colonized exposed to the devastating effects of colonization, but the colonizers and their descendants were also subjected to a double alienation which, in the case of Jean Rhys, is transferred to her fiction, making it highly ambivalent.

REFERENCES

- Bhabha, Homi. “The World and the Home.” *Third World and Post-Colonial Issues*, vols. 31–32, 1992, pp. 141–53.
- Bouson, J. Brooks. “Speaking the Unspeakable: Shame, Trauma and Morrison’s Fiction.” *Quiet As It’s Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, edited by J. Brooks Bouson, State U of New York P, 2000, pp. 1–21.
- Brown, Laura S. “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma.” *American Imago*, vol. 48, no. 1, 1991, pp. 119–33.
- Burrows, Victoria. *Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.
- Carr, Helen. *Jean Rhys*. Northcote House, 1996.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1952. Pluto, 2008.
- Hall, Stuart. “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’.” *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by Stuart Hall, Open U, 1997, pp. 223–80.
- Hooks, Bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Routledge, 2015.
- Johannessen, Lene M. “Palimpsest and Hybridity in Postcolonial Writing.” *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, vol. 2, edited by Ato Quayson, Cambridge UP, 2012, pp. 869–902.
- Lacan, Jacques. “The Line and Light.” *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1963–1964*. 1973. Translated by Alan Sheridan, W. W. Norton, 1998, pp. 91–104.

- LaCapra, Dominick. *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. Cornell UP, 1996.
- LaCapra, Dominick. "Trauma, Absence, Loss." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1998, pp. 696–727.
- Maurel, Sylvie. *Jean Rhys*. Macmillan, 1998.
- McDermott, Rachel Fell, and Jeffrey John Kripal. *Encountering Kali: In the Margins, at the Center, in the West*. U of California P, 2003.
- Rhys, Jean. *Tigers Are Better-Looking, with a Selection from the Left Bank*. Penguin, 1972.
- Root, Maria P. "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality." *Personality and Psychopathology: Feminist Reappraisals*, edited by Laura S. Brown and Mary Ballou, Guilford, 1992, pp. 229–66.
- Savory, Elaine. *The Cambridge Introduction to Jean Rhys*. Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Tiffin, Helen. "Rite of Reply: The Shorter Fictions of Jean Rhys." *Re-sitting the Queen's English: Text and Tradition in Post-Colonial Literatures*, edited by Gillian Whitlock and Helen Tiffin, Rodopi, 1992, pp. 67–78.
- Weedon, Chris. *Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging*. Open UP, 2004.
- Wordsworth, William. *Poems, in Two Volumes*. 1807. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015.