The Geography of Jean Rhys: The Impact of National Identity upon the Exiled Female Author

Alexandra Philp

Abstract

Critical considerations of Jean Rhys’ texts are often intent on geopolitically ‘placing’ the female author. Feeling exiled from her birth country of Dominica and her resident country of England, Rhys felt as if she ‘had no country really now’. National identity seems to have impact upon both public and private practices of Rhys’ authorship. A lack of national identity implies that Rhys is placeless; a concept which is further problematised when considered under Virginia Woolf’s arguments in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). If Rhys does not have country, how can she have a private space from which to write? For an exiled female author, private space is an issue pertinent to studies of her authorship. Through the frameworks of *A Room of One’s Own* and Hélène Cixous’ concept of ‘country in language’, this article demonstrates that Jean Rhys may use her writing practice as an imagined place in which to search for home. For the exiled female author, the textualisation of place and her identity as ‘author’ is an alternative dwelling space.

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‘So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why I was ever born at all.’

Throughout her life Jean Rhys struggled with feelings of exile and isolation. As a ‘White’ Creole and critic of colonialism, she felt detached from her ‘motherland’ of England and excluded from belonging among the ‘Black’ Creole population in her birth country of Dominica. At sixteen she immigrated to England where she found herself dismissed for being a colonial and a female, thus beginning a lifetime of functioning perpetually as ‘other’. Bridget T. Chalk and Helen Carr suggest that she felt lacking in nationality, a notion that is confirmed by Rhys herself. In a 1959 letter to Francis Wyndham (later to become Rhys’ literary executor after her death in 1979), Rhys wrote that she felt she had ‘no country really now’. Rhys’ lack of national identity forces her to inhabit the space between countries; to find another space to belong.

The impact of (a lack of) national identity on the female author is a question that proves important to studies of Jean Rhys. The question appears central to much Rhysian criticism (see

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Chalk; Carr; Erica Laura Johnson⁵), and is perhaps why a significant interest in the elusive figure of Rhys herself retains a strong hold over critical considerations of her texts. Critics are constantly attempting to ‘place’ Rhys, and I wonder how belonging in no place influences Rhys’ authorial identity and practice. For a female author, this notion of dislocation is complicated further by her gender. Concepts of home and private space are inherently linked to the female sex, and a sense of national dislocation may render such spaces difficult to inhabit.

In A Room of One’s Own (1929) Virginia Woolf argues that a female author must have a private space if she is to write. For Woolf, an obviously ‘English’ author, considerations of private and domestic space for the female practitioner is a question of pertinence to her practice. However, how can a female author with a challenged sense of nationality find a room in which to dwell if she does not even have country? For Rhys, then, what effect does an incoherent national identity have on her practice? As Johnson suggests, writing from terra infirma, a lack of physical country and land, insists that the female author must create terre in a different way.⁶ One such way might be to search for a place in language itself.

For Hélène Cixous, the author may find ‘country in language’.⁷ This concept allows us to speculate that a lack of national and domestic belonging prompted Jean Rhys to find a textual, rather than geographic, home. Through the act of writing and the textualisation of place an exiled female author can search for a room of her own in writing itself. Though Rhys may dwell in her writing, this means she can only really ‘inhabit’ an imagined space. When Rhys leaves her practice, she is again homeless. Rhys did not find belonging in her personal life as she never felt truly accepted in a nationality or geographic place. Her authorial practice, however, functions as a space in which she could search for an alternative belonging. Both the act of writing and the identity of ‘author’ provide Rhys with a site in which she can create a place for herself. In this article, and through the frameworks of A Room of One’s Own and Cixous’ concept of ‘country in language’, I will explore how an exiled female author with a lack of national and domestic belonging may turn towards her writing in search for ‘home’. It is important to note that the term ‘exile’ in this article is used to articulate Rhys’ feelings of rejection from place, rather than in a literal or political sense.

Rhys was born in 1890 in the former English colony of Roseau, Dominica. Her upbringing in Dominica was as a colonial, ensuring that she was unable to convincingly dwell among the majority of the Dominican population. In her unfinished autobiography Smile Please, published after her death with a foreword by her editor Diana Athill, Rhys makes clear her childhood of longing to belong to Dominica. She was enchanted by the Patois songs of her nurse, though her desire, perhaps, is most clearly articulated by her memory of being given two dolls, one of dark skin and one of white. Rhys remembers that; ‘As soon as I saw the dark doll I wanted her as I had never wanted anything in my life before’,⁸ and she smashes the face of the white doll. For Rhys, her ‘White’ Dominican face was the reason for national and cultural exclusion. In wanting a ‘Black’ Dominican face, Rhys wanted to belong.

In her chapter ‘Jean Rhys: West Indian Intellectual’, Carr explains that Rhys existed in a state of constant contrary tension. Though she longed to be Indigenous, she also grew up reading

⁶ Johnson 14.

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English books, and her view of England was therefore ‘glamorous, magnificent’.\(^9\) When she arrived in England at 16 with dreams of becoming an actress, she was rendered ‘other’ by her gender and further rejected for her colonial status.\(^10\) She worked as a chorus girl, and likely a prostitute\(^11\), firstly in England and then throughout Europe. She married the first of her three husbands, and spend some time in rented rooms in Paris. After being dismissed in both Dominica and her ‘motherland’, it is possible that Paris offered Rhys a third, hopeful site where she might find belonging. Rhys was, of course, still ‘other’ in Paris, and she settled in rural England for the rest of her life. She only returned to Dominica once in 1936.\(^12\) Rhys straddled two cultures without finding concrete identity in either. Perhaps illuminated by Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of the borderlands,\(^13\) which Aida Hurtado and Karina Cervantez describe as a third space between ‘two countries, two social systems, two languages,’\(^14\) Rhys resided within the unfixed space between Dominica and England. She felt exiled; as if she belonged to no nation.\(^15\)

She wrote for much of her life, and throughout her career published a collection of short stories (1927), followed by five novels and a further two collections of short stories. Her texts received little critical acclaim until, after a 27-year hiatus, she published Wide Sargasso Sea in 1966. In 1967, she received the W. H. Smith Award,\(^16\) and in 1978, she ‘was awarded the rank of Commander of the Order of the British Empire for her contribution to literature’.\(^17\) Both awards celebrate ‘English’ authors. When asked how she felt of her belated success, Rhys replied that ‘it has come too late’.\(^18\) It is unclear whether it was her ascent to success or England’s ‘claiming’ to which Rhys was referring.

Scholars of Rhys argue that she is often read quasi-autobiographically (see Sue Thomas,\(^19\) Barbara Fister\(^20\)), and her protagonists may be viewed as ‘avatars’ of herself.\(^21\) Her protagonists function as the exiled female West Indian, and their struggle with national identity and the resulting feelings of isolation could be seen as derived from Rhys’ lived experience. The character Anna Morgan in Voyage Though the Dark (1934), for example, feels that ‘England was the real thing and out there [West Indies] was the dream, but I could never fit them

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\(^9\) Carr 105.  
\(^10\) Chalk 122.  
\(^11\) Chalk 121.  
\(^12\) Johnson 22.  
\(^13\) Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (San Fransisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).  
\(^15\) Carr 93; Chalk 119.  
\(^17\) Johnson 268.  
\(^21\) Carr 98.

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together’. Sasha Jensen in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) and Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea* also resonate with feeling a lack of belonging to place, with Sasha unable to permanently inhabit spaces in Europe and Antoinette’s fragmented sense of identity at each location of the text: Coulbri, Granbois, and England. Whether in the Caribbean or in the metropole, Rhys’ protagonists do not inhabit place nor nationality comfortably. For her exiled protagonists, citizenship (or residence) does not equal belonging.

It is difficult to argue that Rhys’ dislocated sense of identity had no impact on how and what she wrote. Exile from place, nationality, and home is seen as a ‘trademark’ of her authorship, with Chalk suggesting that her texts ‘cannot be separated from these questions’. Rather than drawing direct causation, however, I explain the links between Rhys’ search for nationality and her narratives here merely to problematise the concept of Rhys’ authorship. The way Rhys functions as ‘author’ is filled with complexities, though her challenged national identity does seem to have a significant influence on the concept of her authorship.

Madan Sarup suggests that nationality signifies to readers, critics, and authors themselves the language, culture, and ‘norms’ in which their texts operate and are contextualised. This notion is clearly seen operating in the reception of Rhys’ early texts. In the preface to her first published book, the short story collection *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927), Ford Madox Ford articulates Rhys as an exotic identity and despite praising her ‘singular instinct for form’, positions her as an ‘underdog’ with exotic perspective. Ford positions Rhys as ‘other’, which Chalk claims somewhat diminished her potential to gain social and authorial legitimacy in the metropole. Before the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, few of her critics in the West Indies saw her as being truly ‘Caribbean’, which likewise diminished her potential to gain social and authorial legitimacy in her home country. Rhys’ authorship was refused footing and belonging in either nationality, and the notion that identities are not fluid but ‘limited by borders and boundaries’ operates strongly here. The author and text are not judged or identified by the writing but, as Johnson suggests, by ‘pre-existing national or socio-linguistic categories’. The way in which Rhys is positioned and accepted as author is inherently political: her colonial status dictates how she is read and received. When viewed in this way, Oliver Quimby Melton’s insistence that nationality is an ‘unavoidable, requisite donne of modern life’ makes clear the importance of national belonging in forming individual, and in Rhys’ case authorial, identity. How her texts were viewed were of importance to Rhys, as demonstrated by her comment when receiving the rank of Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Wanting to belong to a national literary community and receive acceptance (and celebration) for her work is a

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23 Chalk 122.
26 Chalk 130.
27 Carr 94.
28 Sarup 93.
29 Johnson 269.

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component of Rhys’ authorial practice. It could be seen that a lack of belonging in her personal life translated to a desire to belong in an alternative identity: author.

The result of (a lack of) national belonging on writing practice and authorship is a concept deepened when the issue of gender is considered. Writer and philosopher Hélène Cixous illuminates these concepts in her essay ‘Coming to Writing’. With ‘no grounds from which to write. No legitimate place, no land, no fatherland, no history of my own’31, Cixous questioned ‘in whose name would I write?’ 32 Cixous felt that her incoherent national identity had an impact on her writing and the way she viewed herself as an author. She felt uneasiness about writing in her adopted tongue, French, though it was the language where she believed she could ‘thrive’.33 She explains ‘Write French? With what right? Show us your credentials! What’s the password?’ 34 This anxiety, different for female exile writers, is understood when considering issues of authority. Issues of finding voice and feeling a right to write is problematic for females in ways that for males, who have long occupied positions of authority, it is not. For Cixous, ‘No permanent residence’35 dictated borders in which she as the exiled female author struggled to find identity on either side of the line. This tension is clearly seen in Rhys’ authorship. Like Cixous, who straddled Algerian and French nationalities, the ways in which Rhys wrote are fermenting in the link between nationality and the female sex.

Another concept pertinent for the exiled female author is, naturally, the idea of ‘home’. National belonging indicates inhabiting a ‘home’. Rhys’ lack of nationality, therefore, renders her occupation of a home space difficult if not (geopolitically) impossible. This is an important concept for a writer of the female gender: without being able to occupy a ‘home’ it is possible she does not fulfil the function of her traditional gender role to be the ‘keeper of home’ and becomes a ‘stranger to her own language, sex and identity’.36 In this way, Rhys is alienated from her sex by being unable to inhabit a ‘home’. Her exiled position is furthered.

‘Home’ space is crucial to Rhys’ authorship when viewed under Virginia Woolf’s concept of *A Room of One’s Own*. In her essays, Woolf focuses on the private space and financial income that a woman needs in order to write. For Woolf, stability in a private space is crucial for a female author’s practice. The female author needs a room, a place to be grounded, where she can write without the traditional constraints of her gender, as well as an income that facilitates this. Woolf easily belonged within England. Her clear sense of national identity and her financial security arguably allowed her the option of private space. Woolf’s claims are complicated, however, when turning to Rhys: what happens when national identity (an external marker of authorship) is indecipherable for the author? It is possible that for Rhys, her inability to inhabit place in a national context and her lack of financial security prohibited her ability to find a room of her own. Her writing practice, if viewed in the light of Woolf’s concepts, is not grounded. Rhys’ personal displacement and reliance on various men for her income37 is consistently

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32 Cixous, Coming to Writing 16.
33 Cixous, Coming to Writing 15.
34 Cixous, Coming to Writing 13.
35 Cixous, Coming to Writing 36
37 McDowell 1.

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echoed in her narratives. Her exile protagonists are nomads, stopping temporarily in hotel rooms and cafés, ‘places that sell the trappings of security and domesticity’, without being able to permanently inhabit the spaces. Tone Selboe notes that her protagonists ‘do not have money, home or any sort of security except the temporary protection provided by various men’. These notions are especially evident in Sasha Jensen’s wanderings in Good Morning, Midnight and Anna Morgan’s movement through England in Voyage in the Dark. Sasha moves between rooms in London and Paris, where she is either disliked or disregarded by those she meets. Anna, similarly, inhabits rented rooms for only short periods of time – ‘Anywhere will do, so long as it’s somewhere that nobody knows’ – and depends on Walter, a man with whom she once shared a relationship, for her limited income. The metropole proves to be harsh and difficult to navigate. Like Rhys, Sasha and Anna are unable to completely belong in either domestic space or country, and resonates with Chalk’s suggestion that Rhys’ text depicts a Europe ‘marked by the logic of the passport’. As suggested, it is not only their national identity but the financial situation of Rhys’ protagonists that limit their belonging to place. Carr explains that ‘just as in the West Indies, Rhys suggests, it was hard to be truly “white” without money, in England it is difficult to remain a “lady” without an income.’ Income evidently has influence on perceptions of social belonging and nationality. Furthermore, income influences the simple practicalities of inhabiting space: money determines how long one can pay to stay in a room. Financial status clearly impacts upon the practical and social aspects of dwelling, and belonging, to place. Rhys’ resulting lack of national identity impacts upon external markers of her authorship, while the resulting lack of ‘home’ and private space impacts upon her internal authorship and how and what she writes. If Rhys has neither national nor private space, she writes from a lack of physical place. When viewed under Woolf’s claims, how can Rhys write without place?

Pavlina Radia suggests that critics and scholars of migrant and immigrant writing often emphasise the female author’s need to find stability in their dwelling. This certainly resonates with Woolf’s insistence for a room of one’s own. These critics and scholars (see Caren Kaplan; Rosi Braidotti) argue that the female author can defy patriarchy by defining herself as belonging in a borderless and fluid site. Mobility and in-betweenness themselves become spaces in which the female author finds location, and as Iain Chambers suggests in Migrancy, Culture, Identity, a way of being ‘rooted in the unrooted’. This concept is obviously problematic when considering Rhys’ authorship. This scholarship focuses on migrant and immigrant authors, rather than on ‘exile’ authors. Terms such as migrant and immigrant suggest, at some point, a sense of belonging to national and physical place. For Rhys, clearly an exile without even initial acceptance, belonging in the space between countries is not a desire nor a choice.

38 Chalk 132.
40 Rhys, Voyage in the Dark 86.
41 Chalk 120.
42 Carr 103.
44 Radia 14.

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For writers of exiled nationality, Trihn H. Minh-ha suggests that ‘the true home is to be found, not in houses, but in writing’.

A concept of ‘home’ in writing and textualisation is not exclusive to Minh-ha. In her essay ‘From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History’, Cixous explains that for the author with incoherent belonging, ‘country in language’ might be discovered. Both Mihn-ha and Cixous articulate that for the exile, writing becomes a place to construct ‘home’ and a place from which to ground their practice. These frameworks resonate with Johnson’s claims of Rhys’ ‘life-long artistic struggle to claim a place from which to write’ and how ‘she works to create just such a place in her writing’. Like Minh-ha and Cixous, Rhys might search for a place to dwell in language and writing itself. Not belonging geographically, she textualises the places from which she writes. Through writing, as Johnson suggests, Rhys conceptualises places from which she writes and finds a linguistic ‘home’ from her experience of displacement.

Often, the author’s textual places are the places where Rhys is exiled from; a notion that Rhys has made explicit. In a second 1959 letter to Francis Wyndham, Rhys wrote ‘[w]hen I say I write for love I mean that there are two places for me. Paris (or what is was to me) and Dominica … Both these places or the thought of them make me want to write.’

Rhys’ textual places coincide with her melancholy connection to both Paris, where she wandered nomadically, and her birth country of Dominica. For Rhys, after leaving Dominica and being exiled in England, Paris became a third place where she thought she might find belonging. The stories in The Left Bank and Other Stories are set in Paris. Similarly, the narratives of Quartet (1928), After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (1931) and Good Morning, Midnight take place in Paris. When considering Rhys’ textual Paris, and the way her protagonists are unable to inhabit the spaces, the ‘real’ Paris is understood as just another place of exile for Rhys. The promise of Paris was lost, and Rhys returned to her lifetime struggle to belong in both her birth country and her ‘motherland’.

In contrast to these texts, Rhys’ protagonists remember Dominica from afar; from inside the English metropole. While England is always cold, distant, and filled with towns that ‘always looked so exactly alike’, Dominica functions as an almost-feverish dream which the displaced protagonists remember as the place of an intense connection though a lack of belonging. In her letter to Wyndham, Rhys continued that ‘the West Indies started knocking at [her] heart. So – “Voyage in the Dark”. That (the knocking) has never stopped.’ It is true that until Wide Sargasso Sea, Voyage in the Dark contains the most references to the Caribbean. The protagonist, Anna Morgan, is a West Indian exile and the narrative is haunted by memories of her birth country. The novel opens with Anna’s memories of the island, where she thinks of ‘the smell of the streets and the smells of frangipani and lime juice and cinnamon and cloves, and sweets made of ginger and syrup’. Anna thinks ‘it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream’. It is perhaps the ‘constant knocking’ of the West Indies beyond the completion

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47 Hélène Cixous, ‘From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History’ 5.
48 Johnson 24.
49 Johnson 14.
50 Rhys, Letters 171.
51 Rhys, Voyage in the Dark 8.
52 Rhys, Letters 171.
53 Rhys, Voyage in the Dark 7.
54 Rhys, Voyage in the Dark 7-8.

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of *Voyage in the Dark* that prompted Rhys to write *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The novel is Rhys’ only text that takes place (mostly) in the Caribbean. The novel is derived from a very ‘English’ text: Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). By rewriting and giving voice to Bertha Mason, the ‘White’ Creole ‘madwoman in the attic’, Rhys creates place through the textualisation of the meeting place between an ‘English’ text and a ‘White’ Creole voice. Even the title constructs an idea of the space between the two nations, as the Sargasso Sea refers to the body of water between the Caribbean and England. Rhys also combines French, Patois, and English to create the language of her text. Using untranslated words and phrases – ‘glacis’
55 ‘sans culottes’
56 – exposes and transcends linguistic borders. Writing in the languages of her birth country and ‘motherland’ is a way that Rhys combines nationality in order to create a place where she is able to exist without friction.

Considering the background provided in *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*, the way Rhys turned to *Jane Eyre* in which to find a place to write and search for ‘home’ is not surprising. She describes how her older siblings left her and how she felt a lack of interest in making friends with those around her. Rhys felt that ‘[she] was alone except for books’.

Language, it seems, is the place where Rhys has always been able find some sense of belonging. From between two nations Rhys creates textual homes, whether it be in the rented rooms of England or the garden of Coulibri. For the exiled female author, the act of writing and the textualisation of place creates a site where she can search for a space to dwell.

In this article I have explored how an incoherent national identity influences a female’s authorial practice. For Jean Rhys, a lack of national identity and belonging certainly has an impact on both public (critical reception; how she is viewed and written about by others) and private aspects of how she functions as author. Finding no ‘home’ space in her personal life, Rhys instead turns to writing to search for Cixous’ insistence of ‘country in language’. Rhys seeks ‘a room of one’s own’ in the actual practice of writing, and through the textualisation of place she allows herself to search for ‘home’. I use the verb ‘search’ rather than ‘find’ as although Rhys creates a dwelling space in her writing, her personal life was still plagued by a lifelong sadness. Even at the end of her life, when she had received acclaim and recognition for her texts, Rhys was discontented. In an interview, she claimed that if she could choose between happiness and writing, she would choose to be happy.

It seems that Rhys never found personal happiness. She did, however, find a place and another identity in which to search for such belonging. Though Rhys’ search for a stable national identity is, and will always be, unresolved, it could be said that she found some comfort in writing and in her authorial practice as a place that she could call her own. For the exiled female author, her writing is her *terre*.

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**Alexandra Philp** has recently completed her Honours in Creative Writing at the Queensland University of Technology. *Her project examined adolescent sister relationships in rural*

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56 Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* 45.
57 Rhys, *Smile Please* 19.


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Australian Gothic fiction. Her other research interests include female authorship, rural landscape, and female response to place.

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