

TESIS DE LA UNIVERSIDAD
DE ZARAGOZA

2024 247

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Trauma and Limit-Case Testimony in Jean Rhys's Modernist Novels

Director/es

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<http://zaguan.unizar.es/collection/Tesis>

ISSN 2254-7606



Premsas de la Universidad
Universidad Zaragoza



Universidad de Zaragoza
Servicio de Publicaciones

ISSN 2254-7606



Universidad
Zaragoza

Tesis Doctoral

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UNIVERSIDAD DE ZARAGOZA
Escuela de Doctorado

Programa de Doctorado en Estudios Ingleses

2024



Universidad
Zaragoza

Tesis Doctoral/PhD Dissertation

Trauma and Limit-Case Testimony in Jean Rhys's Modernist Novels

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UNIVERSIDAD DE ZARAGOZA

2023

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the representation of trauma in Jean Rhys's four modernist novels. The self-representational quality of these works triggers debate on whether the hard-and-fast conventions of autobiography, which has traditionally advocated a strong adherence to truthfulness, may hinder a successful articulation of trauma. Therefore, the main goal of this study is to examine how Rhys navigates and challenges some key limits of the genre to give voice to traumatic experiences via testimony. For this enterprise, her interwar novels are analysed as early examples of a hybrid genre which Leigh Gilmore (2001) has termed 'limit-case autobiography'. Following Gilmore's model, Rhys's modernist novels are read as trauma narratives that test two key limits in autobiography, namely the boundary between factual accuracy and invention, and, more interestingly, that of representativeness. It is revealed that Rhys manages to articulate trauma—both event-based and insidious—by eluding the restrictive demand for factual accuracy, and she does so by intermingling her personal circumstances with those of her heroines. This gives way to a compelling testimony that is by nature dialogic, and such a connective interplay is key to making these narratives representative of certain destitute social groups, namely UK-based immigrants coming from the colonies of the British Empire, debased women who depended on men both economically and emotionally, and, on a larger scale, helpless people that fall into the category of the 'underdog'.

RESUMEN

La presente tesis explora la representación del trauma en las cuatro novelas modernistas de Jean Rhys. La dimensión autobiográfica de estas obras suscita el debate de si las convenciones del género autobiográfico, que tradicionalmente ha abogado por una fuerte adhesión a la verosimilitud, pueden ser un impedimento a la hora de narrar una experiencia traumática. Por lo tanto, el principal objetivo de este estudio es examinar el cuestionamiento por parte de Rhys de algunos límites clave del género para articular sus experiencias traumáticas a través del testimonio. Para ello, se analizan sus novelas de entreguerras como ejemplos tempranos de un género híbrido que Leigh Gilmore (2001) denomina «casos límite». Tomando como punto de partida la teoría de Gilmore, esta tesis analiza las cuatro novelas modernistas de Rhys como historias de trauma que ponen en duda dos límites clave de la autobiografía, a saber, la frontera entre ficción y verdad factual y, sobre todo, el llamado límite de la representatividad. Se evidencia que Rhys narra dos tipos principales de experiencias traumáticas—puntual e insidiosa—eludiendo las exigencias de la verosimilitud autobiográfica, y esto lo consigue entretejiendo sus circunstancias personales con las de sus heroínas. Se ha observado que dicha empresa da paso a un testimonio de trauma convincente que es fundamentalmente dialógico, lo que resulta clave para desenmarañar el carácter representativo de estas narraciones en tanto en cuanto abordan el pesar de ciertos grupos sociales desvalidos, a saber: los inmigrantes establecidos en el Reino Unido procedentes de las colonias del Imperio Británico, las mujeres desprovistas que dependían de los hombres económica y emocionalmente y, a mayor escala, el grupo denominado *underdog*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If I could go back in time and write these statements during the interwar years, modernist compression would seem my best ally on this struggle to express in just two pages how much I am indebted to all those who have helped me during this journey. First of all, I am deeply grateful to the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities for its financial aid, without which it would have been difficult to immerse myself into a research group and devote my entire time to my thesis. Amid this stimulating environment, from the outset my guardian spirit has been my supervisor, Dr Bárbara Arizti. Her expertise, her wholehearted support and her zen mindset are a godsend to me, and all these traits have helped me become a more efficient scholar and, most of all, a better person.

I am also appreciative of the trust I have built with my teammates, both in Teruel and in Zaragoza. By working hand in hand with them, I have realised that, whenever one of us falters, the whole group will be there to keep one another afloat. As Professor Susana Onega told me one day, we are all on the same boat and every effort counts. This is a lesson I have learnt from critical moments such as going through the writer's block or falling in the trap of procrastination, but also from the many coffee breaks at Café Buñuel, El Olivo, Hogar Extremeño or the canteen at the Pablo Serrano hall of residence. I cannot help getting goose bumps when thinking of all the colleagues who have always believed in me and encouraged me to try my luck applying for the job position at Teruel. To all of them, thank you. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Dr Laura Stevens (University of Tulsa) and Prof. Christine Reynier (University of Montpellier) for making me feel like home during my respective research stays. The experience in the US, though online, was a great landmark in my longing to draw academic attention to lesser well-known texts by Rhys. Regarding the month I spent in France, it gave me the peace and quiet I needed to finish writing my dissertation, and the

best thing about it was the wealth of bonds I forged with wonderful people, some of whom have contributed to the assessment of this thesis.

Words cannot express my gratitude to my family and friends. They have stuck with me through thick and thin, and have instilled in me that it is indeed possible to strike the right balance between work and leisure. This five-year journey would have been bumpier without their generosity, their humour and their penchant for hitting the town. My special thanks go to my parents, who have understood more than anybody else my need to engage in small talk and my night-owl routines. Even more special is the gratitude I feel for my maternal grandparents being alive and that I am lucky enough to celebrate this milestone with them. Finally, I would like to thank all the students I have met during my experience as a postgraduate research fellow. Every time that I look back on their passion for English literature and their feedback, I am sure that my job is a blessing.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Anglo-Dominican writer Jean Rhys (1890-1979) is a widely acclaimed literary figure that has become a central part of twentieth-century British literature syllabi and that still captures considerable attention in present-day research. As evinced by the titles of some recent volumes on Rhys, such as Mary Wilson and Kerry Johnson's *Rhys Matters* (2013) or Erica Johnson and Patricia Moran's *Jean Rhys: Twenty-First Century Approaches* (2015), both the form and the content of her works are congruent with current issues, debates and approaches. Many Rhysian critics, as well as her close acquaintances, have long agreed that she was ahead of her time. In his introduction to Rhys's first short story collection, *The Left Bank and Other Stories* (1927), the British writer and Rhys's mentor Ford Madox Ford made two remarks that enhance the need to revisit her work today. Concerning her style, Ford affirmed that Rhys displayed "an instinct for form being possessed by singularly few writers of English and by almost no women writers" (24–25). Besides her distinctive formal innovations, Ford singled out a thematic aspect that lays bare the psychological depth of her work as well as its relatability: "a terrific—and almost lurid—passion for stating the case of the underdog" (24). In addition to these features, Rhys's liminality in terms of both cultural identity and literary tradition buttresses her status as a writer that defies any hard-and-fast labels to do with space or time. Her multifariousness is enhanced by the intricacy of her identity, as a white Caribbean-born Creole of Scottish and Welsh ancestry.

It is also challenging to determine to what literary tradition Rhys belongs, as she wrote both modernist and early postmodernist fiction. She reached worldwide fame for her 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a neo-Victorian rewriting of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Still, she also wrote an array of short stories and, remarkably, four modernist novels, which are the focus of this dissertation. In compliance with the specificities of modernist literature, Rhys's interwar texts bring to centre stage the emotional paralysis and social disengagement of the self in the

wake of historical, political or cultural circumstances her heroines are unable to control or even fathom. An inability to adapt to this situation leads characters like Rhys's women to negative inertia, hesitancy and, ultimately, self-defeat. The effect of this changing reality on the human mind is one of the main concerns of modernist writers like Rhys, whose plunge into the psyche of her characters allowed her to deftly represent a key issue in the art of the period: the shattering of the human mind. In this case, as highlighted by Ford in the quotations above, she depicts the fractured psyche of the underdog and, in line with such brokenness, she does so through a style marked by vagueness and fragmentation.

Rhys's mastery of literary form and the centrality of underdog experience are clearly seen in her modernist novels. These texts have been outshined by *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in terms of both literary consumption and criticism. In the case of *Quartet* (1928) and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), they were equally praised for its aesthetic quality and admonished because of their bleakness. However, in Rhysian criticism, they have been paid less attention than *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and, most notably, *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939). This dissertation sets out to revisit Rhys's four modernist novels and bring them in line with present-day debates in literary and cultural studies, from the fluidity of cultural identity to the healing power of storytelling and its role as catalyst for strengthening empathy and solidarity between human beings. Furthermore, the exploration of these works by Rhys seeks to move beyond the traditional evaluation of modernism as a Eurocentric movement. In this sense, features such as the allusion to the West Indies in some of these novels and Rhys's interest in cosmopolitanism, probably influenced by her many-sided cultural identity, evince that these texts capture the variegated alternative discourses of modernism that coexisted alongside the well-trodden European ones. In this respect, recent volumes like Julia Lopoukhine et al.'s *Transnational Jean Rhys* (2020) explore the transnational dimension of her works in line with contemporary phenomena such as globalisation and the hyperconnectivity of society. In keeping with recent

volumes on Rhys like the ones mentioned above, this analysis of her longer interwar texts aims to highlight that this timeless writer still matters, all the more so as her introspective look on the mind unveils common human preoccupations that, as such, bring closer the modernist and the contemporary selves. In keeping with Rhys's emphasis on the human condition, this dissertation expands on the body of literature on Rhys and trauma. What it adds to previous studies on this topic is a view of her modernist novels as network-like testimonies of trauma where the border between self-representation and the experience of other individuals and groups is necessarily blurred. To put it differently, it relies on the commonality of the experiences depicted in her interwar novels to assess both the representation of trauma in these literary testimonies and their representativeness. To this end, my analysis of Rhys's modernist novels draws on two pillars—namely autobiographical studies and trauma theory—to delve into the interlink of the author's life story, the narratives of her female protagonists and the tribulations of larger groups.

In much of her literary production, and distinctly in her modernist novels, Rhys drew on her life story to flesh out the testimony of her heroines and give salience to the most pervasive of her experiences, namely the pain of alienation. As a consequence of a set of identity-related circumstances and event-based situations, Rhys was affected by an anxiety that she belonged nowhere. To mention some of these stressors, in Dominica she faced the grudge of Caribbean blacks against the offspring of former planters, while in England her Caribbean Creole origins entailed a sense of impotence at finding no glimpse of a welcoming atmosphere and failing to successfully meet standards related to class, accent, or respectability. Concomitantly, during her first years in Europe she went through the vicissitudes of underdog life: not only was she invisible to the metropolis' mainstream society, but she was economically vulnerable. It is her destituteness that led her to find alternative means of subsistence, among them the recourse to male acquaintances who were older and more economically powerful than she was. During this

stage of maturation, like many middle-class—or lower-middle class—women in the same situation, she exposed herself to the seduction of men that could at last provide her with funds and, at the same time, with a delusory sense of emotional shelter. This emotional and economic dependency complicated her pain of alienation and even contributed to the development of other subsidiary traumas. These traumas, most of which are of an insidious nature, haunt the totality of the novels addressed in this dissertation. Likewise, they feature prominently in her unfinished autobiography *Smile Please* (1979), where she recollects her life in Dominica and her first fifteen years in Europe. This autobiographical work sketches several key events in her life that can be read against the apparently fictional events depicted in her novels. The multiple similarities between the vignettes in *Smile Please* and her fiction contributed to an increase in both the scholarly and general attention to Rhys's works as autobiographical. It is generally assumed, then, that Rhys took her life as raw material for composing her fictional works. Indeed, by far one of the most frequent approaches to her work is the (auto)biographical one (e.g., Angier, Carr, Pizzichini, Seymour, Staley), whereby a number of meaningful parallels are drawn between the Dominican writer's fiction and her life. In the foreword to *Smile Please*, Diane Athill maintains that Rhys's works "were not autobiographical in every detail . . . , but autobiographical they were" (6). At the same time, it should not be overlooked that Athill's contention implies that, though Rhys's work could be classified as 'autobiographical', some of its elements might pose a threat to some key limits in this life-writing genre. Indeed, most of Rhys's work is fictional so it could be hazardous to firmly categorise it as 'autobiographical' without discussing to what extent it complies with the fixed requirements of the autobiographical genre in the strict sense of the term.

It seems necessary to gauge whether Rhys's work is an example of a self-representational literature that deviates from a traditional view of the genre. In other words, the analysis of her assumedly autobiographical works leads to the following question: should the testimony of the

(auto)biographical subject evince authenticity? The compliance with factual accuracy required of conventional narratives of the genre seems to be at stake in Rhys's work as it foregrounds an experience of trauma that appears to threaten coherence and authority. If trauma is at the core of Rhys's autobiographical work, it should be hypothesised whether ordinary conventions of the genre may serve the purpose of representing trauma. Otherwise, the potential incapacity of traditional autobiography might raise the following question: could trauma be more suitably expressed through self-representational narratives that contravene the strict demand for utter accuracy? In that case, is the blending of truth and fiction an inevitable—and perhaps fitting—response to the challenge of representing trauma?

This dissertation aims to contribute to the discussion on the autobiographical quality of Rhys's work with a new insight that addresses its ability to represent trauma. Accordingly, this study necessarily goes beyond an analysis of the degree of factual accuracy in Rhys's writings. What is sought instead is to explore whether the convergence of fictional elements and life-writing might enable her to outstrip the constraints of autobiography and, eventually, rightfully represent the traumatic experience. For this purpose, this dissertation draws on Leigh Gilmore's concept of the "limit-case," which designates a hybrid genre concerned with trauma narratives whose purpose is to test two key limits in classical autobiography: the first one is precisely the boundary between *truth and lies*; the second one is denominated the limit of *representativeness*, and enables to elucidate to what extent these testimonial narratives of an individual suffering from trauma may ultimately stand as representative of a collective experience. This study, then, aims to contribute to the body of biographical interpretations of Rhys's work by analysing her four modernist novels, a lesser trodden ground than *Wide Sargasso Sea*, as early examples of limit-case autobiographies.

The critical reading of these narratives from the perspective of the limit-case might raise debate on two fundamental questions, in line with the two limits this life-writing genre attempts

to challenge: do Rhys's interwar novels offer a dialogue between Rhys's verifiable life experiences and the artistic construction of female characters that enables an effective representation of trauma? Do these dialogic narratives of trauma allow for the emergence of a network that connects the (auto)biographical subject with others through the act of sharing her trauma testimonies via writing? In other words, the approach taken in this study seeks to smooth the path for a reconsideration of the self-reflective dimension of Rhys's work. While many of the previous studies on this question have hinted at some key parallels between the author's biography and the events depicted in the fictional works, it remains to be inquired whether Rhys, an estranged but profoundly socially conscious writer, may have resorted to self-representational writing as a harbinger of social reconnection. In accordance, this dissertation casts light on how her work, and more concretely her modernist novels, tackles traumas that are interwoven in the author's complex personality and that fundamentally stem from historical and social phenomena such as imperialism, migration, and gender inequality. Hence, one of the key questions triggered by the 'limit-case' approach taken in this study is whether the trauma testimonies may position the autobiographical subject as representative of wider communities, ultimately rendering collective trauma more visible and generating a web of identification and empathy.

In this way, this dissertation aims to demonstrate that the testimonies of the four heroines in Rhys's modernist novels—which closely follow particular events in the author's life—represent not only the ordeal of Rhys herself, but also that of communities affected by similar traumas. The analysis of these interwar texts through the limit-case focus casts light on these narratives' relational dimension, understood as the intersection of the particular experiences of the autobiographical subject and those of certain identifiable social groups. The connections to be drawn between individual testimonies and the stories of larger social groups make the limit-case, a hybrid genre that flourished in the late years of postmodernism, an innovative approach

to Rhys's work. Indeed, it is a framework that harmonises with present-day interaction models, as its organising principle is a network-like, horizontal model of relationships that echoes our era's fluidity and interconnectedness.

This introductory chapter firstly aims to provide the theoretical framework on which the analysis of the selected corpus of fiction is based. As the limit-case model is concerned with the intersection between trauma and self-representation, there is a review of some important literature on trauma studies (section 1.1) and autobiography (section 1.2). I first start with a general introduction to the concept of trauma and its most significant symptoms, presenting the main ideas in the first seminal works in this field. I then move on to examine in depth the extent to which research has brought attention to the representation of trauma in fiction, highlighting the main narrative techniques used for this purpose. More interestingly, I finally headline the crossroads between individual and collective traumas and discuss the key concept of 'insidious trauma', which is of high relevance for understanding the sources of trauma in Rhys's selected novels. The review of self-representation runs over the evolution of autobiography from being a Western and eminently male-centred genre with hard-and-fast principles as to truthfulness to becoming a more inclusive practice that has been shaped by other life-writing genres such as autofiction. Lastly, the theoretical underpinnings of the 'limit-case' are thoroughly explained, following Gilmore's influential work *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001), with a focus on how this hybrid genre puts to test two chief limits in traditional autobiography (truth vs. fiction, and representativeness) and enables authors to find a suitable way of expressing the experience of trauma. The presentation of Gilmore's theses is complemented by some ideas from her article "'What Was I?': Literary Witness and the Testimonial Archive" (2011), which addresses how the interpenetration of the literary testimony and the non-fictional witness narrative in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* enhances its status as a form of "public mourning" (Gilmore, "Literary Witness" 83), thus corroborating its relatable dimension.

Section 1.3 discusses the two pillars of this dissertation, namely autobiography and trauma, in relation to Rhys's life and work. Firstly, there is a survey of the extensive literature on Rhys and autobiography and of Rhys's own attitude to life writing, both discussions hinting that considering her work autobiographical is open to controversy. Then, some events of her life are summarised, putting emphasis on those contributing to her traumatic anxiety. Following the allusion to some relevant studies on Rhys and trauma, the section is closed by a call for an exploration of the representative dimension of Rhys's testimony of trauma. It is posited that, the enormous body of critical literature on Rhys notwithstanding, there is a need to determine to what extent her modernist novels offer a mode of self-representation that enables a dialogue between individual experiences of trauma and the plight of certain social groups. In response to this knowledge gap, Section 1.4, which describes the methodology to be followed, seeks to highlight that the need for this dialogic, multidirectional reconsideration of Rhys's trauma testimonies intends to be satisfied by their perusal through the lens of Gilmore's theory. Finally, section 1.5 provides a succinct summary of Rhys's four modernist novels.

Before presenting this dissertation's theoretical framework, an outline should be given of the three chapters on the analysis of Rhys's modernist novels (Chapters 2, 3 and 4). All three chapters bring to centre stage Rhys's integration and ensuing depiction of her traumas through her novels and how the unfathomability of the traumatic experience as she revisits it constraints its representation. Simultaneously, the testimonial quality of her narratives is underscored via an insight into Gilmore's limit of representativeness. This question, which is explored in more detail in the last chapter, structures the three chapters devoted to the close reading of the novels. Each of them addresses one social group these narratives may be deemed representative of. Chapter 2 revolves around the displacement undergone by immigrants coming from British colonies, especially Caribbean white Creoles. Chapter 3 tackles the destituteness and emotional helplessness of women remaining at the margins of bohemian life in interwar metropolitan

centres. Finally, Chapter 4 deals extensively with the misery of the loosely associated social group Ford alluded to in his introduction to *The Left Bank*, namely the ‘underdog’.

1.1. Understanding Trauma and Its Representation in Fiction

Trauma is a complex phenomenon that resists comprehensive understanding and whose meanings and implications have been widely explored and contested among scholars. As Vincenzo di Nicola argues, “it is difficult to characterize trauma as a unified discourse or as a spectrum, even within a given discursive formation such as psychoanalysis or psychiatry” (18). Such intricacy is already evident in the etymology of the term, which is said to present a dual genealogy. ‘Trauma’ comes from Ancient Greek *τραῦμα* (traûma), meaning ‘wound’ or ‘rupture’. Originally, this term denoted a wound inflicted upon the body, but from the mid-nineteenth century onwards it has been used more extensively to refer to an emotional wound, usually originated by a distressing event to which the subject is exposed.¹

The first medical analyses of the psychological dimension of trauma were conducted in the 1860s. Such examinations were made in relation to a syndrome known as ‘railway spine’, in which victims of railroad accidents claimed that they had been physically injured when nevertheless there was no evidence of it (Sütterlin 12). In the late 1880s, the psychiatrist Jean-Martin Charcot labelled those symptoms under the term ‘hysteria’, a psychological disorder that was later explored to the full by Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer in their seminal work *Studies in Hysteria* (1895). A limitation of an approach to these traumatic condition as ‘hysteria’ was that this term had been historically applied to female patients in psychoanalytic theory (Wald 2). Therefore, when similar symptoms were observed in male soldiers, the

¹ According to Andrew Moskowitz, Markus Heinimaa and Onno van der Hart, the word *trauma* was firstly used in English with a psychological meaning in William James’s 1894 review of Freud’s “Preliminary Communication”, where he speaks of “psychic traumata” (15).

syndrome was labelled 'war neurosis' or 'shell shock'. It was not until the early 1980s that the aetiology of trauma was given the distinct name of 'post-traumatic stress disorder' (PTSD). This diagnosis was established as a medical category by the American Psychiatric Organisation (APA) in 1980. Since then, there has been an avid interest in the phenomenon of trauma and, most importantly, in its relationship to culture, memory, history and literature. Accordingly, in the 1990s there was a proliferation of theoretical works on trauma by acclaimed researchers such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Dominick LaCapra, all of them contributing to the emergence and ultimate establishment of Trauma Studies as a multidisciplinary field of research. These foundational texts will be taken as a point of departure in the discussion of trauma as a phenomenon that could be said to play an important role in the understanding of the human condition.

In the introductory chapter of *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Cathy Caruth underscores the impact that trauma has on human understanding: "The phenomenon of trauma has seemed to become all-inclusive, but it has done so precisely because it brings us to the limits of our understanding" (4). The main reason behind the potential of trauma to destabilise sheer understanding is the impossibility to accurately locate the traumatic event in place or time. Caruth draws on the concept of 'belatedness', a central concern in Freudian theory, and postulates that "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time" ("Introduction" 9). In her later work *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Caruth elaborates on this argument and explains that the traumatic event "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (4). Unable to wholly process such a challenging event as it occurs, victims are only able to grasp it when traumatic memories intrude on their everyday life. In this sense, the traumatic event is compulsively

reexperienced and reenacted, giving rise to a series of pathological symptoms collectively known as PTSD.

In his influential book *The Trauma Question* (2008), Roger Luckhurst starts his discussion of trauma with a brief summary of its main symptoms, which could be classified into three clusters: the first category connects with the compulsive *re-experiencing* of trauma, and Luckhurst mentions the intrusion of flashbacks and the recurrence of dreams and nightmares; the second set comprises stimuli to do with *avoidance*, ranging from eluding a single thought to utter numbness; the third and final category refers to *hyperarousal*, including exaggerated responses, hyper-vigilance, and irritability (1). Though being given less scholarly prominence than psychological manifestations of trauma, there are a list of physical symptoms induced by trauma: these symptoms can be manifest themselves via somatisation² or as palpitations, weight loss, and shortage of breath (McFarlane 165). In addition to these symptoms, a notable by-product of trauma is the splitting phenomenon of *dissociation*. As Suzette Boon et al. explain, dissociation is “a major failure of integration that interferes with and changes our sense of self and personality” (8). As a result of dissociation, the traumatised subject’s personality is split into different parts to such an extent that the victim’s consciousness is altered.³ In the words of Boon et al., people affected by dissociative disorders “feel fragmented because they have memories, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and so forth that they experience as uncharacteristic and foreign, as though these do not belong to themselves” (8).

The splitting of the psyche urges victims to assemble the fragments in an attempt to grasp full knowledge of the traumatic event. As the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton summarises in his

² Karen McClintock provides a concise but explanatory definition of ‘somatisation’ in relation to trauma: “Somatization is simply the idea that our bodies hold trauma within them” (160).

³ Moskowitz et al. relate dissociation with common alterations of consciousness such as absorption and divided attention (21–22).

interview by Cathy Caruth, “being shattered, one struggles to put together the pieces, so to speak, of the psyche, and to balance that need to reconstitute oneself with the capacity to take in the experience” (“An Interview” 137). However, any attempt on the part of the victim to assemble the fragmented memories in order to reconfigure the traumatic event is likely to prove unsuccessful: as Dori Laub asserts in relation to the Holocaust experience, trauma induces a distortion of the events that ultimately produces a “collapse of witnessing”, that is, the impossibility of entirely knowing the traumatic event (“Event” 80). In sharp opposition to this idea of the inaccessibility or unspeakability of trauma, Judith Herman asserts that trauma can indeed be firstly accessed and then put into words (2). The tenet of Herman’s model is that trauma can be healed via storytelling, which ultimately allows for restoring “a sense of efficacy and power” (41). Accordingly, she proposes three steps leading to the recovery from trauma, namely establishing safety, “remembering and mourning”, and “reconnection with ordinary life” (Herman 155). This clash between conflicting views on the (un)speakability of trauma has led to what Luckhurst denominates a “flat contradiction in cultural theory” (82): whether the re-experiencing of trauma brings about aporia or melancholia, or whether it can be transformed into a productive, therapeutic narrative aimed at the resolution of trauma.

Having underscored such a pivotal contradiction in trauma theory, it seems necessary to allude to and briefly discuss three important concepts from Freudian psychoanalysis that enable a better understanding of the experience of trauma: *denial*, *acting out*, and *working through*. The first two refer to defence mechanisms against anxiety-producing stimuli, while the latter stands for a phase where patients laboriously and painfully struggle to recover and integrate their memories. The preliminary stage of denial, also known as ‘disavowal’—from German *Verleugnung*—, has been conveniently summarised by Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis as “a specific mode of defence which consists in the subject’s refusing to recognise the reality of a traumatic perception” (118). The following phases to be tackled, namely acting

out and working through, are closely related to trauma and performance. These notions, which are defined in relation to one another, were originally introduced by Sigmund Freud in his 1914 essay “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” and later expanded on by the trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra. Freud’s piece of research explores the different processes involved in both the recollection of memories through psychoanalysis and in their narrativization. One of these processes by which the individual deals with trauma is labelled “acting out”, and it occurs when patients access repressed memories and react physically by impulsively repeating the experience (Freud 151). The diametrically opposed process is “working through”, an articulatory practice by which the victims firstly manage to recognise the repressed experience and ultimately overcome their resistance by transforming the compulsive repetition into a “motive for remembering” (Freud 154). In other words, working through means that patients can eventually overcome their trauma by providing a verbalised account of it. In a way, acting out is closely related to the idea of trauma as inducing aporia or indeterminacy, while working through trauma implies engaging with Judith Herman’s scheme of healing through storytelling. Likewise, acting out could be said to enhance the fragmentation of the dissociated self, whereas working through points to the assortment of the hitherto disconnected subject.⁴

The historian Dominick LaCapra expands Freud’s psychoanalytic notions of ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’ beyond the clinical setting by placing them in the context of historical, social and political change. LaCapra relates these two concepts to the Freudian notions of ‘melancholia’ and ‘mourning’⁵ and suggests a reassessment of the category of victim as not merely psychological but also social, political, and ethical (*Writing History* 79). With this aim

⁴ This view is supported by Kaplan and Wang, who argue: “Acting out is a melancholy possession of the subject by the repressed past, on the model of the dissociated self. Dialectically, working through is an attempt of breakout” (5–6).

⁵ These notions are discussed in Freud’s Essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917). According to LaCapra, “mourning might be seen as a form of working through, and melancholia as a form of acting out” (*Writing History* 65).

in mind, he sees in the working-through endeavour a useful tool for “critical judgement and a reinvestment in life, notably social life with its demands, responsibilities, and norms requiring respectful recognition and consideration for others” (*History and Memory* 45). This idea contributes to reassessing the early contention in trauma studies that trauma is unspeakable. By relocating and reimagining the traumatic experience, the narrating subjects create a bond that links their individual story to that of others, one of the implications of this association being that the traumatised self can indeed be representative of larger social groups. In words of Elspeth McInnes and Danielle Schaub, “how each survivor knows ‘what happened’ begins with their sensate world but expands into other understandings with trauma re-presented and shared with others” (xi). Therefore, the traumatic experience could be said to allow for a dialogue between individual and collective stories that provides information about how individuals relate to the world.

As trauma goes beyond individual experience, it seems vital to make visible and prominent the suffering of those who have been pushed into the background by mainstream society. In *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bonds* (2013), Stef Craps heartily requests that trauma studies “acknowledge the traumas of non-Western or minority populations for their own sake” (19). The questioning of what Craps calls trauma’s “one-sided focus” (“Grief” 53) resulted in a key project in postcolonial criticism that Michael Rothberg termed “decolonizing trauma studies” (“Decolonizing” 226). To this end, Rothberg suggests creating “an alternative canon of trauma novels” (“Decolonizing” 226), and this constitutes another driving force for a re-evaluation of Rhys’s interwar novels. As argued in Chapter 2, her targeted fiction can be said to dovetail with the experience of white Creoles coming from the British West Indies, like Rhys herself. In this sense, they tackle the alienation of individuals and communities that were invisible to a biased society. This dissertation’s call for an openness to embrace and relate to previously unattended individual and collective pains is geared towards a remodelling of not

merely trauma studies, but chiefly of how people understand and respond to the circumstances of subjects relegated to subordination on the basis of their ethnicity, class or gender. What lies at the core of this demand for inclusiveness is that trauma is, in the words of Laurie Vickroy, “a multicontextual social issue” (2). The social dimension of trauma entails that, just as trauma is an experience affecting different individuals and groups worldwide, it may trigger a reaction based on identification and empathy. In this way, the dialogue between traumatic experiences from different social environments or historical periods can bring about the recognition of common pains that are shared by different communities across the globe and that may bind them together.

The multiplicity of contexts where trauma occurs and the communality of this experience make it necessary to underscore the close and necessary relationship between individual and collective traumas. In this context, Kai Erikson’s preliminary but still influential definition of *collective trauma* satisfies the needs of this discussion: “A blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (153). When the foundations of social groups are shattered accordingly, the production and reception of traumatic testimonies can make allowance for the recognition of trauma-induced wounds, and such an awareness may bring about the critical judgment highlighted by LaCapra: the sharing of individual and collective traumatic testimonies may arouse critical thinking—and, as a result, social action—aimed at reassembling the previously disintegrated social bonds.

Given the integral link between individual and collective traumas, it should be remarked that traumatic experiences are not always the outcome of a stand-alone shocking stimulus. As Craps has observed, “it is not just singular and extraordinary events but also ‘normal’, everyday humiliations and abuses that can act as traumatic stressors” (*Postcolonial Witnessing* 45). At this point, it is helpful to succinctly explain LaCapra’s differentiation between historical and

structural trauma (*Writing History* 76–82). In historical trauma, the distressing event is punctual and its specific date can be traced. By contrast, structural trauma does not point to a single event, but is an “anxiety-producing condition” that expresses transhistorical absence (LaCapra, *Writing History* 82). This terminological opposition is perceived by Craps as unbecoming for defining the continuous and deep-rooted subjection to traumatic stimuli to which discriminated individuals or groups are subjected, as with racism (*Postcolonial Witnessing* 4). This situation of long-standing, cumulative stress stemming from such exposure has been conceptualised as ‘insidious trauma’, a model deviating from the event-based framework of trauma.

The notion of ‘insidious trauma’ was introduced in 1992 by Maria Root, who explains: “[T]he individual is often alert to potential threat of destruction or death and accumulates practice in dealing with threat, especially insidious experiences like ageism, homophobia, racism, and sexism” (241). The feminist psychologist Laura Brown has elaborated on Root’s notion of insidious trauma, defining it as “traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (107). It can be inferred from the remarks by Root and Brown that this conglomerate of racial, sexist or ageist microaggressions has a detrimental effect on its victims over time, as it leads to an increasing unease and hypervigilance, among many other stress-related symptoms. It should also be added that power imbalance is at the root of insidious trauma. Indeed, this type of trauma is “usually associated with the status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued by those in power” (Root 240). The cumulative violence victims are susceptible to is the outcome of structural forms of oppression that aggravates their destituteness. Hence, insidious trauma should be addressed as a socially-based trauma affecting a community of people. It seems vital to make prominent the status of these underclasses as part of a group and, in line with LaCapra,

as political, social and ethical victims. Thus, a far-reaching interaction between individual and collective testimonies of insidious trauma could be achieved that aims at critical judgement.

Having stressed the need for a dialogue between individual and collective stories of trauma as catalysts for social action, the very notion of *testimony* should be discussed in relation to trauma. As specified in its legal definition, testimony is “the evidence of a witness in court, usually an oath, offered as evidence of the truth of what is stated” (Law and Martin). However, this legalistic dimension of testimony does not appertain to the representation of trauma, as traumatic stories cannot be assessed on the basis of absolute accuracy. There are elements inherent to the traumatic experience that thwart any attempt to attain complete truthfulness, from its belatedness to the subject’s dissociative symptoms or acting-out behaviour. In the words of Jean-Michel Ganteau and Susana Onega, “the repression of affects that lies at the heart of trauma is manifested in the impossibility of knowing and communicating the traumatic event or experience in cause-and-effect, rational terms” (2). The victims’ inability to fully grasp the traumatic experience is aggravated by their spatiotemporal position in the moment of attestation: as noted by Meg Jensen, testimony should then be understood as “potentially fallible memory narratives constructed in retrospect for a public audience by a mind and body no longer present to that which it attests” (“Testimony” 70).

In these circumstances contemporary trauma has led to what Shoshana Felman calls a “crisis of truth”, which “has brought the discourse of testimony to the fore of the contemporary cultural narrative” (17). As a result of this crisis of truth, a new definition of testimony should be provided that considers the constraints of trauma representation. Suitably, Dori Laub gives the solution in his interview by Cathy Caruth: “‘Trauma’ is actually the word for ‘wound’ in ancient Greek, so testimony is the healing of the wound by shaping and giving shape to an experience that’s fragmented, a healing way of pulling fragments together” (“Record” 48). This re-interpretation of the term in the context of trauma implies a shift of focus: testimonies of

trauma are not concerned with factual accuracy, but with the healing effect that the act of narration produces on the witness. As Dori Laub claims with regard to trauma survivors, “[they] did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive” (“Truth and Testimony” 63). Likewise, Suzette Henke and Judith Herman agree that the struggle to narrativise the traumatic experience prompts the mental recovery of the traumatised subject: the former theorises this healing process as “scriptotherapy”⁶ (Henke xii), and the latter similarly proposes storytelling (Herman 2, 41).

The storytelling practices mentioned above reveal the therapeutic potential of post-traumatic testimony. The artistic shaping of the traumatic experience enables trauma survivors the following: first, the early articulation of the traumatic event may allow for what Raymond Scurfield calls the “integration of the traumatic experience” (246). Ultimately, they succeed in transforming the bit-by-bit, incoherent memories into a meaningful, shareable narration. The creation of a post-traumatic testimony is hence a process geared towards the achievement of meaning. With this aim in mind, Jensen summarises how this type of testimony produces meaning: “first, privately, through the construction of a coherent, listenable narrative of a traumatic experience, and second, publicly, by sharing that narrative through a testimonial act” (“Testimony” 73). The movement from the private towards the public enables self-representational trauma survivors to make their testimonies sharable and ultimately representative. Along the same lines, Jensen argues: “When survivors express past experiences through representative narratives, whether metaphoric or otherwise, they become tangible, shareable stories, rather than unprocessed memories with no ‘date-stamp’” (*Art and Science* 19). Jensen’s emphasis on the representativeness and shareability of traumatic testimonies further highlights that individual traumatic experiences can indeed relate to stories of other

⁶ Suzette Henke defines “scriptotherapy” as “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experiences in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (xii).

individuals and larger social groups. This idea of traumatic self-representation as potentially representative is crucial for a re-assessment of the limits of autobiography that will be explored in section 1.2. Indeed, as Gilmore explains in her article “‘What Was I?’: Literary Witness and the Testimonial Archive”, self-representational narratives at large have the potential to extend beyond the individual, since they are singular accounts that yet stand out for their “wider *representative capacity*” (77; my emphasis).

The creation process of artistic post-traumatic testimony involves a highly frequent use of metaphoric language. Unable to fully grasp a traumatic experience characterised by belatedness, survivors recur to metaphors in order to suggestively evoke what cannot be accurately represented. On a similar note, Jensen maintains: “Many of these witnesses draw upon the language of metaphor, of allegory, with the hope of offering a brief glimpse of the otherwise inconceivable world in which they were forced to exist, and from which they will never fully escape” (*Art and Science* 67). In this context, even though they strive for a coherent, relational testimony, their experience often takes the form of an experimental, fragmented narrative. Accordingly, trauma narratives frequently make use of disjunctive modernist textual strategies. This is precisely the case with the four narratives to be analysed in this dissertation: Rhys’s interwar novels were written in the modernist tradition and hence adopt formal features that have been deemed suitable for the representation of trauma. Trauma narratives borrow from modernist art the frequency and sophistication of stream-of-consciousness techniques such as free indirect style and interior monologue. Likewise, there is recurrent use of free association and fragmentation, both of them mirroring the pathological dissociation caused by trauma. Both the general disorientation and the incompleteness victims feel in their lives are recreated through the violent rupture of textual continuity. One of the paramount devices trauma narratives exploit to generate a fracture of order and meaning is the use of silences. As Tony Kushner wittingly observes, “the silences are often no less significant than what is

included and emphasized” (287). These holes in knowledge are conveyed using ellipses, blanks, asterisks or dashes, and readers are urged to give a meaningful interpretation of them. As substantially meaningful elements, silences do speak for themselves, as they stress the complexity of trauma and the inability to accurately display it through conventional modes of representation.

Trauma narratives also make recurrent use of temporal distortion through narrative strategies such as abrupt temporal jumps, foreshadowing, or flashbacks. Testimonies of trauma, hence, renounce linearity on the basis of the event’s elusive nature. Besides being a constraint inherent in the traumatic experience, the disruption of linearity in trauma narratives may bespeak a degree of subversiveness. This idea lies at the root of Jenny Edkins’ concept of ‘trauma time’. Trauma time is an understanding of temporality as intrusive and resistant to the linearity imposed by the nation-state (15–16). Considering the connection between linearity and order, trauma time poses a threat to the stability of the nation-state. This means that, when writers of trauma resort to trauma time, this “disruptive, back-to-front time” (Edkins 229) intrudes into the story to such an extent that the sovereign power, related to order and a logical sequence of events, is challenged. This is why, according to Edkins, survivors of trauma cling on to this conception of time: “Their testimony challenges sovereign power at its very roots” (230). In summary, trauma time may be said to allow for a form of political resistance whereby those subjected to systemic oppression—and, therefore, potential victims of insidious trauma—challenge the system via a narrative that breaches linearity.

Even though modernist techniques prove appropriate for the depiction of the traumatised subject’s shattered mind, authors such as Craps have warned against the perils of assuming that they are the only means for representing trauma in a satisfactory way. Craps has marked that modernism is an inherently Eurocentric cultural tradition, and that relying on exclusively modernist strategies could lead to “the establishment of a narrow trauma canon consisting of

non-linear, modernist texts by mostly Western writers” (*Postcolonial Witnessing* 41). Such a concern about trauma studies as a Eurocentric—or Euro-American—field is similarly expressed by Jill Bennett and Rosanne Kennedy (10), Stef Craps and Gert Buelens (2), Michael Rothberg (“Decolonizing” 225), and Rebecca Saunders (15). Along similar lines, in her study *Ethnic Modernisms* (2002), Delia Caparoso Konzett remarks that late-twentieth-century critics have begun reviewing modernism in the plural, “referring to the many alternative and competing discourses of the period that were obscured by a canonical version of modernism with distinctly European traits” (5). The exclusively Eurocentric nature of modernism is destabilised, for instance, by the work of authors coming from the colonies, such as Rhys herself and Katherine Mansfield, another important modernist author born in New Zealand. Just like dominant views of modernism as Eurocentric have been reassessed by critics such as Konzett, the somewhat limited scope of trauma studies is being growingly broadened. As Rothberg argues in his preface to the edited book *The Future of Trauma Theory* (2014), “trauma studies will need to travel further and add a whole new series of destinations to its agenda” (xii).

Besides this necessary expansion in the scope of trauma, researchers such as Irene Visser call for “a more comprehensive conceptualization of trauma” that enables the theorisation of “collective, prolonged, and cumulative experiences of traumatization” (280). This reassessment of both the phenomenon of trauma and the critical field of trauma studies could allow for a cross-cultural mode of solidarity that is mandatory in our global age. As highlighted in Visser’s appeal, present-day conceptualisations of trauma should put the emphasis on collective experiences of trauma, rather than exclusively delve into the traumatic event *per se*. However, the focal point of such approaches should not be sameness. Such an endeavour to identify common grounds in cultural trauma could potentially overlook the particularities of a certain group or individual. With a view to overcoming this limitation in terms of outlook,

Kaisa Ilmonen suggests resorting to the notion of intersectionality, as it is more concerned with solidarity than sameness (178). Indeed, since its inception in the context of late-1980s Black feminism, intersectionality has implied both a change of outlook and a form of action described by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw as follows: “[U]nderstanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking” (149). This reversal of traditional ways of thinking responds not merely to a demand for solidarity, but also to an urge to acknowledge the multidirectional influence of manifold forms of inequality and oppression in different parts of the world. An intersectional approach to trauma is, therefore, particularly compelling at the present time, as the urge for solidarity lying at the root of intersectionality makes it necessary for scholars to adopt a relational approach to this phenomenon much in line with our society’s network-like quality.

Bearing in mind the need to pay heed to the relational dimension of trauma, Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and Robert Eaglestone underline the relevance of *interdisciplinarity*, which is a defining feature of the essays in their collection *The Future of Trauma Theory* (2014). They write in favour of such an integrative, multidisciplinary approach to trauma as it acknowledges “the interweaving that trauma itself gestures towards” (Buelens et al. 4). In the same way, twenty-first-century literatures of trauma need to showcase a horizontal dialogue between experiences on a transnational scale, thus allowing for a mediation of trauma that challenges reductionist conceptions of this phenomenon. As exposed by Kaisa Kaakinen, such narratives could “expand readers’ awareness of the ethically and politically sensitive negotiation demanded by the contact of divergent affective histories in today’s world” (264).

The intersectional and interdisciplinary approach to trauma that our global age demands necessarily entails re-evaluating the figure of the (auto)biographical subject, and most concretely its assumed centrality. As argued above, post-traumatic testimonies evolve from a

private, mnemonic construction of an articulated narrative into public disclosure. This final stage in the process fosters the testimony's entanglement with other individual and collective stories of trauma. The testimony, then, could be re-examined as a fluid that transforms and is transformed as it blends with other narratives. It is at the points where these narratives intersect that the seemingly egotistical testimony becomes representative. This means that the testimony of one survivor of trauma can speak for others. In this context, the long-standing view of the self-representational subject as central and unique no longer holds sway. Hence, the following section aims to firstly survey how the centrality of the (auto)biographical self has been challenged and then to propose the paradigm of the limit-case autobiography as a model that underscores the paramount relationality of the (traumatic) testimony.

1.2. Limit-Case Testimonies: Testing the Limits of Autobiography

Life-writing has been one of the most frequent practices in the history of literature. Zachary Leader asserts that 'life-writing' is a "generic term used to describe a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed" (1). Hence, this umbrella term encompasses not merely biographical or autobiographical texts; it also comprises materials that serve as a basis for constructing histories: among these materials dealing with life, Leader draws attention to historical writings, lyric poems, testimonies and, more recently, worldwide digital forms such as tweets or Facebook entries. This wide variety of life-writing genres and practices may be said to test the monolithic hierarchy of the autobiographical genre, which, according to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "remains the widely used and most generally understood term" (*Reading Autobiography* 2–3).

The largely uncontested status of autobiography could be accounted for by two main reasons, namely the implications of its critical definition and the cultural context in which this literary practice arises. The genre of autobiography gained ground during the Enlightenment and thus it was concerned with “assessing the status of the soul or the meaning of public achievement” (Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography* 2). This means that the aim of autobiographical writing was to present one’s own life as an account of their psychological maturity, ultimately emerging as models of human behaviour that should be imitated by those seeking public achievement. The relevance of the psyche’s development is brought to the fore in Philippe Lejeune’s definition of autobiography, which has been considered categorical by many. Lejeune defines autobiography as “a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (193). This definition puts the accent on the development of personality while stressing the issue of truthfulness: judging from the use of “real” and “his own”, Lejeune implies that truth should be a key element in autobiography, and this ties in with the Enlightenment’s endeavour to present genuine examples of successful lives. However, the implications of such a truth are dangerous, as the question of whose truth should be followed comes forth.

The prominence of autobiography in the eighteenth century offered individuals the possibility of making their lives universal. However, Linda Anderson warns: “Insofar as autobiography has been seen as promoting a view of the subject as universal, it has also underpinned the centrality of masculine—and, we may add, Western and middle-class—modes of subjectivity” (3). Because of having underpinned the centrality of Western masculine subjects, the trustworthiness of hitherto less visible testimonies such as those of women and ethnic minorities has been widely disputed. Such distrust has been highlighted by researchers such as Nancy Miller, who suggests that sincerity entails a masculine subject and, as such,

women run the risk of being discredited merely for being women (51). This is the core idea in Leigh Gilmore's monograph *Tainted Witness* (2017), which draws on feminist studies to pore over how women's testimonies and self-representational female writers have historically been "tainted" or, in other words, debased by means of disbelief, dishonour, or stigmatisation (*Tainted 2*). The practice of giving less credit to women's testimonies in comparison to men's contributed to the fact, that, up until the 1980s, the reaction of the majoritarian male critics to women's histories was indifference. Such a response is remarked upon by Estelle Jelinek in her introduction to an essay collection that launched criticism of women's life-writing texts, *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (1980): "'Insignificant', indeed, expresses the predominant attitude of most critics towards women's lives" (4).

Critics' general disregard for women's life-writing at that time also applied to non-Western subjects, whose testimonies were barely perceptible in the genre. As Laura Marcus noted, "'Autobiography' as conventionally defined is often judged to be a limited and inappropriate means of representing . . . non-hegemonic subjectivities and identities" (223). One of the main reasons behind this sheer invisibility was the essentialist or Romantic notion of selfhood that emerged in the late eighteenth century. As Anderson explains, this view was still embraced in the mid-twentieth century and supported that "each individual possesses a unified, unique selfhood which is also the expression of a universal human nature" (5). First of all, it was assumed that the self was an unbreakable entity. The solidity highlighted in this conception of selfhood would prevent traumatic testimonies from entering the hitherto rigid genre of autobiography, since external stimuli could contribute to shattering the self. Second, the unspoiled selves that were to become exemplary and universal were overwhelmingly male and Western, so any construction of the self that deviated from the norm was likely to be judged as invalid and untrustworthy.

However, the conception of the self as a unity began to be contested at the beginning of the twentieth century. With the emergence of psychoanalytic theories and the abrupt changes in the individual's relationship to the world, the essentialist view of selfhood changed likewise. As Anderson notes, "the modern disillusionment with the unitary subject does not simply create a break, opening up a new critical perspective; it also casts a backward shadow, transforming how we read previous writing" (60). This need for re-reading previous writing entailed that, throughout the twentieth century, it became necessary to reassess the Romantic notion of selfhood and hence the dogmas of autobiography. In this context, the main challenge to essentialist views of autobiography was to determine to what extent the male-centred, individual testimony is the one that should be first trusted and then deemed universal.

The paradigm shift from Modernity to Postmodernity accelerated this re-evaluation of the unitary self. Alongside the decline of grand narratives and the proliferation of critical works from postcolonial and feminist studies, the autobiographical genre became more open to the *pétits récits*⁷ of minorities. These previously marginalised subjects constructed autobiographical histories that were not restricted to the individual testimony but informed of how one's life is shaped by their interaction with other people. This permeation of little narratives into the hitherto fixed autobiographical genre gradually induced the decentring of the essentialist view of the self as a Western, male-centred unique construction. Consequently, a new view of the subject as multiply determined gained prominence, whereby the subject has multiple components in terms of race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity that "one cannot easily sever, separate out, or subsume under one another" (Smith and Watson, *De/Colonizing* xiv). As catalysts for embracing an approach to the self as a complex construction, the autobiographical histories of minorities and marginalised groups prove that testimonies should

⁷ In his seminal work *The Postmodern Condition* (1979, 1984), Jean-François Lyotard uses the term '*pétits récits*'—'little narratives'—(60) to refer to those assumedly fragmented texts of minorities forced into silence by the dominant grand narratives.

never be explored as exclusively personal narratives. As Julia Swindells asserted in 1995, “autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual” (7). Similarly, Smith and Watson contend the following about women’s life-writing: “The writing and theorizing of women’s lives has often occurred in texts that place an emphasis on collective processes while questioning the sovereignty and universality of the solitary self” (*Women* 5). The fact that such testimonies go beyond the individual foreshadows the emergence of a globalised society where relational approaches to identity and history have been foregrounded.

Twenty-first-century approaches to memory, self-construction and life-writing agree on the adoption of a network-like model that strives against the dangers of the uniqueness discourse by informing of the complex intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships characterising our global age. For instance, Paul Gilroy calls for the endorsement of linkages that reveal “new understandings of self, sameness and solidarity” (128). Likewise, Michael Rothberg proposes a multidirectional model of memory whereby “groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interaction with others” (*Multidirectional Memory* 5). Along the same lines, in her recent study *The Ethics of Storytelling* (2018), Hanna Meretoja argues for a vision of life as a “*narratively mediated interpretative process*” (63; emphasis in the original). As she argues, [w]e are entangled in a culturally and historically constituted web of narratives, in relation to which we make sense of our possibilities” (63). The negotiation between narratives has a far-reaching effect on the construction of the self, as it builds on the dynamic interaction with other histories, both individual and communal. Such a dialogue is a defining feature of autobiographical testimonies of suffering and trauma, which is this dissertation’s central concern. As Leigh Gilmore demonstrates, these narratives emerge via a “dynamic of testimony” stemming from interactions between witnesses and interlocutors (*Tainted Witness* 5). Nevertheless, not only

does this negotiation between histories bring into question the uniqueness of the self, but it also tests the problem of *truth*.

As explained above, truth-telling has long been considered a fundamental aspect of autobiography. At this point, it is necessary to unpack Lejeune's definition of the genre as a "narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence" (193). Lejeune makes it clear that these narratives should be written by a "real" person, so an essentialist approach to autobiography might entail that any fictional element would be regarded as potentially deceptive. Hence, autobiographers find themselves compelled to satisfy the readers' expectation of trustworthiness: as Roy Pascal argues in his seminal work *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960), readers of autobiography expect truth, so "autobiographers themselves all make more or less successful efforts to get at the truth, to stick to it, or at least try to persuade us they are doing so" (83). With autobiography's demands for a truthful history in mind, Lejeune proposed an "autobiographical pact" between writer, reader, and publisher, whereby it should be assumed that the author, the narrator and the character that is being talked about are the same (202).

A strict adherence to Lejeune's contract would lead to a referential approach to autobiography. However, Philip Baruth warns that referentiality is not really a pivotal point in autobiography: "A reader does not go to autobiography for a referential history; a reader goes to an autobiography for a subjective perspective by the author on the author. When a reader wants verifiable facts, he or she makes a different pact, by picking up a biography" (182). It could be argued, then, that autobiography is more concerned with *subjective truth*. This stance is supported by Evelyn Chew and Alex Mitchell, who maintain that "an autobiography is necessarily subjective, since it concerns the personal life of the acting subject and is told from his or her point of view" (par. 4). Along the same lines, Smith and Watson explain that autobiographical truth "resides in the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader

aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life” (*Reading Autobiography* 16). The intersubjectivity highlighted in this contention reflects the previously explained need for life-writing narratives to negotiate with other histories.

Just like the multiply determined subject has eventually replaced the view of the self as unique, the autobiographical genre is steadily engaging in a dialogue with other life-writing practices in an attempt to destabilise any premise that autobiography is obsessed with trustworthiness. Accordingly, recent approaches to autobiography show that this hitherto fixed and quasi-dogmatic genre has evolved into relationality. As Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf puts forth in the preface to the *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* (2020), “it is the aim of this volume to conceptualize the autobiographical genre as multi-perspectival, relational, and mutable” (xvii). Having exposed the incipient mutability of autobiography, there should be a brief account of how the dialogue of this genre with other life-writing practices contributes to further destabilising the quintessential limit of truthfulness. Indeed, autobiographical practices are continually transformed by life-writing genres that put to test the limit between truth and fiction. The genres to be briefly discussed in the following paragraphs are biofiction, autofiction, memoir, and limit-case autobiography. It is the latter category that will be given more prominence, as this dissertation’s main concern is to analyse the four selected novels by Jean Rhys as limit-case narratives.

Before exploring the genres listed above, there should be a brief account of some terms referring to life-writing practices: the autobiographical novel, the pseudo-autobiographical novel and the *roman à clef*. Though not being as sophisticated as the concepts discussed below, they are relevant not merely because they are long-established categories in autobiographical studies, but also because Rhys’s texts have been explored as such. In autobiographical novels, fictional elements override factual or historical accuracy. They are mostly fictional texts where authors decide to subordinate their impulse for verisimilitude to their artistic aims (Watson 27).

As for the pseudo-autobiographical novel, Andrew Baruch Wachtel has defined it as “a first-person retrospective narrative based on autobiographical material, in which the author and the protagonist are not the same person” (3). This life writing genre is virtually analogous to the autobiographical novel in that it gives pride of place to the fictional, thus making it clear that the identities of the author and the protagonist are not the same. Its distinguishing element may be, as highlighted by Wachtel, its reliance on an autodiegetic narrator. Finally, the *roman à clef*—which may be translated as ‘key-novel’, is another fictional genre that to a certain degree relies on autobiography. In his work *The Art of Scandal* (2012), Sean Latham gives a definition of these narratives that unpacks their hyphenated denomination as ‘key-novels’: “Able to pass as a novel, it becomes a *roman à clef* only through the introduction of a key that lies beyond the diegesis itself” (9). In the case of novels like Rhys’s *Quartet*, often referred to as a *roman à clef*, the key is readers’ contextual information about the society depicted in the novel and, more significantly, the set of parallels that can be drawn between the fictional characters and the real-world figures on whom they are modelled. What appears to set these texts apart from the classical life-writing genres discussed previously is their penchant for encoding gossip and scandal (Latham 6–7). Indeed, this is why Rhys, who took the so-called ‘Affaire Ford’ as raw material for her first published novel, avoided an excessively conspicuous representation of the love triangle with Ford and Stella Bowen.

Focusing on more contemporary self-representational genres, postmodern literary critics contributed to giving heed to the dialogue between fiction and truth in the construction of the (auto)biographical self. As Michael Lackey summarises, “postmodernism underscores the degree to which fiction necessarily plays a role in the construction of a biographical subject and why, therefore, an accurate representation of the biographical subject is ultimately impossible” (“Locating” 5). In his 1991 essay “Biofictions”, the French scholar Alain Buisine coined the portmanteau word ‘biofiction’ in order to refer to a life-writing practice that reflects

the postmodern concern aforementioned. However, Buisine failed to provide a comprehensive definition of this genre. A comprehensive definition of 'biofiction' is provided by Lackey: "[A] postmodern form of biography that implicitly concedes through its dramatization that it cannot accurately signify or represent the biographical subject because the author's subjective orientation will always inflect the representation" (*American* 17–18). The inexorable influence of the author's subjectivity marked by Lackey underlines once more the current view of the (auto)biographical subject as a multiply determined construct. By resorting to such an assorted subject, writers of biofiction—and other life-writing genres—attempt to depart from essentialist views of the self and subsequently represent the rhizomatic world in which both characters and flesh-and-blood people live. Indeed, Lackey explains that "authors of biofiction use the life of their subject in order to create their own vision of the world" ("Introduction" 10). The postmodern blurring of boundaries between fiction and truth in life-writing reaches its peak in autofiction, a genre which, though having been widely explored from a theoretical perspective in French literary circles, is relatively new in Anglophone critical contexts (Dix 1; Worthington 1). The term 'autofiction' was coined by the French critic Serge Doubrovsky and appeared for the first time on the back cover of his 1977 novel *Fils*: "fiction of strictly real events" (qtd. in Cusset 1). Though making it clear that the events depicted should be "strictly" real, this early definition of the genre already highlights the dialogue between fiction and reality. Indeed, it exposes the product of this life-writing practice is a fiction. This introductory definition presents a limitation in that it puts the focus on the nature of the events while overlooking a discussion on the limits of the self. With a view to filling this gap, Doubrovsky attempts a second definition of autofiction: "A form of autobiographical writing that permits a degree of experimentation with the definition and limits of the self, rather than the slavish recapitulation of known biographical facts" (in Dix 3). This second definition enhances the

fuzziness that has been thoroughly discussed in this section, as it brings to the fore the extent to which the self is constantly redefined and reshaped.

It should be noted that autofiction subordinates biographical facts to the depiction of the self. In this context, scholars such as Philippe Gasparini observe that autofiction writers refuse to retrace a chronology of the key events in the author-character's life (26). In a similar vein, Worthington argues that “the meaning and power of an autofictional text resides more in its plot and themes than in the biographical or historical accuracy of the story it tells” (3). Therefore, the insistence on demanding (auto)biographical truthfulness yields to a concern with plot and themes, and this makes autofictions be read as novels more than autobiographies *per se*. Not coincidentally, Worthington provides a thorough definition of autofictions as “*novels* that play with the expectations evoked when the protagonist and the author share a name and some biographical information, but when that protagonist engages in clearly fictional endeavours” (12; emphasis in the original). Since autofiction gives less prominence to the question of truth, the events and themes might have a degree of fictionality. However, truth is by no means neglected in this genre. For Cusset, in the context of autofiction truth is “the capacity to go back inside an emotion, to erase anything anecdotic . . . in order to offer it to the reader in a bare form, devoid of anything too idiosyncratic, so that he can claim it as his own” (2). This autofictional concern with emotions is closely related to autobiography’s stand for subjective truth and, once again, aims to destabilise any views of the subjective experience as a clinical set of episodes whose worth resides in their verisimilitude. Rather, what is stressed is to what extent the life writer’s revisitation of some recurrent concerns potentially allows for an emotion-based response whereby readers relate to that experience and make it their own. To put it another way, autofiction—as does the life-writing genre extensively analysed in this dissertation—associates truth with the relatability of the autobiographical subject’s emotions. In this sense, the genre’s potential to generate engagement with the subject’s feelings points to

the issue of *representativeness*, one of the fundamental limits of autobiography that will be discussed at the end of this section.

Although recent self-representational practices such as autofiction radically deviate from biographical accuracy, memoirs could be said to be faithful to it. G. Thomas Couser defines 'memoir' as a text which "presents itself, and is therefore read, as a nonfictional record or representation of actual humans' experience" (15). Worthington elaborates on this definition and adds that "memoir is usually conceived of as an autobiographically accurate story told from a highly particularized and personal perspective; it is *one* person's side of *one* story" (148). Thus, a key opposition between autofiction and memoir is that the latter is not read as a novel, but as nonfiction. While autofiction presents a high degree of fictionality in comparison with autobiography, memoirs are unlikely to deviate from truthfulness. Memoirs are thus intimately connected with autobiographies, the main difference being that memoirs focus on a specific event or memory rather than on the author-character's entire life.

Nevertheless, as is the case with autobiographies, whether all memoirs strictly adhere to referential truth or not shall be debated. First, it should be marked that the primary function of memoir is "to make identity claims" (Couser 13). This essential goal of the memoir entails that the memories which the subject recollects are not exclusive to a single individual—in this case the author-character. Instead, what comes to the forefront is how subjects assert their identity through storytelling and, in so doing, they create a potentially testimonial narrative that may speak for other people besides the self. Not surprisingly, researchers such as Vivien J. Gray highlight that in memoirs "the author intrudes himself as a participant into an account that focuses equally on persons other than the self" (2). Therefore, the story featured in a memoir can be shaped by the memories and testimonies of other members of the community whose cultural identity is stressed. This interspersed of individual and collective testimonies is a key feature of trauma narratives, many of which are memoirs. In addition to their global outlook,

what characterises trauma narratives is that they pose a challenge to factual accuracy. As memoiristic texts, trauma narratives are supposed to be historically accurate, but such accuracy is generally unattainable (Worthington 126–127). Worthington goes on to discuss one of the factors that prevents writers of trauma narratives from ensuring utter accuracy in their stories: “[They] often reject pure mimesis as less appropriate to their purposes, preferring instead to tell it slant” (127). Yet, their inability to comply with a strict demand for factual accuracy is not exactly the result of conscious choice. Rather, it may stem from the incapacity generated by the trauma. As discussed in the following paragraphs, this is one of the key aspects of self-representational trauma narratives leading up to the contestation of the limits of autobiography. Gilmore’s concept of the ‘limit-case’ is subsequently discussed to buttress the hypothesis that contemporary life-writing genres are no longer rigid.

Limit-case autobiography could be said to be the self-representational genre that best summarises the re-evaluating endeavour that has been described in this section. The limit-case paradigm was exposed by the American scholar Leigh Gilmore in her study *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001). As the monograph’s title reveals, Gilmore explores to what extent traumatic testimonies have the potential to test the limits of autobiography. Indeed, in the introduction section she explains: “I am interested in this coincidence of trauma and self-representation and will examine what it reveals about autobiography, its history, and especially its limits” (Gilmore, *Limits* 2). In this initial contention Gilmore suggests that self-representation is greatly affected by its encounter with trauma. According to Silvia Pellicer-Ortín, “[t]rauma begs for the representation of the unrepresentable and works against any coherent narrative representation of the self” (71). Trauma appears to constrain linearity and coherence, ultimately frustrating any attempt on the part of the subject to narrativise a factually accurate testimony. Therefore, Gilmore seeks to

analyse the problematics of self-representation in a selection of trauma narratives with the aim of showing how these testimonies may destabilise the limits of autobiography.

Limit-cases are defined as self-representational narratives that blur the border between “autobiography and fiction, autobiography and history, autobiography and legal testimony, autobiography and psychoanalysis, or autobiography and theory” (Gilmore, *Limits* 14). When it comes to assessing what autobiographical boundaries are tested by these liminal narratives, Gilmore identifies two key limits: the limit between *truth and lies* and the limit of *representativeness*. Before explicitly mentioning these limits, she summarises the relationship of limit-case writers with their self-representational projects: “For the writers I study here, autobiography’s project—to tell the story of one’s life—appears to constrain self-representation through its almost legalistic definition of truth telling, its anxiety about invention, and its preference for the literal and verifiable” (3). From the outset of her study, Gilmore highlights that limit-case authors take issue with a straitjacketing compliance with factual accuracy. They do not seek a representation of life events that can be verified, but a testimony that transcends categorisation. More importantly, Gilmore warns that the generic demand for verisimilitude may hamper the representation of trauma in the ensuing literary testimony: “[C]onventions about truth telling, salutary as they are, can be inimical to the ways in which some writers bring trauma stories into language” (3). Along similar lines as Pellicer-Ortín, Rudolf Freiburg contends that “limit-case narratives try to achieve the impossible: to represent the unrepresentable” (83). Hence, this hybrid genre often resorts to the rupture of linearity alongside a suspension of genuineness for the depiction of an experience that is both elusive and unfamiliar.

Considering trauma’s unfathomability, Gilmore goes on to argue that “the trauma is not necessarily documented or documentable from the text at hand” (*Limits* 43), thus stressing the need to test the centrality of truthfulness in autobiographical texts. It should also be highlighted

that the trauma-induced failure of chronology brings about a convergence of different temporalities to which Gilmore alludes later in the study. She expands on the junction of past and present by explaining that it is greatly accounted for by transference (90), which in trauma studies refers to the sharing process that takes place between the survivor who struggles to retrieve and verbalise the traumatic experience and the story's listener (Modell 168). The fact that "the past remains present" (Gilmore, *Limits* 90) in the storytellers' account, together with these narratives' potential for transference, makes trauma testimonies—and, significantly enough, limit-cases—inextricably linked to current affairs, and therefore potentially relatable. At this point, it seems necessary to draw attention to a central idea connected with the truth/fiction limit. In the chapter on Jamaica Kincaid's autobiographical novels, Gilmore asserts that it is the persistence of some key topics rather than truth claims that is significant and that gives a sense of continuity to her limit-cases (98). Such an undermining of the obsession with factual accuracy is helpful in that it enables involved readers to identify a network of relationships between situations that apply to different characters in an autobiographical cycle. The recurrent appearance of trauma-related preoccupations—such as the angst at interacting with strangers or metropolitan alienation in the case of the Rhys's limit-cases to be explored in this dissertation—could consequently put the stress on the text's relatability. Such a potential of the trauma testimony to exist in relation to other survivors' stories leads us to the second border Gilmore underscores, namely the limit of representativeness.

Following the avoidance of cataloguing autobiographical accounts on the basis of truth-telling and the re-evaluation of the demand for factual accuracy when it comes to representing trauma, Gilmore proposes a second, more interesting test to the limits of the genre:

A different question would focus on the way [one's] testimony tests a crucial limit in autobiography, and not just the one between truth and lies, but the limit of

representativeness, with its compulsory inflation of the self to stand for others, the peculiar way it operates both to expand and to constrict testimonial speech, and the way it makes it hard to clarify without falsifying what is strictly and unambiguously “my” experience when “our” experience is also at stake. (*Limits* 5)

This urge to reconceptualise the limit of representativeness poses a threat to views of autobiography as an exclusively personal narrative at which other subjects can only look when it is an exemplary one. At the same time, Gilmore implicitly calls for embracing the junction between individual and collective memories and stories. This stance is strongly related to the idea that memoir—and any other life-writing genre—undertakes the task of informing about identity. In this sense, limit-case testimonies offer a powerful and enlightening manifestation of identity, as they bring into operation a network of relationships between individual testimonies and society while enhancing the status of the autobiographical subject as a citizen. In this fashion, Gilmore remarks that limit-case autobiographers “explore representations of personhood that are sceptical of dominant constructions of the individual and the nation. All are concerned with the interpenetration of the private and the public” (13). Limit-case representations of the self are ultimately subversive because they challenge dominant discourses on individuality and nationhood. In this sense, limit-case autobiographies lend themselves to being an excellent vehicle for diffusing the testimonies of individuals and groups other than Western, white and male.

Limit-case testimonies allow for a more inclusive and democratic view of autobiography whereby the testimonies of previously marginal societies come to the forefront. According to Gilmore, the entrance of a wider array of individuals into the self-representation arena is the result of ongoing social and political movements (*Limits* 16). At the same time, the proliferation of studies in the fields of feminism, postcolonialism and trauma studies has contributed to raising debate on whether ‘alternative’ testimonies may claim verisimilitude. In practice, a

telling example is that of Latin American *testimonio*, a form of subaltern post-traumatic testimony that confronts traditional narratives on colonialism through the attestation of a collective voice (Jensen, “Testimony” 69–70). In the case of Gilmore, she concentrates on women’s writings and observes: “While the entry of women into autobiography did not inaugurate a debate about women’s truthfulness, it certainly revived the rhetoric of women’s deceitfulness. Two questions hound women’s autobiographical efforts: Can women tell the truth? Do women have lives worth representing?” (*Limits* 21). Although these questions aim to survey whether women’s self-representational practices are likely to meet the key limits of autobiography, they are of no importance for Gilmore’s project; she completely rejects the idea of scrutinising ‘alternative’ testimonies by asking these queries, as what matters is how limit-case testimonies challenge the limits exposed in the questions (verisimilitude and representativeness). All in all, what is sought with these ‘alternative’ narratives is to go against a legalistic definition of testimony as rooted in truthfulness and individuality: the aim of limit-cases testimonies is to produce “an alternative jurisprudence, a form of judgement drawn from the complexities of a legal, literary, and political past” (Gilmore, *Limits* 44). Indeed, as Gilmore maintains in ““What Was I?”: Literary Witness and the Testimonial Archive”, genres of witness narrative like the limit-cases—and, in the case of her analysis, Kincaid’s *Autobiography of My Mother*—elude the exigencies and constraints of the legal testimony (81, 83); they are literary works that, in Gilmore’s view, join literal testimonies in the project of creating a more thorough testimonial archive (“Literary Witness”, 81–82).

Gilmore sees in traumatic testimonies the potential to deconstruct the sovereignty of the autobiographical self and ultimately attain the alternative jurisprudence mentioned above. Trauma inflicts a primarily psychological wound that breeches the unity of the self, giving as a result a fragmented entity that cannot be considered representative of the eighteenth-century paradigmatic self. As psychologically shattered individuals, the victims of trauma are unlikely

to articulate a coherent testimony and thus their stories might run the risk of being judged as untruthful. Gilmore is aware that such a slanted view of traumatic testimonies constrains the representation of a traumatic self in the process of reconstruction via narrativisation. Therefore, she proposes that limit-case autobiographers “structure the grounds for an alternative hearing” (*Limits* 145). This call for an alternative, more empathetic audience ties in with the need for trauma survivors to be heard. In this sense, limit-case autobiographies are not meant to be judged by a group of legal experts resolute to elucidate the testimony’s validity. As traumatic narratives, limit-cases “offer histories of harm and the individual that differ from legal ones and which are, strictly speaking, inadmissible as testimony” (146).

This alternative jurisdiction for narratives paves the way for the emergence of a new conception of the autobiographical subject. Rather than a sovereign self whose testimony emerges as exclusive, limit-cases install what Gilmore calls the “knowing subject” (*Limits* 143–148). She elaborates on this notion by explaining that the knowing subject “works with dissonant materials, fragmented by trauma, and organizes them into a form of knowledge” (147). In other words, what these subjects do is to engage in a process hinting at the testimonial quality of their narratives: firstly, they particularise the form of violence they are subjected to; then, they give it a voice that not merely makes heard their individual plight, but that may speak for those who have not found a mode of expression for their pain (Gilmore, “Literary Witness” 80). The mission of these alternative, traumatised autobiographical subjects is thus to assemble the presumably discordant fragments of both their story and their self, eventually producing a meaningful narrative with which other individuals may identify. Gilmore elaborates on this idea in her monograph *Tainted Witness* (2017), suggesting that autobiographical accounts of suffering build a “dynamic of testimony” between speaker and interlocutor (5). As a matter of fact, limit-case autobiographies engage in the rhizomatic dialogue which has been foregrounded throughout this section. Far from offering *sui generis* and exclusionary

narratives, limit-case writers provide testimonies that inform about both individual and collective traumas and identities. The receptiveness inherent to limit-case testimonies allows for other individual and societal histories to interact with each other. Hence, at the same time as recollections can be shaped by other people's memories, limit-case narratives can enrich and be enriched by the experiences of subjects and communities. All in all, this alternative jurisdiction of trauma and identity as provided by limit-case autobiographies offers the hitherto fragmented survivors to become representative, and this possibility is enabled by the creation of a knowing subject.

By testing the limits of the autobiographical genre, Gilmore's paradigm questions both the obsession with factual accuracy and the uniqueness of the autobiographical self. Furthermore, it underscores how the intersection of life-writing and trauma allows for the creation of an alternative jurisprudence for self-representation, whereby factual accuracy and the uniqueness of the autobiographical self are no longer submitted to debate. Having culminated the discussion of the autobiographical genre with the presentation of Gilmore's theory, the next section will succinctly explore the role of autobiography in Jean Rhys's work. The author to be analysed in this dissertation is certainly a liminal writer. Therefore, not only will the following section present the multifariousness of the author through the summary of the most relevant events and traumas in her long life; most importantly, it will eventually advocate for the need to analyse Rhys's fiction through the limit-case focus.

1.3. Jean Rhys, Autobiography and the Struggle to Narrativise Trauma

The analysis of Rhys's modernist novels as potentially testimonial trauma narratives based on the author's experience demands an acknowledgement of some key critical approaches to her work from the lenses of autobiography and trauma. As regards the former, there is a body of

literature that has extensively focused on the autobiographical dimension of her texts since Rhys's death in 1979, and this is a research line that still holds sway. Shortly after her passing, Thomas Staley wrote the first uncondensed study of Jean Rhys and her work under the title *Jean Rhys: A Critical Study* (1979). In this monograph, Staley underscores the key role that (auto)biography plays in both Rhys's work and his seminal critical study: "I attempt to place her life in the foreground of the entire study rather than treat it as background to her work" (1). In 1990, Carole Angier's biography *Jean Rhys: Life and Work* was published. This reference work goes beyond a minute record of her life, as it offers a close reading of her longer texts that makes it one of the most comprehensive studies on Rhys. During the 1990s, the scholarly interest in Rhys resulted in the completion of some seminal monographs on her work, such as Mary Lou Emery's *Jean Rhys at "World's End": Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile* (1990), Veronica Marie Gregg's *Jean Rhys's Historical Imagination: Reading and Writing the Creole* (1995), Helen Carr's *Jean Rhys* (1996, reprinted in 2012), Sylvie Maurel's *Jean Rhys* (1998), Elaine Savory's *Jean Rhys* (1998) and Sue Thomas's *The Worlding of Jean Rhys* (1999). Even though the intersection of fiction and factual accuracy is not these works' main goal, they acknowledge the role of her life and background as essential to better understand her texts. Twenty years after the publication of Angier's biography, Lilian Pizzichini's *The Blue Hour: A Portrait of Jean Rhys* (2010) was released. Told in a highly gripping style that reminds us of romance novels,⁸ Pizzichini's work is satisfactory for its suggestive portrait of Rhys's psychological dimension. Indeed, the plunge into the author's mindset is facilitated not only by this biography's novel-like style, but also by its abundant juxtaposition of her life and passages from her novels and short stories. Likewise, the inner turmoil of the Dominican writer

⁸ Pizzichini herself intends that her biography could be read "like a piece of romantic fiction" (qtd. in Short, "Making Up" 44).

is given pride of place in Miranda Seymour's *I Used to Live Here Once: The Haunted Life of Jean Rhys* (2022), which is to date the latest biography of Rhys.

As hinted at in the quotation from Staley's foundational book and in the brief literature review above, life-writing lies at the core of Rhys's work. The relevance of her self-discovery and revisitation of her life for her literary production is brilliantly summarised in the first pages of Carr's study: "Like many modernist writers, Rhys had used her life, in all its painful rawness, as the material from which she formed her fiction" (3). Most importantly, as Carr goes on to argue, Rhys widely relies on the events of her life in an attempt to "find a narrative, a language, a form, which makes sense of the world she has experienced" (27). The allusion to modernism is of the greatest importance for the purposes of this dissertation, as it lays bare her struggle to assemble a narrative that might help not only understand the alienation that so defines the unrest of the alienated modernist self, but potentially make sense of a world from which she felt estranged. In resorting to autobiography, she is actually establishing a network between her testimony and the circumstances of other identically alienated individuals, this being a liaison that will be explored throughout the dissertation.

Though being a central concern in the research into Rhys, the autobiographical approach to her fiction should be taken with caution. In a letter to Francis Wyndham sent in May 1964, Rhys does acknowledge her recourse to (auto)biographical facts in her novels: "In long novels—facts are very comforting to me. Of course they are always distorted, twisted, changed and so on. But all the same they are there. When I was despairing I could say *this happened*" (*Letters* 276; emphasis in the original). Despite the reassurance that Rhys claims to have had as a result of introducing factual elements, she strongly opposed a categorisation of her works as autobiographies. In a letter sent in September 1959 to Francis Wyndham, an editor at André Deutsch, Rhys speaks of her novel *Quartet*: "It has some life and it wasn't an autobiography, as everyone here seemed to imagine though some of it was lived of course" (*Letters* 171).

Along the same lines, in a letter sent in January 1960 to her daughter Maryvonne, she emphatically asserts that her short story “Till September Petronella”, set in 1914, is “*not* autobiography” (*Letters* 180; emphasis in the original).

In the introduction to his compilation of Jean Rhys’s letters, Francis Wyndham explains the reason behind Rhys dissatisfaction with the label ‘autobiography’: “What upset her—and increasingly so with age—was the falsity she detected in books written about people and places she had known, or set in periods she remembered” (9). This dread of inaccuracy was by no means senseless: Rhys was a profoundly discreet person, and hence she feared that unfounded rumours could lead to misconceptions about her. By way of illustration, in a letter sent to the actress Selma Vaz Dias in November 1963, she talks about her neighbours in Cheriton Fitzpaine and comments on their suspicion that she is a witch (*Letters* 248). Exhausted by invasions of privacy and gossip, Rhys expressed in her will that no unauthorised biography of her should be published (Wyndham 9). The emergence of studies on Rhys’s life-writing intrinsically risks factual inaccuracy. Indeed, in 2018 the writer’s granddaughter, Ellen Ruth Moerman, attended an international conference on Rhys at the Sorbonne University titled “Transmission Lines”. Moerman noted that many of the scholars’ assertions on Rhys’s biography were “screamingly inaccurate” (SWAN). One of the reasons behind the biographers’ imprecisions is the Dominican writer’s proclivity for privacy, which may be said to hamper a purely factual or historical approach to Rhys’s fiction. Moreover, it should not be overlooked that Rhys herself recurrently blended fact and fiction, even in an acknowledged autobiography like *Smile Please*.

Helen Carr observes the following in relation to Rhys’s reaction to autobiographical readings of her work: “Jean has suffered from having her life and work read against each other”, since she has “found herself again and again depicted, by analogy with her victims, as

oppressed and defeated” (1, 5). In an interview by Elizabeth Vreeland, Rhys expresses her fatigue with writing about her life:

I don't mind writing about when I was a child, but I don't quite know why I should go on writing so much about myself. I've had rather a rum life, but I was thinking the other day, would I go through it all again. I think not. I guess I write about myself because that's all I really know. (237)

As can be noted in her reply, the writer is reluctant to recollect her off-centre life and, to a certain extent, reexperience it via storytelling. Except for her supposedly pleasant childhood in the West Indies, her adolescence and adulthood are likely to provoke more pain than relief. However, she resists detaching her fictional writing from her life, as she admits writing about herself. Rhys's claim thus enhances the argument that her fiction is mostly based on her (auto)biography. It is also worth remarking that, in this quotation, Rhys connects writing with knowing, and such a parallel points to one of the main hypotheses in this dissertation: that, as befits limit-cases, Rhys's modernist novels enabled her not only to articulate some individual and collective pains she was aware of, but also to gain a better understanding of these traumatic experiences. In keeping with the perusal of such traumas provided in this dissertation, what ensues is an account of some highlights of Rhys's biography that attempts to trace the origin of some of her traumas, both event-based and insidious ones. As this study deals with her interwar novels—the last one published in 1939—this introductory account will put the focus on the period spanning from her birth in 1890 to the outbreak of the Second World War. Some of the events and traumas to be presented will be tackled in more detail in the chapters devoted to the analysis of the corpus. The information provided in the paragraphs that follow is chiefly based on Carole Angier's comprehensive biography and on Rhys's *Smile Please* (1979). There will also be reference to other biographical studies, especially Lilian Pizzichini's and Miranda Seymour's, and to Rhys's surviving letters.

Jean Rhys was born in Roseau, the capital of the small Caribbean island of Dominica, which at that time was under British control. There is no utter consensus as to her birthyear: while most scholars agree that she was born in 1890, authors such as Staley and Vreeland present it as 1894. This discrepancy is noted by Athill: “The date 1894, which appears in *Who’s Who*, was supplied by her. But an old passport gives 1890—and a cousin of hers, now dead, once told me that as children they often used to comment on her being ‘ten years older than the century’” (Rhys, *Smile Please* 11). Rhys often took four years off her age: for instance, when marrying her first husband in April 1919, she gave her age as twenty-four (Angier 103). Yet, Angier convincingly solves this conflict by stating that Jean was born nine months after November 1889, when her little sister Brenda died of dysentery (11). As regards her genealogy, she was a white Creole of British origin and, as Angier marks, “like so many ‘English’ colonial families, Jean’s was not English, but Welsh, Irish and Scottish” (6). Rhys’s great-grandfather on her mother’s side had come from Scotland so as to run a sugar plantation, and her father was a Welsh doctor who moved to Dominica in 1881 (Angier 7–9). As she recalls in her autobiography, at the age of nine she started developing a sense of unbelonging within her family: “Catching sight of myself in the long looking-glass I felt despair. . . . My brothers and sisters all had brown eyes and hair, why was I singled out to be the only fair one?” (*Smile Please* 20). This feeling of estrangement was aggravated by her edgy relationship with her mother: Rhys admits to having been afraid of her (*Smile Please* 21) and, for her entire childhood, she felt as if she were the ghost of her mother’s deceased baby (Pizzichini 7). As Teresa O’Connor remarks, “Rhys never once portrays a scene, either in her fiction or nonfiction, of warmth or gentleness between mothers and daughters or between her own mother and herself” (23).

In addition to this, Rhys’s inability to fit in was worsened by the rejection she felt on the part of black Dominicans. The black population of Dominica looked at Rhys’s family with

suspicion because they had been former slaveholders. According to Gregg, Rhys's view of blacks was "sustained by simultaneous love and hatred" (67). On the one hand, she admired their strength and merriness (e.g. *Smile Please* 50), to the point that she made dire attempts to identify with them. On the other hand, she was overwhelmed by the intimidation inflicted by a black nurse, Meta. This servant recurrently played jokes on her, shook her violently and told her ghoulish stories of zombies and werewolves (*Smile Please* 30). In a way, her uneasy alliance with them mirrors her connection with her native land. As Angier explains, she longed for an identification with Dominica, but she eventually had the feeling that the place was fending her off (22). Therefore, even if Rhys was emotionally attached to her Caribbean birthplace, the island ultimately fell short of her eagerness to belong. This pain of alienation shaped Rhys's lifelong mistrust and emotional frailty and was heightened by her experience in England. At the age of sixteen, her father arranged that she should go to England in order to study at the Perse School in Cambridge. Her British aunt Clarice, of whom Rhys was afraid, would accompany her during her holidays (Angier 34). At the end of the first term, she left the School on the grounds that she wanted to be an actress (*Smile Please* 101). Accordingly, she joined the Academy of Dramatic Art, but soon she found herself constrained to find a job due to her father's death and the family's economic vulnerability. As Rhys recalls, she found a job as a chorus girl in a musical comedy (*Smile Please* 105). However, her peripatetic employment eventually proved detrimental for her welfare: she was overcome by dislocation, and this pain was made worse by a failed relationship with an English stockbroker, Lancelot Grey Hugh Smith, who broke the relationship of his own accord. Following the abrupt ending of this affair, Rhys fell into depression and spent more than a week scribbling her disturbing memories in a series of exercise books (Angier 79). Even though she was devastated and barely left her room, this period was potentially profitable insofar as the exercise of handwriting may be deemed a form of scriptotherapy. Moreover, this stage of lockdown was crucial for her development as

a writer. The notebooks on which she scrawled her ruminations introduced her to the acclaimed writer Ford Madox Ford and were the basis of some of her fiction, most notably her novel *Voyage in the Dark*.

In the autumn of 1917, her situation changed for the better: she met a half-French, half-Dutch journalist named Jean Lenglet. Angier's characterisation of Lenglet underscores his generosity and modesty: "He must be poor, or he wouldn't stay in Torrington Square. And yet he was so generous—crazily, recklessly generous. ... And he was completely sincere and natural, because he didn't give a damn about ordinary standards" (98). As Angier summarises, even though he was a stranger to her, this foreigner offered her the possibility to flee a life full of boredom and coercion (99). For Rhys, this evasion meant freedom, as from the outset she had been oppressed by a country with which she was disenchanted. Hence, she left England and married Lenglet in 1919. From that moment onwards, Rhys led an itinerant life, living in such diverse places as The Hague, Vienna, Budapest, and Paris. This nomadic way of life and her economic precariousness made it burdensome to raise her daughter Maryvonne, who was born in 1922 and left in a clinic in Brussels (Plante, "A Remembrance" 259). During her second stay in Paris, Rhys tried to earn money by translating into English the articles which her husband wrote in French and by selling them to English newspapers and magazines (*Smile Please* 153). Whilst inquiring for a publisher interested in her husband's work, Rhys met Ford Madox Ford through Mrs. Adam, who worked on the *Daily Mail* (*Smile Please* 154–155). Ford was the editor of the *Transatlantic Review* and was soon interested in her black exercise books, which had been typed into an unpublished novel provisionally entitled "Triple Sec" (*Smile Please* 155). He realised the potential that Rhys had as a writer and enticed her into writing short stories (Angier 134).

By 1927, Rhys had managed to publish her first collection of short stories, much praised by Ford, entitled *The Left Bank and Other Stories*. Still, the happiness of this apparently

promising period in Paris was disturbed by two circumstances: Lenglet's arrest and Rhys's affair with Ford. In 1924, Lenglet was arrested and subsequently imprisoned for illegal entry into France and, apparently, for "currency offences" (Angier 125). Aware of Rhys's destitute state, Ford and his partner, the Australian painter Stella Bowen, invited her to dinner and asked her to stay with them (Plante, "A Remembrance" 260). Ford was certainly attracted to Rhys and eventually became her lover. Yet, by the time Rhys's first collection of short stories was published under the mentorship of Ford, Rhys's affair with the writer had come to an end (O'Connor 65). As for her marriage to Lenglet, the 'affaire Ford' led to their separation and subsequent divorce in 1933. As Plante summarises in his tentative reconstruction of Rhys's chronology, Lenglet wrote Rhys a cordial letter in which he asked for a divorce and for their daughter to be educated in Holland ("A Remembrance" 265). Rhys agreed to both petitions and, in 1934, she married her literary agent, Leslie Tilden Smith. In that same year, she published her third novel, *Voyage in the Dark*.

In 1939, Rhys wrote her fourth and last interwar modernist novel, *Good Morning, Midnight*. However, Rhys explains in Vreeland's interview: "But then war was declared, almost immediately, and they didn't want books. . . . I was forgotten and I gave up writing" (234). In a footnote to Wyndham and Melly's compilation of Rhys's letters, it is explained that, although the agreement between Lenglet and Rhys considered that their daughter should spend the holidays with her mother, when the war began she decided to remain with her father (*Letters* 26). This circumstance, together with her dislike of England, could be said to have worsened her overarching feeling of dislocation and, in a way, might be said to have contributed to her disappearance from the literary panorama from 1939 and 1966. Even if her physical and mental fragility affected the quantity of her literary production, her creative spark was rekindled in 1949. It is in this year that the actress Selma Vaz Dias contacted her because she was interested in dramatising *Good Morning, Midnight*. Rhys was enthralled by Dias's rediscovery of her

work and set her sights on resuming her writing: “You’ve already lifted the numb hopeless feeling that stopped me writing for so long” (*Letters* 61). Although Rhys published little work during this apparently fruitless period, she wrote poetry, letters, short stories and even drama (Johnson and Moran 3). Most importantly, from 1957 to 1965 she minutely revised and polished the drafts of what was to become her most celebrated work: *Wide Sargasso Sea*. This novel won the WH Smith Literary Award and brought the 76-year-old Rhys the success that had eluded her since the 1940s. Moreover, Wyndham notes that life became more pleasing for the frequently disillusioned Rhys: she widened her social circle and made plans to overhaul her cottage in Devon (12).

It should be noted that two essential figures in the revival of Rhys’s prosperity were Diana Athill and Francis Wyndham, both of them working for the publishing company André Deutsch. They were supportive listeners when her emotional stability was at stake and gave her unconditional advice during her burdensome amending of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rhys’s 1966 novel was published by André Deutsch, and so were her two ensuing short story collections: *Tigers Are Better Looking* (1968) and *Sleep It Off, Lady* (1976). Rhys’s last work is an autobiography entitled *Smile Please*. This fragmented work was left unfinished as Rhys passed away while working on it. On 9th April 1979, she had a fall and consequently fractured her hip (Pizzichini 302). She did not survive the complications deriving from her hip surgery and died on 14th May 1979. As Athill recalls in her foreword to *Smile Please*, during the last four winters of her life Rhys found in the novelist David Plante a sympathetic friend who typed out the material composing the first part of her unfinished autobiography (7). Both the first half—dealing with Dominica—and a second, unrevised part dealing with her first seventeen years in Europe are fundamental for understanding her writing process and, chiefly, the interdependence between autobiography and fiction in her work.

It is not surprising to find that, as a life story, *Smile Please* tackles many of the traumatic experiences undergone by Rhys, though not as painstakingly as in her fiction or in some of her papers. Just as her autobiography helps Rhysian critics read her emotional wounds in context, so did it enable Rhys to make sense of such happenings once again. Indeed, as explained above, it can be inferred from her interest in writing about herself that such an endeavour was primarily therapeutic. As for the attention paid to trauma in critical readings of Rhys's *oeuvre*, it has been from the outset touched upon as integral to her heroines' life experience, the close reading of the novels being often enriched by allusions to the author's own ordeal. However, despite the centrality of her women's psyche in any insight into her literature, there is little research that brings to the fore the notion of 'trauma' in relation to Rhys's literary world. In the early years of Rhysian criticism, her protagonists—and, by the same token, herself—were frequently categorised as passive victims without poring over the fractures of the psyche underlying their sluggishness. In the wake of the consolidation of trauma theory as a critical framework, some studies that explicitly and extensively address trauma in Rhys's work have been published. To mention some pathfinding literature on this issue, Victoria Burrows's *Whiteness and Trauma* (2004) explores the absence of a strong mother-daughter relationship as central to the alienation defining her experience and that of her characters. A thorough discussion of the fragmentation lying at the core of both the traumatic experience and the style used by Rhys to represent it is given in Maren Linett's "'New Words, New Everything': Fragmentation and Trauma in Jean Rhys" (2005). These works' findings on how trauma shaped Rhys's relationship with herself and her writing process are expanded on in Patricia Moran's book *Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetics of Trauma* (2007). This work explores the aesthetics of her trauma narratives in relation to some traumatic sexual experiences she experienced during her early years, most significantly an abuse by a family friend that is explained in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

In view of the debates raised in the three twenty-first-century insights of trauma theory mentioned above, it is undeniable that there is a strong link between Rhys's personal experience of trauma and the misfortunes of her characters. Such a connection accounts for the suitability of a combined approach to her work through the foci of autobiography and trauma, which are the two main pillars of this dissertation. Still, as is demonstrated throughout the close reading of her modernist novels, her work exposes how self-representation and the depiction of trauma entail going beyond the exclusively personal. As Wyndham remarks in the introduction to her letters, "[s]he confessed to being an egotist, but she did not seem to me to be crudely self-centred" (10). What Rhys is doing through life-writing is actually partaking of the modernist endeavour to look within and represent life as perception. This aspiration for depicting life in a different way from realist mimesis is described in Virginia Woolf's influential essay "Modern Fiction", in which she describes life as "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (160). The analysis of her texts shows that Rhys's depiction of life involves, in keeping with Woolf's thesis, delving into both her consciousness and that of her characters: through the stories of her female characters, she displays how she made sense of that "luminous halo" surrounding her, namely her inner life and external reality. With respect to the latter, as she depicts her relationship with the worlds of interwar London and Paris, Rhys captures the alienated subject's responses to the environment with which she was constantly interacting, whether through observation or through verbal speech. Remarkably enough, such an interaction granted her access to the daily suffering of underprivileged outcasts, with whom she eventually forged a bond of solidarity based on relatability. Her intimate link with a mass of people that could be denominated 'the underdog' gave way to an autobiographical writing that deviates from the exclusively personal testimony. As is explored in the section that follows, such a necessary bond between Rhys and larger communities has a key significance in her self-representational work, and thereby it

could be said to underpin the approach to her modernist novels in this dissertation. Indeed, this testimonial dimension of Rhys's modernist novels is what my approach aims to contribute to previous studies on Rhys, autobiography and trauma: it is sought to flesh out the workings of trauma in Rhys's female protagonists but also to read it against the experience of the author and of other shattered underprivileged characters.

1.4. Approaching Rhys through the Limit-Case Focus

This section aims to describe the methodology pursued in this dissertation, which intends to read Rhys's modernist novels as early examples of Gilmore's 'limit-cases'. The high degree of relationality in Rhys's self-representational trauma narratives urges new directions in present-day research into autobiography and trauma in her work. It seems imperative that cutting-edge studies of her writings do not put exclusive emphasis on the parallels between fiction and the author's biography; even if these preliminary connections are essential, they do not evince whether the fictional characters and the autobiographical subject can stand for others. An analysis that foregrounds both the intricacies of the traumas revisited in these novels and these stories' testimonial nature is deemed necessary for a re-evaluation of Rhys's literature as a full-fledged portrayal of the self characterised by its relatability and its timelessness. In the same fashion, the transcendence of the autobiographical subject's centrality could lead to new research that reconsiders the self-seeking detachment that is so widely depicted in modernist fiction. Indeed, my approach to her interwar underscores the relationality mentioned above to bring them into dialogue with contemporary issues such as the hyperconnectivity of present-day society and globalisation.

This dissertation sets out to reinvigorate the classical autobiographical approach to Rhys's fiction. In a way, it closely examines the interpenetration between the private and the

public in a traumatic testimony that goes beyond exclusively representing her individual plights. With this purpose in mind, Rhys's modernist novels will be read from the lens of Gilmore's theory, thus elucidating to what extent these trauma narratives test the limit between factual accuracy and fiction and that of representativeness. What is encouraged then is to delve into Rhys's revisitation of her emotional wounds through writing, putting the focus on two key processes that echo the two limits discussed by Gilmore: firstly, how the necessary debunking of the demand for autobiographical accuracy enables Rhys to set a framework for the depiction of trauma and, subsequently, her better understanding of this experience as she translates it into persistent topics that give unity to her work; secondly, how the individual stories told in Rhys's work are representative of larger social groups, thus evincing the commonality of such experiences and these narratives' testimonial nature. In an attempt to abide by Gilmore's concern with representativeness, this dissertation's methodology will gradually leak the commonality of Rhys's and her female protagonists' experiences. This gradual disclosure makes it necessary to firstly examine the parallels between the fictional elements in the selected corpus and the author's biography, and finally to argue to what extent these traumatic experiences relate to those of other characters belonging to specific social groups. Just like Gilmore's theory challenges two key limits of autobiography—truthfulness and representativeness—this dissertation establishes a network of relationships at two levels: first, the links between fiction and biography will be identified; after this preliminary step has been accomplished, there will be a second layer of connections between the individual testimony and the collective one.

As regards the preliminary connection between factual accuracy and fiction, the four Rhys's modernist novels have been read against her biography. For this purpose, there has been a careful selection of (auto)biographical evidence that uncovers the profoundly private life of this Caribbean writer and, most importantly, her worldview and her traumas. First and

foremost, some key passages from *Smile Please* will be read alongside her fiction, with an emphasis on how the author reminisces about and depicts her childhood and early adolescence in Dominica. A great deal of the factual information to be scrutinised has been retrieved from Angier's biography, whose ideas are complemented by references to the twenty-first-century works by Pizzichini and Seymour. As for Staley's critical study, it is mentioned very sporadically; as an early examination of Rhys's life and work, it contains inaccuracies that were amended with the appearance of new biographical research (D'Costa 400). The significance of such biographical studies notwithstanding, the interest of this dissertation lies in the exploration of Rhys's personal papers. Such documents enable a compelling perusal of the author's experiences and state of mind that matches the purposes of this study. Indeed, the purpose is not to question the papers' degree of trustworthiness, but to survey them as part of Rhys's endeavour to understand her traumas and as testimonies that are potentially representative. As a matter of fact, it should be remembered that, in Gilmore's words, limit-case testimonies "confront how the limits of autobiography, multiple and sprawling as they are, might conspire to prevent some self-representational stories from being told at all if they were subjected to a literal truth test or evaluated by certain objective measures" (*The Limits* 14). Considering this, relevant data will be provided from a selection of her letters.⁹ Similarly, some central traumas and affairs will be supported by a choice of written material found in the Jean Rhys Archive at the McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa. A selection of these unpublished papers, which comprise typeset autobiographical sketches and essays alongside unbridled handwritten notebooks, provide an untold insight into some of the key sources of Rhys's traumas, thus allowing for an innovative examination of both the author's representation of trauma and the intersection of fiction and factual accuracy. Besides being priceless evidence of Rhys's process

⁹ This correspondence was compiled by Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly and covers the period spanning from 1931 to 1966.

of writing trauma, some of these personal papers offer interesting conclusions regarding her feeling of (un)belonging and, more specifically, the sentimental contrast between Dominica and England. Finally, there is some occasional but explanatory reference to interviews and meetings such as Plante's and Vreeland's.

The link between (auto)biography and fiction being established, it is essential to outline how the second layer of rhizomatic connections has been created. The goal is to elucidate how Rhys's selected fiction links the experiences of both the author and her female protagonists to the concerns of other underdog fictional characters and actual communities. Therefore, firstly some sociological research will be done into the circumstances and welfare of two social groups in the context of interwar Britain: first, the pre-World War I and interwar migrants coming from both prevailing and former colonies of the British Empire, especially the West Indies, citizens that, despite having already settled in Britain, found themselves belittled by the hierarchical structures of colonialism; second, a category that Juliana Lopoukhine et al. designate "interwar bohemian female *déclassées*" (1). Broadly speaking, this category encompasses negligible and dependent women that are not as poverty-stricken as the lower classes, but nevertheless need to be taken care of economically and emotionally. These women are bohemian insofar as they have a certain sensitivity to art and beauty. However, their aesthetic awareness is not tackled in this study; the somewhat bohemian quality to be explored is their being wanderers. They tirelessly roam around the streets of London and Paris in search of a male lover that supports them with funding and that temporarily gives them the emotional security they lack. This is not an attempt to biasedly categorise the Caribbean writer or her apparently destitute women. Rather, the aim is to identify some shared traits that account for the potential of the selected fiction's testimonies to be representative.

Secondly, some relationships will be established between the individual experiences of the female protagonists and those of other characters in the four selected novels. Though not

being victims of trauma *per se*, these characters of apparently minor relevance can be said to share similar concerns to those of the protagonists and the autobiographical subject. It is through the interaction between the four female protagonists (Marya, Julia, Anna and Sasha) and other destitute characters—male or female—that a dynamic of testimony is enacted. Their contact at certain points in the novels leads to the coalescence of the misery of the four Rhys women and that of their acquaintances. Some of these down-and-out characters may be classified within the two categories mentioned above, so they will be briefly discussed in the respective chapters devoted to these social groups. However, a great portion of them resists categorisation; indeed, they display the liminality characterising Rhys and, to a certain extent, her sense of unbelonging. These unclassifiable outcasts living in London and Paris will be collectively discussed in the last chapter as examples of ‘the underdog’.

Having delineated the social groups of which the individual testimonies to be explored are representative, a description of this dissertation’s structure ensues. It should be noted that, given the in-betweenness of both Rhys and her characters, it is implausible—and certainly undesirable—to provide a systematic division into hard-and-fast social categories. Likewise, such liminality problematises the assignment of a specific collective trauma to the groups to be discussed. Thus, the social categories that have been introduced in the paragraph above and on which this study’s structure is based are open to redefinition. It should also be stressed that, though touching on colonial issues and gender roles, this dissertation does not seek to elucidate whether Rhys can be considered a postcolonial and/or feminist writer. Such debate goes beyond the scope of this study and might deter from its main objective: reading her modernist novels as early examples of limit-case autobiographies.

The analysis to be conducted in the present dissertation is divided into three chapters (Chapters 2, 3 and 4), each of them devoted to the plight of one social group Rhys’s modernist limit-cases can be deemed representative of. All these chapters follow the same sequence: the

interwar novels by Rhys's are discussed chronologically, and the close reading is divided into four numbered subsections, each of them devoted to one novel; finally, it should be mentioned that the analysis is preceded by an introductory subsection and followed by some concluding remarks aimed at summarising the main findings in the corresponding chapter, both the onset and the coda being left unnumbered. In the case of Chapters 2 and 3, the introductory subsections involve a brief discussion of the two social groups identified above together with an account of some key events in the author's biography that help better understand the limit-case analysis to be conducted. As regards Chapter 4, the preliminary subsection includes a definition and survey of the 'underdog' category in Rhys's fiction. However, virtually no biographical information is included in it, and the number of parallels between biography and fiction in this last chapter's close reading is notably lesser than that of the two previous chapters. The reason why the last chapter presents a somewhat sparse quantity of biographical information is that the logic of this study closely follows Gilmore's development of the limit-case testimony. It should be remembered, then, that testing the limit between factual accuracy and fiction is an important but preliminary stage. As such, it is expected that, by the end of Chapter 3, this initial stage has already been completed. Hence, Chapter 4 is a section that manifests the culmination of the testimony's movement towards representativeness and, subsequently, the achievement of a new jurisdiction of trauma. Not coincidentally, this final chapter builds a dynamic of testimony by linking the female protagonists' traumatic testimonies to the disquietude of other underdog characters. These marginalised characters do not necessarily fall into the two social groups discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, and so their involvement with the stories of both the protagonists and Rhys's contributes to expanding the boundless breadth of the selected novels' limit-case testimonies.

Chapter 2 revolves around the trauma of deracination that collectively links the conglomeration of migrants formerly dwelling in colonies of the British Empire or else

territories that had been subject to British colonial rule. There will be a focus on how this pain of unbelonging is translated into a profound dislike of England and a sense of metropolitan alienation that is mainly experienced in London. Given that Rhys was born in a Caribbean island, the expatriate group that is discussed in more depth is the Caribbean colonial community living in interwar England. Chapter 3 deals with the “interwar bohemian female *déclassées*”. In this case, the analysis is focused more on their inefficiency in living by themselves than on the degree of freedom entailed by their indefatigable wandering. The specific women to be examined are emotionally and economically dependent on men that, besides belonging to an upper class, are generally older than them. These alleged benefactors, largely based on some of Rhys’s lovers, take advantage of their mistresses, manipulating them and often taking sexual advantage of them. When they grow tired of their protégées, they abandon them, and at this point the cumulation of their abrupt departure and the microaggressions through which they try to ensure dominance over their female companions aggravate these women’s physical and emotional vulnerability while enhancing their pain of alienation. In addition to the set of traumas based on male-based oppression, some of these Rhysian characters undergo sex-related PTSD. On certain occasions, the mental paralysis of these characters—and certainly that of Rhys—is strengthened by experiences such as sexual harassment and even an unintended pregnancy that leads to abortion. This discussion will hence bring to light the negative after-effect of resorting to male lovers in search of emotional and economic shelter.

Chapter 4 explores the limit of representativeness in a slightly different way. Rather than analyse how Rhys and her heroines speak for particular social groups, it displays the links between their histories and those of other characters in the respective novels. They will be collectively discussed under the label of ‘the underdog’. These marginalised individuals show varying degrees of the alienation and gloom that characterise both Rhys and her heroines. A dark horse from the outset, Rhys felt particularly attached to the underprivileged ever since she

was a child, and little by little her empathetic bond with these helpless people enabled her to create a literary system of affiliation that suits the aim to destabilise the barriers between social inclusion and exclusion.

1.5. The Texts

Prior to the analysis of Rhys's modernist fiction from the lens of the limit-case theory, there should be a description of the corpus of analysis, which comprises her interwar novels: *Quartet* (1928)—originally published as *Postures*—, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939). In the paragraphs that follow, the novels are firstly placed in the context of modernist art and ideology, putting the focus on how these texts partake in the modernists' interest in exploring the human mind. Then, the type of narrator in the targeted Rhys's texts is briefly discussed. Finally, a succinct summary of the four novels is presented. It should be noted that many of their topics appear in multiple works by the same author, and this frequent revisitation of themes is, as hinted at above, key to understanding how Rhys's modernist novels test the limits of verisimilitude and representativeness as defined by Gilmore. In keeping with their status as autobiographical and potentially relatable, Rhys's texts have often been interpreted in Rhysian criticism as fictional versions of the author at different moments in her life, all the more so as Francis Wyndham argued in 1950 that "essentially the novels deal with the same woman at . . . different stages of her career" ("Inconvenient" 16). Indeed, her modernist novels revolve around female protagonists that, as was the case with the author, are underdog, unwanted and deeply alienated both as early adults and as middle-aged women. Even though their inability to belong in a hostile society is relevant, the central concern in these works is the plunge into their inner world. This descent into their mindset allows for an insight into the suffering of neglected people that transcends any categorisation to do with time, space or even class. In Carr's view, Rhys explores "a dimension of modernist, even

postmodernist consciousness that perhaps only appears elsewhere before the Second World War in Kafka's work" (xvi).

The state-of-the-art exploration of consciousness and the ensuing depiction of trauma make Rhys's interwar novels simultaneously coherent with modernist concerns and an *oeuvre* ahead of its time. Indeed, they present a cutting-edge representation of trauma via a potentially representative testimony. Thus, they have an inherent degree of relationality that might prompt a reconsideration of the modernist emphasis on *individual* inner experience. Not surprisingly, scholars such as Peter Childs leave behind the insistence on modernist writers' apparent aloofness and stasis, remarking that many of them "were in their different ways hybrids, mongrel selves moved by both the voyage out and the voyage in" (63). This idea suggests a re-evaluation of modernist subjectivity, from an almost exclusive accent on the inner self to the criss-crossing that is embraced in the present dissertation. As argued throughout the analysis, the selected works test and ultimately overcome the two key limits in autobiography, and not only is this enterprise aimed at sweeping the boundaries between fiction and facts, or the private and the public; it is an attempt to exploit the liminality of these trauma narratives and propose an approach that takes account of the networks characterising our present-day age.

One of the borders that Rhys's modernist novels blur is that of narrative agency. Rhys's cycle of modernist novels does not restrict itself to a single type of narrator. In the case of the first two novels—*Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*—, the story is told by a narrator that is outside the fictional world, while the events in *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Morning, Midnight* are told in retrospect by the protagonists themselves. Relying on Gérard Genette's distinction according to the narrator's presence or absence in the story, it can be observed that the first two novels make use of the so-called "heterodiegetic narrator" (245). By contrast, in the latter texts the story is told by a narrator that is also a character. Hence, the voice speaking to us is what Genette denominates "homodiegetic narrator" (245), though in this dissertation it

is referred to as “autodiegetic narrator” (Genette 245), a subtype of the homodiegetic narrator that underlines the narrator’s status as the protagonist. It appears imprudent to determine the reasons for this assignment of narrative voices in Rhys’s interwar novels, let alone hypothesise that the autodiegetic narrator in the last two novels hints that they are more self-representational than the previous ones. Such a debate might create a biography-based hierarchy that would not do justice to Rhys’s autobiographical project as a whole. Nevertheless, some explanations for this distribution of narrators could be briefly given. In the case of *Voyage in the Dark*, it may require a character-narrator because it is largely based on Rhys’s diary-like “Black Exercise Book”. Likewise, *Good Morning, Midnight* presents an autodiegetic narrator as its biographical details are more overtly explicit than those in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*. As regards *Quartet*, the choice of a narrator that is outside the story world might imply a decision not to make her affair with Ford Madox Ford too obvious and expose her mentor to further public scandal. The implications of this choice tie in with her agreement that the first edition of the novel by Chatto & Windus was published under the title of *Postures*.

These interpretations notwithstanding, it seems plausible to discuss the novels’ narrative agency as the accomplishment of Rhys’s endeavour to destabilise boundaries. According to Gardiner, these splits in her novels’ narrative voice “internalize the dichotomy between a woman and her society”, the narrators claiming to “see themselves both from the inside and outside, split between being observers and participants” (*The Politics* 24). For the purposes of this dissertation, Gardiner’s key contentions should be explained toward the rear. First, the chasm between observing and participating is closely linked to the double movement of the trauma survivors who ultimately share their testimonies: they firstly undergo the traumatic event and eventually turn their experience into a tangible narrative. At the same time, this evolution may prompt their gradual overthrow of the dichotomy between the individual (female) protagonists and their society. It is through their attestation that they forsake their

seclusion-induced invisibility and become part of a society that can empathise with them. This act of sharing their testimonies facilitates the progression from exclusion to inclusion. In the same way, it enables them to connect with the histories of other characters and social groups, hence making their testimonies representative. Rhys's contrasting assignment of narrative voices, then, reflects the dynamics of the limit-case testimony that this dissertation aims to foreground. In this sense, the somewhat static operation of observing is as important as the active move towards telling. Therefore, the contrast between heterodiegetic and autodiegetic narrators in the selected novels is by no means antagonistic, as both types of narrator contribute to disseminating a testimony that speaks both for oneself and for others.

Quartet revolves around two married couples that are diametrically opposed in terms of vulnerability and belonging: the open-to-attack couple is that of the Polish artist Stephan Zelli and the English Marya, who is the novel's female protagonist; the influential one is that of the Heidlers (H.J. and Lois). Marya is introduced to this upper-middle-class couple by the female artist Esther De Solla after Marya tells her that she knows none of the English people living in Left Bank Paris. Her relationship with the Heidlers is forged when she hears that her husband has been arrested, apparently for selling stolen pictures. They offer that she stays at their studio during Stephan's absence, which will last until he is released from prison. During her stay at the Heidlers', her distress is aggravated by H.J.'s advances, which gradually lead to an affair between the benefactor and his protégée of which Lois is aware. On realising that she is being manipulated by the Heidlers, Marya grows irritable, to the point of forsaking their help and leaving their studio. Even if H.J. and the heroine have several sexual encounters that end with his giving money to her, she decides to live in a room until her husband returns home. The recently released artist shows evident signs of a cumulative trauma heightened by his stay at Fresnes prison, and yet he leaves for Amsterdam shortly after to get some help from a Jewish friend.

While Stephan is abroad, Marya travels to the south of France on a train arranged by H.J. During this getaway, the reappearance of traumatic anxiety coexists with punctual episodes of relief. Eventually feeling disenchanted with Nice, she writes a letter to H.J., asking for money to return home and join Stephan. In Paris, she confesses her affair to her husband. Stephan considers that she has been laughing at him while being Mr Heidler's mistress and resolves to find H.J. and kill him. Marya stops him and tells him that she loves her male protector. After a bitter quarrel, Stephan shakes her and she strikes her forehead against the table. He eventually leaves the room and finds a certain Mademoiselle Chardin, who is waiting for him outside. She entices Stephan into going to a hotel she knows, and he reluctantly accepts to climb into a taxi towards the Gare de Lyon, from which he will probably leave France. As for Marya, she loses consciousness as a result of the struggle with her husband. When she awakens, once again she will find herself neglected and in need of economic shelter, therefore reliving a cycle of abandonment and alienation.

The title of Rhys's second modernist novel, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, captures the very outset of the story. The action starts *in medias res*, after Julia Martin's breakup of her love relationship with Mr Mackenzie, a well-off English man. The 35-year-old protagonist stays at a rickety hotel in Paris, locked down until she recovers from both her rupture and the sense of humiliation stemming from Mackenzie's decision to send her money through his lawyer. When Julia finally puts an end to her confinement, she follows her former lover to express her vexation at his having laughed at her using his solicitor. She lightly slaps him and, as she does so, she arouses the interest of a young man. This man, named George Horsfield, is also a gloomy wanderer that is attracted to Julia's loneliness because she reminds him of himself. After accompanying her to her room, Horsfield makes it clear that he has no sexual yearning for her, giving preference instead to listening to her life story. She tells him that she abandoned London with her husband-to-be after the armistice and that, after leading an itinerant life and

losing a baby, went to Paris by herself. She acknowledges having been in good condition until she met Mackenzie. As regards England, she mentions that her mother and her sister live in London and that she may return there. As a matter of fact, she heads for London in the succeeding days. There seem to be two motivations behind her journey to the metropole: to revisit her family and to meet Neil, an affluent lover from when she was a young adult. While Neil finally agrees to send her a few pounds, her family is, on the whole, reluctant to welcome her, especially in the case of Uncle Griffiths. During her fortnight in London, her mother, who had long been paralysed, passes away. Julia's wavering mindset during the funeral contributes to a confrontation with her sister Norah, after which the maid tells her to go home.

After her scene at the wake, she urges Horsfield, who is in London at that moment, to stay by her side. They spend the night together in her Notting Hill boarding house and the male companion tries to verbalise his particular life story to her, without success. Yet, the following night, she is suddenly alarmed by Horsfield's stroke as they go upstairs, and from that moment on she shows a cold attitude towards her friend. She eventually leaves him, announcing that she is set to return to Paris and that a painter has sent her some money. Back in Paris, Julia receives a letter from Mr Horsfield, in which he encloses ten pounds while excusing himself for being unable to visit her. Alongside the circularity implied by the return to Paris and her stay in a gloomy accommodation, the absence of a companion could be said to perpetuate her destituteness. Nevertheless, as she walks into Les Halles she catches sight of Mr Mackenzie. After having a drink, she borrows a hundred francs from him and the novel ends with their farewell.

Voyage in the Dark explores the alienation undergone by Anna Morgan, an 18-year-old Creole chorus girl that has been living in England for two years. She is torn between the conflicting cultures of her Caribbean native island and the metropolis, and such a clash is enhanced by the back-and-forth movement of her psyche. Besides profoundly disliking

England, Anna has to cope with her fragile emotional bond with her stepmother, Aunt Hester, and her economic vulnerability. Anna attempts to live by her makeshift job as a chorus girl and shares a room with Maudie Beardon, a fellow workmate and friend of hers. By the time they have a respite in Southsea, the two women come across two English men, Jones and Jeffries, and the latter invites Anna to have dinner with him. This rendezvous is the first episode in a love relationship where Walter Jeffries's initial sexual interest in her seems to give way to an urge to look after her. Following an impasse during which Anna gradually recovers from the influenza and further distances herself from Aunt Hester, she goes on a short trip to Savemake Forest with Walter, his cousin Vincent and Vincent's partner, a half-French woman named Germaine Sullivan. It is in this setting that Walter announces her that he is going to New York the following week. After this getaway, Anna receives an unexpected letter from Vincent where he informs her that Walter no longer loves her and that their relationship has come to an end. This episode quickens Anna's particular 'voyage in the dark', both in terms of her traumatic stress and her self-destruction.

During her convalescence period, Anna meets a masseuse named Ethel Matthews, who hires her as a trainee and gives her accommodation. In the meantime, she comes upon Laurie, who had been in a show with her the previous year. She is accompanied by two American men—Carl and Joe—and invites Anna to have a drink in her flat. This casual encounter is the starting point of an issue that is subtly depicted by Rhys and that is touched on in this dissertation's Chapter 3, namely Anna's slippage into prostitution. There is reference to Joe's attempt to kiss her during the first meeting of the four, though what is given more salience is Carl's relationship with her. Carl appears to be the counterpart of his comrade: he is a down-to-earth, solicitous man that grows interested in Anna's state of affairs and gives her money, and still some sexual encounters take place between the two that cast hesitancy on the nature of their bond. The protagonist's culmination of her dismal voyage is manifested in her

pregnancy, apparently by an unidentified man. Walter's cousin provides the funding for Anna's botched abortion, which is covertly tackled in the novel's last pages. In the novel's original *dénouement*, found and published in 1985 by Nancy Hemond Brown, Anna dies following the operation (Murdoch 148). As Mary Hanna remarks, this ending was dismissed by three publishers as it was excessively sordid (132). Following the suggestions by Michael Sadleir, publisher of Constable, she found herself constrained to abbreviate and rewrite it. Hence, the final resolution of the Creole's voyage is an ending where, dazzled by the quinine, she overhears the voices of both the doctor and Laurie before going back to drowsiness.

Rhys's last modernist novel, *Good Morning, Midnight*, features Sasha Jansen, a middle-aged English woman returning to Paris for a recess. This novel narrates her wanderings around the City of Light while plunging into her remembrance of some events of her past accounting for her penchant for solitude. Sasha, whose baptismal name is Sophia, has made her way to the French capital with the help of a female friend, Sidonie, who has lent her the money for the journey. Paris is not new for the protagonist, as she had lived there with her husband Enno and held several posts. Most notably, she lands a job as a boutique receptionist, where she is ridiculed by the store's manager. After the narrator remembers this incident, she briefly relates the unexpected visit of a mysterious man known as the "commis voyageur", who lives next door to hers. Sasha is not pleased by this apparent traveller, so she pushes him back and slams the door. Next, Sasha focuses on one of the main concerns in the novel: the question of ageing. The protagonist is preoccupied by her growing old, and this is enhanced by her desire to dye her hair. Such apprehensiveness is heightened when two customers at Théodore's bar inquire after her, and she misinterprets their words as she thinks that they are dismissing her for being a "*vieille*" (46). This episode triggers a painful memory of her son's death in the clinic, at the age of five weeks. Shortly after she dyes her hair, she bumps into two Russian men that grow interested in her air of melancholy. One of them, Nicholas Delmar, reveals that he also used to

be lonesome and offers to introduce her to a friend of his who is a painter: Serge Rubin, a Russian man of Jewish origin who shows great care for Sasha and gives her a picture of a solitary banjo player.

The most prominent of the acquaintances Sasha makes during her fortnight in Paris is a French-Canadian gigolo called René. He appears to be drawn to her because she projects an image of affluence, and so he lets her know that she lacks both money and a passport. Later, he expresses his yearning to tell her his life story and elicit compassion, to which Sasha consents though being wary of his intentions. Between her first and second meetings with René, there is a sustained analepsis whereby Sasha recalls her itinerant life. She talks about Enno, a journalist whom she married in Holland. The couple set their sights on living in Paris, but they have so little money that they cling on to their respective acquaintances to pay for their journey to the French metropole. In the case of Sasha, she calls on a Mr Lawson she had met in Belgium and is given both a hundred francs and a kiss. As for Enno, he resorts to a waiter who lends them some money on arriving at Calais. Once in Paris, their relationship starts to deteriorate as Enno reproaches her passivity and Sasha grows despondent for spending much time alone, and such a bond is made even more fragile after their baby dies. After recalling this set of events, Sasha narrates how René pays a visit to her and tells her that he is determined to head for London, as he has met a rich American woman. However, she suspects that the gigolo is being untrustworthy because he is still penniless. After having dinner, they visit the International Exhibition and René talks her into going to bed with him. In Sasha's hotel room, they kiss each other but she soon yields to her inertia and asks him to leave. They struggle as the gigolo feels that he has been mistreated, while Sasha urges him to take from her the money he needs. Her destitute companion takes nothing of it, which Sasha appreciates to the point of begging him to come back as he watches him through the window. However, the man entering her room as she undresses is not her friend, but the 'commis voyageur'. As the two silently stare at each

other, Sasha embraces her cryptic neighbour, which leads to the sexual encounter that closes the novel.

Rhys's cycle of modernist novels addresses some recurrent experiences and anxieties that apply to the four heroines. None of them may claim to a permanent abode, thus being content with temporary accommodation in hotel rooms, boarding houses or seedy flats. Their failure to find a fixed dwelling place greatly stems from their destituteness, which they cannot change as they are deprived of both the chance and the initiative to land a stable job. In this context, they are left at the mercy of well-off male lovers, to whom they resort for succour in both economic and emotional terms. Another common trait of these women is their penchant for dressing well, which bespeaks their attempt to regain desirability and respectability. Still, they cannot avoid being ultimately forsaken by the men they love and returning to their initial status, namely that of the unwanted, the outsider or the underdog. In light of these topics, it can be argued that the common denominator of these texts is an issue that engulfs most of the traumatic experiences undergone by the Rhysian protagonists: the pain of alienation. The chapters that follow seek to unpack the intricacies of this insidious form of trauma, considering the matrix of class, gender, cultural and ethnic hierarchies characterising the era depicted by Rhys in her modernist novels.

2. CONDEMNED TO NOWHERENESS: THE FIGHT FOR SOCIAL (RE)CONNECTION AMID METROPOLITAN ALIENATION

This chapter reads the plight of Rhys's protagonists in the context of metropolitan alienation. In this respect, the scope of this multi-faceted phenomenon is narrowed down to focus on these subjects' experience of unbelonging as people who do not fit in the mainstream culture of the European metropolitan centres, especially London's. These isolated individuals remain utterly disengaged from society on the basis of a cultural difference they are constantly reminded of and that gives rise to different forms of traumatic anxiety, the most prominent one being their fear of rejection. The origin of these characters' pain of alienation can be traced back to Rhys's entrance into England in 1907. On her arrival at the port of Southampton, Rhys was shocked by the dampness and colourlessness of her destination. In the unpublished "Essay on England", she comments on her pre-journey expectation that her destination would be a marvellous place: "So to me England was a wonderful place, but all I knew of it was a small brown map on a page of my geography book" (1). Yet, this pre-journey expectation abruptly turned into disappointment, and this early feeling somehow foreshadowed the utter displacement she felt from that moment onwards: "I swear that looking out of the porthole that early morning in Southampton, looking at the dirty grey water, I knew for one instant all that would happen to me" (*Smile Please* 168). Rhys had landed in a stringent world of regulations, distrust and colonial disdain. On her first morning in London, she was reproached by her aloof English aunt for leaving the room unannounced to explore the city, remarking that Rhys's drive was "a most peculiar thing to do" ("Essay on England" 4). By the same token, distinctive features such as her beaming smile and her West Indian accent were tainted as bizarre and unacceptable. In her "Essay on England", she goes on to recall how her elocution teacher urged her to stop smiling (4). Two years afterwards, the directors of the Academy of Dramatic Art advised her against acting on the grounds that she could not properly speak Received Pronunciation (Pizzichini

75). Rhys then had to forcibly adapt to the decorum of Victorian starch so as not to be repudiated. To a certain extent, such an acclimatisation entailed uprooting: both the musicality of her accent and her anarchic initiative to stroll around the city were to be condemned as eccentric, so she had to forgo them for good.

The disapproval of the colonial subjects' unconventional practices mainly stemmed from a general ignorance of the colonies and their cultures. As Arthur Paris remarks, "the hegemonic cultural milieu ignores and overshadows the dense undergrowth of ethnic and minority subcultures" (84). In the case of the West Indies, such a colonial disregard translated into a dim perception of where this overseas territory was located: "The West Indies, as the region was (and still is) called, was 'somewhere else': not Europe, not Africa, not India" (Edmondson 20). Just as the islands' geographical space was assumedly indeterminate, the identity of Caribbean people was generally misinterpreted and reduced to cloudiness. While they were defined in stark opposition to the sophistication of the metropolitan gentleman, they were not construed as the epitome of African savagery (Emery, *Modernism, the Visual* 44). Trapped in a world that condemned them to impreciseness, West Indian critical voices living in the metropolis set their heart on defining their cultural identity. However, this endeavour was to be piecemeal and at times stumbling. One of the factors hindering the process of giving a concise definition of Caribbean identity was that the West Indian immigrants living in interwar Britain were by no means a homogenous community. As explained below, they consisted of two ethnic groups, namely Caribbean blacks and white Creoles. It seems reasonable to hypothesise that their lack of cohesion partly influenced their general bafflement when it came to confronting a situation that Caryl Phillips describes in the following terms: "[They] found themselves trying to deal with loneliness, ambivalence, and confusion about their relationship to British society" (36). This feeling of disorientation gradually gave rise to a pain of alienation that thwarted the aim of disseminating a coherent discourse on Caribbean identity; it took decades to fully articulate

a cultural identity vindicated as intricate and plural (e.g., Brathwaite 114; Deena 10). In brief, the experience of this loosely associated group of pre-WWII colonial exiles might be described as a cultural shock. As with Rhys, their expectations of the metropole were unrealistic. Indeed, they were shaped by the cartographic knowledge of the Mother Land they acquired through school textbooks or by idealistic accounts of relatives who permanently lived there. Such biased explanations often overlooked stories of repudiation and desolation, and it was these woes that they were doomed to undergo as soon as they set foot on the metropolitan centre. Once in the metropolis, one of the main obstacles they encountered was solitude. There is little information on migration from the West Indies to the metropole before 1948,¹⁰ but the existing literature agrees that the number of Caribbean colonial citizens to land in Britain was very limited, even more so in the case of white Creoles.

To better understand the metropolitan alienation that is so pervasive in Rhys's interwar novels, a brief account is needed on the two main types of Caribbean-born immigrants arriving in Britain during the first three decades of the twentieth century. A key factor that might have intensified the unbelonging of solitary subjects like Rhys was that there was no such thing as a well-defined community of West Indian Creoles in interwar Britain. Indeed, the vast majority of immigrants coming from Dominica, Jamaica or the British Guiana were blacks. By 1900, some scattered communities of Afro-Caribbean seamen had found their places in areas such as the ports of Bristol and Liverpool and the East End of London (Adi 23). Furthermore, after the outbreak of the First World War increasingly larger groups of Afro-Caribbean men headed for

¹⁰ On 22 June 1948, the *SS Empire Windrush* docked at Tilbury, in Essex, with 492 West Indian migrants on board. The arrival of this passenger liner heralded the first wave of mass migration from the Caribbean colonies to the United Kingdom, the so-called "Windrush Generation" paving the way for the reshaping of contemporary Britain as a multicultural state (e.g., Weiss 163). Concomitantly, diasporic movements to the Mother Land were facilitated by the British Nationality Act 1948, which conferred British nationality and citizenship to members of former British colonies. The unprecedented influx of immigrants from the colonies, which extended over more than twenty years, was to prove decisive for the redefinition of postcolonial regimes, and metropolitan centres such as London underwent a deep transformation from being a white-oriented site of alienation to gradually becoming what Michael Perfect has denominated "a form of communal diversity" (5).

Britain to serve in the army or work as labourers (Matera 22). Whereas the scant research into such sporadic migratory movements refers to these groups of Caribbean blacks as communities (e.g., Bressey and Romain 103; Chapman 3), in the case of white Creoles it is simply mentioned that, sporadically, some of them were sent to Britain unaccompanied for educational purposes. Both their amount and their expectations were, thus, far different from those of Caribbean blacks. The restricted number of West Indian white Creoles who sailed to the British metropole comprised late adolescents and adults from more privileged classes that sought to pursue post-secondary studies (Cantres 3; Conway 373). The unsteady dripping of West Indian students such as Rhys translated into little chance of interaction with other compatriots and, in a way, it contributed to their vulnerability. Indeed, the newly arrived exiles had few acquaintances in an unfamiliar land, and very often most of these associates were British people who might look at them with unsympathetic eyes.

At the Perse School for Girls in Cambridge, Rhys was certainly subject to her English schoolmates' disapproval. Being the only non-English student in class, she was marked as an outsider from the outset. As Seymour highlights, her classmates nicknamed her "West Indies" (40), and she was also mocked by virtue of her pitch and accent (Angier 40). In a letter to Selma Vaz Dias, Rhys recalls that she was "suspected by all (most unjustly) of being a Savage from the Cannibal Islands" (*Letters* 201). When it came to expressing her stance, her speeches were often accused of being exaggerated by her English tutors (Pizzichini 64). In keeping with the school's academic stuffiness and disregard for subjectivity, Rhys found in London an utter lack of empathy: "This is what Jean could not stand: the impersonality of the city; its pitiless disregard for individuals" (Pizzichini 52). Such a blindness to the circumstances of others condemned Rhys and her contemporary fellow citizens to live on the margins of metropolitan society: their stories were bound to remain unknown to a nation that showed no interest in spotting Dominica or Jamaica on the map.

Rhys's social circle in London was narrow, and virtually none of her acquaintances could identify with her experience as a displaced colonial expatriate. In this context, her footprints were likely to run the risk of erasure, like those of other Caribbean migrants. Similarly, the (un)shareability of her testimony was greatly affected by her liminality as a white Creole.¹¹ As Cristina-Georgiana Voicu has noted, white Creoles' complex position ultimately condemns them to what she calls "*in-between-ity*" (35; emphasis in the original). As was the case with West Indians at large, colonial discourse placed white Creoles in a grey category: they were second-rate whites but nonetheless evidently different from Afro-Caribbeans (Rosenberg 186). Torn between the conflicting cultures of colony and metropolis, they are unable to state that they fully belong to a certain place. Indeed, Rhys stated in 1959: "My mother's family was Creole My great grandfather was a Scot. As far as I know I am white—but I have no country really now" (*Letters* 172). Even if they show a degree of attachment to their birthplaces, neither Rhys nor her Creole characters are one with their native islands: they become foreigners as they eventually lose the Caribbean landscape as homeland (Voicu 36).

The liminality-induced loss of the homeland goes hand in hand with a deep sense of dislocation that seems to have haunted many West-Indian white Creoles like Rhys throughout their lives. Nevertheless, this pain of alienation does not exclusively stem from the forfeiture of the insular landscape: the cultural disorientation of white Creoles may be said to be rooted in their being "trapped between two disdainful cultures" (Sternlicht 118). In the West Indies, many had actively participated in slavery, and hence were repudiated by the Afro-Caribbean population. Following the Slavery Abolition Act (1833), which put an end to slavery in the British colonies, the former members of the white plantocracy—whites and white Creoles—

¹¹ Gregg explains that the term Creole refers to "a descendant of European settlers born or living for an extended period in the West Indies or Central or South America" (ix).

grew vulnerable and unwanted. Having been slaveowners in Dominica, Rhys's ancestors similarly underwent the decline of both their family and the colonial system at large:

Rhys was exposed early on to a colonial system already in decline. This decline was directly reflected in the status of her family: her maternal great-grandfather had once been a slave holder and master of a prosperous sugar plantation, but due to emancipation (1834) and devalued sugar prices, this plantation had become by the 1850s a derelict estate. (Konzett 128)

The shock of the new measure alongside the mounting post-slavery uprisings against their former masters gave rise to a feeling of displacement in the white Creole community. Besides being impoverished, many felt helpless in affective terms and out of place in the colony. Victoria Burrows notes that this situation prompted a "collective stasis" among white Creoles, who suspected that the metropolis had cold-shouldered them (26). Indeed, the Empire condemned them as immoral for their role in the slavocracy (Stoddard 80), and during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries they were also ascribed the qualities of indolence and licentiousness (Ramchand 33). As a result of the double rejection explained above, white Creoles found themselves caught in a situation that Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell terms "the paradoxes of belonging" (281–282): they attempted to find a strong sense of belonging in their birthplaces, and yet they remained social outcasts in a place they could never call home.

The exile in the metropolis of these liminal subjects only contributed to perpetuating their feelings of unwantedness and displacement. As David Lambert argues, they were "a white other against which metropolitan British identity was formulated" (16). Marked as different from the outset, they were doomed to remain uneasy throughout their experience in a foreign country. Having been deserted by both their birthplaces and the motherland, they perceived what Judith Herman has identified as a fundamental feeling in trauma victims: the loss of a

“basic sense of trust”, victims feeling “utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection” (52). In this context, Jean Rhys—alongside writers such as the Dominican Phyllis Shand Allfrey (1908-1986) and the Jamaican Eliot Bliss (1903-1990)—was faced with the challenge of redefining her cultural identity through writing, and this could only be attained after an arduous process of self-introspection that would allow her to fathom her pain of alienation. The rekindling of an obliterated identity via storytelling was to be onerous: in addition to the problem of lacking an empathetic listener, this process necessarily involved coming to terms with and narrativising trauma, especially the pain of displacement and deracination. Rhys was thus confronted with the following challenges: first, she should revisit an individual experience of alienation that was both shattered in shape and shattering for the self; then, she would get a better understanding of her traumas by writing about them.

In the light of their traumatic nature, Rhys’s narratives of alienation, from her interwar short stories and novels to the early postmodernist novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, show a degree of fragmentation that is revealing of both the author’s and her heroines’ disoriented psyche. Indeed, none of them manages to fully grasp their traumas, and this turns their resulting testimonies ambivalent and perplexing. In the same way, the identity of Rhys’s outcasts is far from clear-cut. As victims of deracination, they lack a home to identify with, and this translates into the depiction of fluid identities that, in many cases, leave the enigma of the heroines’ origin unresolved, the only unambiguous case being the portrayal of Anna Morgan as a white Creole. Nonetheless, such a fragmentation and ambiguity could be addressed in a positive light. As Maren Linett observes, her fragmentary style is primarily “strategic and mimetic”, as it serves the purpose of undermining dominant discourses (439). What then characterises the four modernist novels is the collapse of a uniform self alongside a breach in the linearity of time and discourse. Such a fissure brings about ambivalence, and this hesitation may ultimately

bring about the destabilisation of rigid colonial constructions of identity. On a similar note, Konzett argues: “Rhys’s fictive world . . . explodes any myth of cultural uniformity and synchronicity, grounding the construction of culture in the conflicting middle-positions that determine the negotiation of identity” (132). In accordance, the suggestion of an imprecise identity becomes a witty strategy that aims to demystify the power dynamics inherent to the colonial gaze. Hence, ambiguity evolves from a disorienting quality into a relational method that enables the questioning of colonial hierarchy.

The relationality latent in the liminal identity of both Rhys and her female protagonists ties in with the rhizomatic nature of limit-case testimonies. As can be seen in the analysis that follows, all four novels profit from the dynamic power of ambivalence as a way out of a cultural uniformity that would condemn interwar colonial expatriates to oblivion. By amalgamating her traumatic experience and the fictional story of her displaced characters, she forges a representative history that sidesteps the assignment of identity labels. As Sandra Paquet remarks, she takes her psychocultural polycentrism as the core of her artistry, ultimately suggesting that “nothing about identity is fixed or monolithic” (224). This idea of identity as unstable and fragmented soon gained ground in modernist cultural productions, in keeping with the uncertainty and the sense of radical break with the past defining the post-1900 era. The reconstruction of modern Western society after undergoing a concatenation of ruptures—whether political, cultural, or epistemological—entailed a touch-and-go process of “reformulating the self” (Fordham 35) that was central to modernism. Such remaking contributes to showing that, drawing on Zygmunt Bauman’s metaphor of ‘liquid modernity’, modernism is already pointing to the overcoming of a view of identity as a set-in-stone construct. The ‘hardness’ of modernity, in the words of Bauman (*Liquid 2*), gives way to a liquidity that translates into a fluid, unfixed identity (32) that postmodern theory brings to centre stage.

Against the solidity and rootedness of official discourse, Rhys approaches identity—be it gender-related, social, or cultural—as “always in process” (Dell’Amico 1). As suggested in this chapter, the permeability of cultural identity could be seen as a harbinger of a fluid or liquid testimony that makes Rhys’s story dialogic and, hence, relatable. It is through this dialogue, therefore, that her trauma narratives may become ultimately representative of those colonial subjects experiencing metropolitan alienation while advocating a re-evaluation of an identity largely misread and neglected by the dominant discourse of the Empire. As a matter of fact, Daphne Grace contends the following about autobiographical writers like Rhys:

[They] take on the role of witness bearers and documenters of their own traumatic experience as well as the wider socio-political implications of that historical moment to the community. The identity that is forged through such texts transcends gender and race, and . . . writers arguably form a trans-national group regardless of national identity or ethnicity. (71–72)

Through her limit-case testimonies, Rhys correspondingly engages in the transcendence of identity-related barriers. The uncertainty as to her characters’ origins and sense of belonging may point to the shareability of these traumatic histories: they are not exclusive, as they portray a common experience of displacement and misrecognition. In a way, they aim to reinterpret the in-betweenness of both Rhys and her heroines; far from being thwarting, Rhys’s limit-case testimonies are affinitive and potentially powerful, as they give visibility to marginalised social groups while questioning the validity of colonial discourses on identity. In summary, they are a token of resilience that allows for a positive redefinition of liminal identities while generating historical bonds between colonial immigrants living in pre-WWI and interwar Britain.

Before close-reading the four selected novels by Rhys, it should be underscored that the traumas to be discussed in the context of metropolitan experience mostly bring to mind Maria

Root's notion of 'insidious trauma'. In this sense, this chapter seeks to examine how Rhys's leading characters are distressed by a never-ceasing threat that they may be further devastated. As soon as they leave their temporary abodes to venture into the outside world, their hypervigilance is enhanced. Nearly any element of the metropole, from its residents to its streets, is part of a web of stressors whose cumulative effect insidiously shatters the already fractured mind of Rhys's cultural misfits. Their resulting angst translates into a series of alienation-related anxieties, such as a sense of imprisonment and an inability to envisage a clear future, that the analysis below intends to unpack.

2.1. The Captivity of the "Strayed Animal" and Mental Exile in *Quartet*

The trauma experienced by the first Rhys woman to be discussed, Marya Zelli, is greatly informed by her relation to the Heidlers. Whereas the chapter on the figure of the interwar *déclassée* focuses more thoroughly on the protagonist's relationship with Mr Heidler, based on Rhys's affair with Ford Madox Ford, the present section explores how her stay with this couple heightens her insidious metropolitan alienation. An early penetration into Marya's unbelonging is given in the opening paragraphs. As she roams around the Boulevard de Montparnasse, her displacement is suggested by the aloofness of her gaze: "Her long eyes slanted upwards towards the temples and were gentle and oddly remote in expression" (*Quartet* 7). Both the remoteness and the oddity of her countenance may hint at her feeling out of place while she walks with no apparent destination. Nevertheless, it is not exactly Paris that makes her feel displaced. Indeed, the lively atmosphere of Montparnasse is one of her few sources of comfort. This was also the case with Rhys,¹² who acknowledged that the ambience of Paris helped her

¹² In a letter to Francis Wyndham written in September 1959, she declared: "When I say write for love I mean that there are two places for me. Paris (or what it was to me), and Dominica" (*Letters* 171).

propel her literary career (Vreeland 226). In Rhys's words, "Whenever I had some money, I'd shoot back to Paris. Paris sort of lifted you up" (Vreeland 234).

As disclosed later, what upsets Marya is her perception of the street she is walking along as "own sister to the Tottenham Court Road", and this resemblance "depressed her" (*Quartet* 7). Reading this passage against Rhys's biography, the reference to Tottenham points to the period in her life following her abandonment by Lancelot Grey Hugh Smith in 1912. During this stage of inertia, she barely left her room in Tottenham and was possessed by an unappeasable sadness that accompanied her for good (*Smile Please* 120). As Wyndham remarks in his introduction to Rhys's letters, "the whole earth had become inhospitable to her after the shock of that humdrum betrayal" (10). The remembrance of this area in London then evokes the crystallisation of the author's deep pain of alienation. Taking this into account, Marya's allusion to Tottenham Court Road relates her displacement to an experience in London. The allusion to this origin of dislocation is strategic for two main reasons. Firstly, the memory of Tottenham Court Road foreshadows what is bound to be the main booster of alienation for the female protagonist: her imminent introduction to the Heidlrs, an English couple who will aggravate her destituteness. Secondly, the connection between such a estranging place for her and the assumedly customary act of streetwalking appears to hint at the insidious nature of her trauma: her feeling of unbelonging. In this respect, what may be depressing her is the awareness that she is an outcast who could at any moment be subject to disdain by people that seem to know both the city and the system better than she does. The displaced heroine's cumulative stress, which manifests itself as a combination of alertness and despondency, is a central concern in all the modernist novels, and in the case of *Quartet* it is greatly fuelled by the influence of the Heidlrs.

The initial get-together of Marya and the Heidlrs already marks the prevailing sense of dislocation haunting the protagonist. As Nagihan Haliloğlu contends, these meetings "serve to

reproduce the ideology of that society and are foundational moments for the construction of identity” (113). The narrator’s account of the topics dealt with in the conversation reflects the exclusion to which Marya is susceptible, a marginalisation that, bearing in mind the constant reproduction of ideology highlighted by Haliloğlu, she will experience time and again: “They discussed eating, cooking, England and, finally, Marya, whom they spoke of in the third person as if she were a strange or at any rate a strayed animal—one not quite of the fold” (12). From the outset, the Heidlens are marking her as an interloper. As suggested by their use of the third person, they seem not to be giving the floor to her, and this is a hint that she will never really belong to their social circle. What is more, their perception of her as a drifting outcast might imply that they feel pity for her. Such a condescending attitude is closely related to that of Rhys’s English classmates and tutors at the Perse School. Just like Rhys was scorned due to her unconventional pitch and manners, the outcast protagonist of her first novel is belittled for being different. In this case, she is likewise looked down on because of her identity. At one point during the supper, Mr Heidler—named H.J.—asks her: “But you are English—or aren’t you?” (12). The relevance given to identity in the conversation is accounted for by the appearance of this query immediately after an asterisk marking a time ellipsis. Moreover, the dash reflects H.J.’s hesitancy and hence the lack of certainty surrounding Marya’s obscure identity.

Marya assures H.J. that she is English (12), and yet it appears that, when being close to the Heidlens, she feels at odds with her alleged Englishness. By way of illustration, after she is informed that her husband has been arrested, there is reference to her distress at the possibility of coming across English-speaking people is expressed: “In three minutes I’ll hear somebody talking English. In two minutes, in a minute” (22). She mulls over this nerve-racking likelihood as she emerges from the metro station at the Place Denfert-Rochereau, direly looking for her acquaintance Miss De Solla with the hope that she may help her on account of Stephan’s

detention. Aware of her helplessness, Marya is haunted by a sense of foreboding that, in keeping with her initial recollection of Tottenham, can be interpreted as a symptom of insidious trauma. Not coincidentally, a factor that contributes to her anxiety that she will run into English-speaking people is that she is moving nearer the area where the Anglophone Heidlers live.¹³ The link between the heroine's intrusive thoughts of Tottenham and the fear that she might overhear someone speaking English is, despite its subtlety, a clear example of how Rhys plays with the limit of factual accuracy to capture the disorientating and elusive nature of trauma. The novel fails to give a solid representation of the events related to Marya's stay in Tottenham and, in consonance with this, during the account of her anxiety after getting off the metro there is no allusion to any English people that might have contributed to her alienation back then. In addition to this, what defines both memories is a sense of continuity manifested in the haunting presence of trauma. Considering the event from Rhys's biography mentioned above, the two figments point to an undefined experience that involves both a place, in this case a district of London, and thoughtless English people, presumably Lancelot. What the reappearance of this anxiety-ridden memory suggests, therefore, is that the writer might be drawing on some ill-defined experiences of her past to cover recurrent topics on metropolitan alienation and try to evaluate them from a temporal distance, this being one of the main aims of limit-cases.

Marya's anticipatory anxiety comes true within a short amount of time: she spots the Heidlers as they quarrel on the Rue Denfert-Rochereau. Marya's distress is not unjustified, because the Heidlers have already marked her as an outsider by pushing her into the background and, in particular, H.J. has showed hesitation as regards her English identity. The unease provoked by the Heidlers suggests that she is intimidated by a couple whom, in the

¹³ Seymour points out that Ford Madox Ford and Stella Bowen lived in a little apartment at 16 avenue Denfert-Rochereau (98).

words of Amy Clukey, can be said to “epitomize the imperial privileges of metropolitan perception” (442). In this sense, they are scrutinisers ready to cast doubts on whatever deviates from their dogmatic conception of Britishness. As Clukey maintains, they work as “synecdoches for a form of definite and stable modern British identity that is able to absorb and dominate subordinate, ‘parochial’ cultures” (442). It is not farfetched to argue, then, that from the very moment H.J. appears to dismiss Marya’s uncertain identity, a hierarchy is built that resonates with the workings of imperial power and, most importantly, of her powerless position. This system of dominion and subordination is made evident in some other passages, as is discussed later.

The anxiety-ridden intrusive thoughts of Marya in connection with Tottenham and then the possibility of bumping into the Heidlars may point to a trauma of alienation emanating from the accumulation of unfruitful interactions with judgemental people from the metropole. Before the announcement of her husband’s capture, there is a telling analepsis whereby her years at a touring company are summarised. This account brings to mind Rhys’s job as a chorus girl from 1909 to 1910, an experience that, as recounted in *Smile Please*, worsened her fear of rejection: “As soon as we began I felt the mockery and scorn coming up from the audience” (107). The disdain of the unsympathetic English audience brought about a degree of uprooting that is highlighted in the novel: “She learned, after long and painstaking effort, to talk like a chorus girl, to dress like a chorus girl and to think like a chorus girl—up to a point. Beyond that point she remained apart, lonely, frightened of her loneliness, resenting it passionately” (*Quartet* 15). It can be argued that both Rhys and Marya ceaselessly try to adapt to the exigences of both their non-permanent occupations and society, and yet they dive head first into an inexorable fate: they will never fit in the rigid society of the metropolis. At the end of the day, they remain deserted and homeless, since both the frequent rejection of the audience and their nomadic life thwart any possibility to find a home.

Marya's homelessness is inextricably tied to the invisibility of both her history and identity. This bond is underlined through a whimsical strategy on the part of Rhys. As Marya returns to her hotel room from the Palais de Justice, focalisation fleetingly shifts to the character of Monsieur Hautchamp, the lodging's *patron*. He is reading an article that starts: “*Le mélange des races est à la base de l'évolution humaine vers le type parfait*” (27). It is stated that the mixture of races is the basis of human evolution towards the ideal type. While this witty change of focalisation does not imply that Marya may be a Creole, it could be read as a subtle but piercing criticism of the imperial neglect of the people from the colonies, whose hybridity is reduced to vagueness and stereotypes. In line with the representativeness of the chorus girl's inability to belong, it could be asserted that the inclusion of this fictional newspaper article may connect Marya's destituteness with the general experience of the colonial other—including white Creoles like Rhys who never managed to speak with a standard accent—under the lens of the Empire. Not by chance, as she leaves the hotel and roams around the Parisian streets, she rekindles her trauma of alienation: “It was a vague and shadowy fear of something cruel and stupid that had caught her and would never let her go. She had always known it was there—hidden under the more or less pleasant surface of things. Always” (28).

The mordancy of dislocation under the charming surface of appearances is manifested in the emerging relationship of Maurya with the Heidlers. Indeed, it is prefigured in the opening sentence after a temporal jump that takes the action forwards to their second dinner: “‘Well’, said Heidler, ‘here’s hoping’” (32). Heidler's statement appears to be deceptive, as suggested by his use of the insert *well*. Even if the English couple are determined to give her temporary accommodation, it remains unclear whether they can eventually provide her with the emotional shelter she direly needs. Their affability is cast in doubt when Marya expresses her reluctance to live in their studio. Mrs Heidler reacts by firmly declaring: “Many's the one we've pulled out of a hole since we've been in Montparnasse, I can tell you. . . . And they invariably hate us

afterwards” (41). By focusing on the acrimony of their *protégés*, she might be implying that both she and her husband should be praised for their hospitality. When expressing gratitude to the benefactors becomes an imperative for the *protégés*, a relationship of subservience may be generated that strengthens the moral and social superiority of the Heidlrs. It appears, then, that their intentions stem not so much from their solidarity as from their desire to be worshipped as providers. This can be perceived when Mrs Heidler downplays Marya’s gloom and gives pride of place to vaunting her role as benefactor: “‘You’re a very tiresome child’, answered Lois. ‘Very’. You know that I’m pulling every string I can, and so’s H.J. [Mr Heidler]. We’re certain to fix you up” (*Quartet* 51). In a way that resembles colonial power relations, both Lois and her husband are neglecting Marya’s history at the same time as they attempt to clearly define a hierarchy-based boundary: that between the coherent, God-like benefactor and the submissive beneficiary that needs to be assembled or, in the words of Mrs Heidler, fixed up.

Having been marked as tiresome by the Heidlrs, Marya turns to her thoughts to explore her present-day situation. As soon as she loses herself in the streets of Paris, she “plunge[s] herself into her dream” (*Quartet* 54). After the couple temporarily leave for their country house, the unhinging of Marya’s imagination is represented through interior monologue: “Fancy being shut up in a little dark cell when the spring was coming. Perhaps one morning you’d smell it through the window and then surely your heart would nearly burst with the longing for liberty” (54). In this passage, she sees herself as a prisoner of her longstanding displacement, a daily stress that points to her insidious trauma. The stay with the Heidlrs, suggested by the metaphor of the cell, was supposed to be a ray of hope, but this is only illusory. She can only perceive this longing from a distance, and she is aware that she is condemned to sorrow: “And her longing for joy, for any joy, for any pleasure was a mad thing in her heart. It was sharp like pain and she clenched her teeth. It was like some splendid caged animal roused and fighting to get out” (59).

Likewise, later on in the narrative, as she visits a zoo on the French Riviera she identifies with a fox that is doomed to eternal imprisonment: “There was a young fox in a cage at the end of the zoo—a cage perhaps three yards long. Up and down it ran, up and down, and Marya imagined that each time it turned it did so with a certain hopefulness, as if it thought that escape was possible. Then, of course, there were the bars” (124). The recurrent use of animal imagery in both this novel and in other Rhys’s works may be read as another strategy to do with testing the limit of factual accuracy: the autobiographer is using similar rhetorical devices to articulate both her traumas and those of the Rhysian heroines and, as she re-represents them, get a better grasp of these elusive happenings. Interestingly, Erica Johnson discusses the following as for Marya’s animalisation: “That she feels herself to be an ‘animal’ to be discussed by English people reveals not only her failed citizenship, but also her profoundly different state of being in the world” (“Upholstered Ghosts” 216). As she reexperiences her identification with caged animals, it grows evident that she feels caged at the Heidlers’ or, in other words, that she is “a marionette” (*Quartet* 82) at the mercy of tyrannical people living in a world she will never be part of.¹⁴

As the action unfolds, Marya grows aware that she is being manipulated by the Heidlers, especially by Lois. At first, her exasperation translates into surges of anger, such as hostile responses and even physical violence (e.g., beating Mr Heidler). Gradually, her behaviour gives way to a more reserved critical attitude that could be subversive. By way of illustration, while Mr Heidler lectures her on his wife’s benevolence, she observes: “He looks exactly like a picture of Queen Victoria” (89). While the hitherto impulsive *protégée* would have uttered this

¹⁴ The use of the word “marionette” to refer to the Rhysian woman is retaken in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Towards the end of Section 2 in Rhys’s masterpiece, the Rochester-like husband of Antoinette renames her as Bertha and, punctually, as “Marionette” or “Marionetta” (99). This designation conveys the growing domination to which the Englishman subjects her, which is part of a ruthless endeavour to obliterate her cultural identity and ultimately uproot her by taking her to England. In this case, the insidiousness of this project can be seen not only in the husband’s process of debilitating Antoinette, but also in the threat that she may be taken out of Jamaica at any moment.

stance untimely, the more mature Marya succeeds in suppressing her resentment, and so the similarity between Heidler and Queen Victoria remains unspoken. By means of this parallel, she may be criticising Mr Heidler as a potential representative of the oppressive power of the Empire. Interestingly, by suppressing her impulse to answer back she is adopting an air of prudence, which, as Paul Johnson puts it, “was the most quintessentially Victorian of the bourgeois virtues” (59). Furthermore, this is the first time in the novel that she rigorously judges her oppressors as they speak. In so doing, she becomes an active bystander that takes over the role of main observer. This is particularly undermining, as the perusal of the different statuses in the relationship had so far been conducted by the Heidlers, who tellingly live on the Avenue de l’Observatoire.

Despite the development of her critical thinking, Marya is still benumbed by her trauma, and this bewilderment is underscored as she returns to her hotel room:

Marya would have the strange sensation that she was walking under water. The people passing were like the wavering reflections seen in water, the sound of water was in her ears. Or sometimes she would feel sure that her life was a dream—that all life was a dream. ‘It’s a dream’, she would think; ‘it isn’t real’—and be strangely comforted.

A dream. A dream. ‘*La vie toute faite des morceaux. Sans suite comme des rêves*’. Who wrote that? Gauguin. ‘*Sans suite comme des rêves*’. A dream. Longshining empty streets and tall dark houses looking down at her. (96)

The imaginary presence of water thwarts not only her ability to move smoothly, but also her visual and aural perception. In a way, the perplexing effect of water may be said to symbolise the paralysis induced by trauma, whose persistence is reinforced by the auxiliary verb “would”. Just as her senses are benumbed, she is unable to fully make sense of a traumatic experience

that is inherently shattering. This is reinforced by an allusion to Gauguin that highlights that life is made of small bits, hence pointing to fragmentation.

The reference to Paul Gauguin is, as noted by Alain Buisine, an intertextual reference to the dedication of a notebook that he bought in Tahiti for his daughter Aline in 1893 (149). Such an allusion is of key relevance for understanding the representation of the heroine's identity, both in this novel in particular and in Rhys's work at large. First of all, it should be pointed out that Gauguin was a forerunner of modernist Primitivism, which promoted the direct dialogue with primitive civilisations as a means of rupture with the modern world (C. Moran 43), and that he developed the most distinctive stage of his production in the French Polynesia and in the Caribbean colony of Martinique. In a similar fashion, through this allusion Rhys might be hinting at the possibility of a mental exile to her particular Caribbean place of origin as a means for the autobiographical subject to flee the alienation she undergoes in the modern European metropole. The mental voyage to the Caribbean is a narrative device to be exploited in *Voyage in the Dark*. Still, this is a trope that is already anticipated in *Quartet* and that, as argued at the end of this section, appears to have an associative and restorative function as far as the detached heroine's identity is concerned.

Secondly, and in connection with the central pain of alienation, Gauguin's quotation alludes to the fragmented nature of life, which is in consonance with the metropolitan society's figurative shattering of such a complex cultural identity as that of Marya and Rhys. Affected by a trauma that gets worse whenever she is forsaken, she might be feeling that, like the dreams (*rêves*) to which Gauguin alludes, her existence lacks a sense of continuity in that she has no one to have a fruitful dialogue with. If the aim of Primitivist art is to establish a visual relation with Tahitian or West Indian cultures to break with life in the metropole, Marya will fail to do so, as she knows no one that shares both the same origin and her social status. This is why, in the opening pages of the novel, she openly expresses to Miss De Solla that she does not know

“any of the English people in Paris” (*Quartet* 8). Even if she will later meet the Heidlers, they are in a far more comfortable position than she is and, what is more, their Englishness is well-defined. Marya’s situation, therefore, can be compared to that of immigrant white Creoles from Britain’s West Indian colonies, who were likely to have found little chance of interacting with other white Creoles in the metropole. In this context, Marya feels unpleasantly surrounded by water, and this might stand for her isolation: she is an island that is both physically and emotionally cut off from an unsympathetic mainstream society. This nebulous experience of self-awareness, which reappears at the onset of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, is remarkable for its mixture of reality and daydreaming as a means for representing traumatic experience. Such strategy, once again, evinces a playful testing of factual accuracy that underscores this novel’s status as a limit-case and that characterises the final instances of Marya’s musings to be tackled in this section.

In an attempt to escape her overwhelming situation, Marya comforts herself by denying reality, feeling sure that her life is nothing but a dream. In the passage discussed above, such an exit could be interpreted as a dissociative symptom stemming from her traumatic experience of displacement, all the more so as the dream, translating Gauguin’s words, brings no hope of continuity. Nevertheless, further textual evidence lays bare a different type of mental exile that she experiences while taking a respite in the south of France. This experience is evoked by Rhys in an unpublished autobiographical sketch entitled “The Forlorn Hope”:

It happened when I was sitting in the hot sun thinking and then not thinking and then being intensely happy, for I no longer existed. I was the wind and the blue sea. The ‘I’ was left behind—a horrible dream of prison. Everything was laughing with joy. Do you see now? I knew that my life on earth had been just a dream of prison. (1)

This reverie, which suggests some sort of self-detachment, was experienced by Rhys in Cannes in September 1926. Both Jean Lenglet's strife for a legal residence permit and her obsessive infatuation with her literary mentor had made her spiritless, and hence Ford paid for her holiday in Cros de Cagnes, to the north of Cannes (Angier 157–158). As reflected in the quotation, her daydreaming evolves into a semi-mystical experience in which she unconsciously abandons a self that has long been incarcerated. Remarkably, this vision is not exactly of the same nature as the one Marya has in the Parisian hotel room. As hinted at above, Marya's feeling of walking under the water and her perception of life as fragmented are dissociative inasmuch as they are a by-product of her trauma. By contrast, Rhys's vision should not be interpreted as an instance of traumatic dissociation since it has a positive component. The hard-and-fast limits of the self seem to be dissolved, hence allowing for its fusion with the sea and the wind in what could be deemed a metaphor for the subject's evolution from trauma-induced inhibition to a happiness that might imply some sense of working through.

In the same way as the arrangement made by Ford, Heidler gives Marya money to give herself a respite in the south of France. However, at first her sojourn seems to do nothing but aggravate her psychological condition. She experiences PTSD symptoms such as night sweats, feeling sick and tinnitus (*Quartet* 125–126). Most notably, she suffers a nightmare that again foregrounds her pain of alienation:

She was trying to climb out of the blackness up an interminable ladder. She was very small, as small as a fly, yet so heavy, so weighted down that it was impossible to hoist herself to the next rung. The weight on her was terrible, the vastness of space round her was terrible. She was going to fall. She was falling. The breath left her body. (126)

This dream corroborates that Marya has long internalised her insignificance in society. Besides being invisible to the naked eye, she is aware that the space surrounding her is enormous, as is

the gap between outcasts and the rest of metropolitan society. As for identity, Cathleen Maslen makes the point that the angst expressed in this nightmare “relates to the brutal ‘squashing’ (‘as a fly’) of Marya’s identity, which seems ever more tenuous and unreal as the affair with Heidler takes its course” (72). Heidler falls short of Marya’s expectations to find an empathetic listener that understands her story, and instead dispatches her to the French Riviera. When she firstly expresses her dissatisfaction with the impending journey, he categorises her as “cold” (*Quartet* 119), just like Lois has previously labelled her as tiresome. Such responses are contemptuous and reveal that they are unwilling to relate to the experience of their *protégée*. It could be argued nonetheless that a positive message is suggested in this passage, namely in her desperate effort to climb the ladder. Even if she is doomed to failure, her endeavour might be read as a sign of resilience. However, her traumatic condition does not let her apprehend that beam of resilience, but condemns her to a more acute awareness of collapse.

Marya’s mental deterioration while in Cannes is a product of her protectors’ derision and disdain. Nonetheless, she manages to find relief in the coastal landscape, especially in the sea. While it is unclear whether Marya is an English-speaking Caribbean Creole or not, her affective bond with the sea plays a significant role as she experiences a form of mental exile. As with Anna Morgan in *Voyage in the Dark*, she might be clinging on to the sea because it reminds her of the Caribbean, and this is a textual cue that brings her closer to Rhys. Just as Rhys expresses her bliss as she sunbathes in “The Forlorn Hope”, Marya feels assuaged after swimming in the sea:

The days were hot and very lovely. Loveliest in the morning, because then there were grey and silver in the blue dream and cool shadows on the water that was so hot and sticky at midday. Rather like bathing in warmish oil. But sticky or not, it was a caressing sea. If you had any guts; if you were anything else but a tired-out coward, you’d swim

out into the blue and never come back. A good way to finish if you'd made a mess of your life. (127)

In a way, it is revealed that the ocean has a therapeutic function: it is described as “caressing” and is conjured in connection with an appealing daylight. The stickiness of its waters could be said to entice her into remaining there and never return to the seashore. The implied movement of crossing the sea and not looking back is highly ambiguous: if taken at a more literal level, it can be read as an allusion to suicide; yet, considering that she returns to the mainland, it may be safer to argue that it symbolises Marya’s yearning to escape her alienation, at least through her imagination, and this is why she appears to cling on to the ocean.

Along similar lines, the sea’s stickiness can be read as an allusion to the amniotic liquid, a metonymy for the maternal womb. In this sense, Marya’s remarkable attachment to the sea expands on the hypothesis that she imaginatively tries to flee her alienation and return to her origins. She feels at ease while bathing, therefore, because it symbolically reminds her of an unstated stage in her life that she associates with protection. Considering the inextricable bond of this character with the author, the return to the maternal womb might, in a way, stand for a reconciliation with an identity to be potentially fractured in the metropolis. Hence, the stickiness of the waters may reflect the sea’s potential to reconnect the different elements comprising her identity, which has been made unclear and ill-assorted by the discourse of the Empire. All in all, the quality of the sea highlighted in the narrative leads to a better understanding of the liminal identities of Rhys and her women. Indeed, both might be dreaming of an exile that implies an ocean crossing which, as André Dodeman and Nanci Pedri argue, “marks the border between home country and an exotic destination, a haunting past and an unforeseeable future” (xii). The attachment of both Rhys and Marya to the sea can be deemed, therefore, somewhat subversive: it is symptomatic of their desire that their identity is recognised in all its complexity.

Besides marking a limit between places, the sea similarly links past and present, as noted by Dodeman and Pedri. It is then undeniable that memory plays a fundamental role in the construction of the sea as a connective spatial-temporal threshold. While staring at the waters, Marya dips in and out of her mind to explore her liminal identity and, in a way, recall a lost paradise. Immediately after the passage that stresses Marya's attachment to the ocean, there is a telling memory retrieved by the internal focaliser after bathing:

When she had bathed she would lie and think of little things, stupid little things like a yellow dress that Stephan had bought her once at Ostend. He always chose beautiful clothes. He had a flair for that sort of thing. It had been fun to wear beautiful clothes and to feel fresh and young and like a flower. The greatest fun in the world". (*Quartet* 127)

The stimulus of the sea triggers a pleasant memory that enables her to fleetingly leave aside her anxiety. She evokes a happy moment in which she enjoyed the pleasures of a carefree life, a paradise that she might be longing to recover. Such a remembrance is suggestive of the period of plentifulness experienced by Rhys in Vienna and Budapest during 1920 and 1921, which is baptised in her autobiographical short story "Vienne" as the "Spending Phase" (*Left Bank* 204). At that time, her husband got a position as an interpreter for the Inter-Allied Commission, and this allowed the previously destitute couple to lead a spendthrift lifestyle that, considering what the autodiegetic narrator of "Vienne" expounds, led to one of the few moments when Rhys felt utterly happy: "I was cracky with joy of life that summer of 1921" (200).

During their stages of opulence, neither Marya nor Rhys were prey to the financial vulnerability analysed in the next chapter and, more importantly, they were not subjected to the daily anguish of metropolitan alienation. The former Austrian-Hungarian metropole afforded Rhys a different position in terms of belonging from the one she had as a Caribbean Creole in the unwelcoming London or as a Left Bank migrant in Montparnasse. As Angier

notes, in Vienna the Lenglets were in contact with people whose wealth grew on a daily basis, and hence the previously displaced married couple became “the conquerors, with foreign currency and dinners at the Sacher” (Angier 114). Nevertheless, such engaging memories are at the same time deceptive, and this is implied in the opening lines of “Vienne”: “Funny how’s slipped away, Vienna. Nothing left but a few snapshots” (*Left Bank* 193). The periods of bliss and opulence are now figments of a past that can only be reached—although obliquely—by means of recall. The same applies to the undisclosed origins of a character whose Englishness is hazy. Marya can only fathom the symbolic endeavour to “swim out into the blue” using her imagination, but eventually the waters remain sticky, potentially suggesting that she is unable to venture into the sea and return to a hypothetical homeplace in a Caribbean island. At present, she confines herself to dreaming about happenings such as the return of some happy moments from her past, which are as illusory as the homecoming of her husband or the prospect of fitting in. Having been abandoned by Stephan and corrupted by the Heidlers’ noxious influence, she is a displaced and destitute woman unable to effectively overturn her victimhood.

It is true, nevertheless, that amid her traumatic disorientation Marya, prone to self-reflexion, has managed to mentally reconstruct a story that is represented through a free indirect discourse that emphasises the feelings of freshness, youth, and human concern. Her clinging to an illusory ray of hope is positive in that it lays bare that she has not yet embraced self-defeat in the face of an insidious experience of alienation to which her position as a social outcast condemns her. To put it differently, the long-drained protagonist has evoked a bliss that she has not suppressed and that she unconsciously craves to feel, in spite of her psychological shattering. Such mental exiles, however, are as ambivalent as her ill-defined cultural identity, because at the end of the day they do not translate into the heroine’s restorative agency. By the end of the novel, as is more thoroughly discussed in the chapter on interwar *déclassées*, Marya is left unconscious in a room full of photographs of men that seem to be looking down at her

(*Quartet* 143), which strengthens her feeling of displacement. Marya is abandoned to a fate that presages nothing but solitude, and the forsaken position in which she is left when the novel comes to an end is retaken in the next interwar narrative of unbelonging by Rhys. Julia Martin has for some time shut herself off from society. Still, the following section reveals that underneath her seclusion there is a potential to move beyond fantasising and exploit a growingly powerful agency.

2.2. Facing “The hour between dog and wolf” in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*

While *Quartet* opens with the wandering of a perplexed outcast, Rhys’s second novel presents an apparently relieved woman—Julia Martin—that has embraced lockdown in her Parisian hotel. After ending her relationship with Mr Mackenzie, she has found in her room a shelter: “Julia was not altogether unhappy. Locked in her room—especially when she was locked in her room—she felt safe” (*After Leaving* 9). Julia’s situation can be linked to that of Rhys in early 1927: having finished her affair with Ford, she spent her days in a room procured by her former lover (Pizzichini 192). Julia’s penchant for solitude implies that social interactions have proved noxious for her, and this is more overtly stated in the paragraphs that follow:

But on some days her monotonous life was made confused and frightening by her thoughts. Then she could not stay still. She was obliged to walk up and down the room consumed with hatred of the world and everybody in it—and especially of Mr Mackenzie. Often she would talk to herself as she walked up and down.

Then she would feel horribly fatigued and would lie on the bed for a long time without moving. The rumble of the life outside was like the sound of the sea which was rising gradually around her. (*After Leaving* 9)

The recall of an assumedly dreadful past, marked by her recent love experience, triggers the acting out of trauma, which is manifested in a hyperarousal that eventually leaves her fatigued. The culminating inaction is the result of a failing interplay with people, and this has translated into a traumatic displacement that often torments her. The relationship with her English lover, which is discussed in the next chapter, is yet one among her many traumatic stressors. As manifested in the second paragraph, her lockdown is protecting her from an outdoor reality whose rumble might be indicative of a persistent threat. Rhys exploits the suggestive power of words—in this case, the disquieting rumble of the streets—to indirectly point to the insidiousness of what lies outside the apparently safe hotel room.

The cumulative nature of insidious trauma, which defines Julia's pain of displacement, is wittingly evoked in the paragraph through the link between the respective reverberations of the street and the sea. As happens in *Quartet*, the sea is conjured at a moment when the heroine feels like an island about to be flooded by a society she cannot relate to. However, as hinted at in the previous section, the sea may take a connective dimension, both spatially and temporally, and Rhys resorts to this subversive symbolic quality by delving further into Julia's mind in the paragraph coming after the evocation of the sea's rumble:

She found pleasure in memories, as an old woman might have done. Her mind was a confusion of memory and imagination. It was always places that she thought of, not people. She would lie thinking of the dark shadows of houses in a street with white sunshine; or trees with slender black branches and young green leaves, like the trees of a London square in spring; or of a dark-purple sea, the sea of a chromo or of some tropical country that she had never seen. (9)

The remembrance of the sea enables a mental exile that momentarily helps Julia cope with her trauma. As she is presumably a victim of neglect and alienation, it is not surprising that she

recalls places rather than people. Through this journey, she might be unconsciously searching for a home that she lost sometime and has been denied since then. Tellingly, the account of her memories culminates in the thought of a sea, probably belonging to a tropical country. Read against Rhys's life, the protagonist's evocation of this sea may seem a nostalgia-tinged memory of a Caribbean island, and yet this interpretation is problematic as the heroine affirms that she has never been there.

As with Marya's origins, the ending of this passage leaves the question of Julia's heritage unresolved. Indeed, the narrator goes on to explain: "[I]t was not easy to guess at her age, her nationality, or the social background to which she properly belonged" (11). The rumble of the sea, therefore, is a textual cue that enhances the fuzziness of her recollections and, by the same token, an uncertainty as regards her identity that might stress her unbelonging. In that respect, it should be noted that the musings quoted above blend memory and fantasy. Even if she admits to having never set foot on the unidentified tropical country, it is revealed later in the novel that there is an element linked to this geographical setting that she might have longed to possess, or at least understand. The slippery quality of this land is inextricably linked to a conflation of absence and loss, using LaCapra's terminology, that is epitomised by the shattered bond with her Creole mother. This fractured relation, which occupies a prominent position in her traumas of uprooting and unbelonging, is discussed later in the analysis. What seems discernible at this point is that, if Julia's connection with that imagined sea is tied to her pain of alienation, the paragraphs quoted above are examples of Rhys's testing the limit of factual accuracy. Just as the mixture of reality and fiction enhances the elusiveness of the experiences recalled, the author might be building up uncertainty to draw readers' attention to such trauma-related obsessions as displacement and the lack of a sense of home.

The baffling effect of the paragraph analysed above then contributes to raising the issue of liminality: just as the sea stands as a symbol of in-betweenness, the uncertainty as to Julia's

identity could potentially make her a liminal woman. Such liminality is in synchrony with the physical space she is occupying: a hotel, which epitomises an in-between world (Carr 37) and is suitably characterised as “liminal” (e.g., Karl 23; Thacker, *Moving* 193). On the one hand, the transitoriness associated with hotel rooms thwarts any possibility of claiming to an abode. The absence of a permanent home could be said to make the temporary guest a non-inhabitant or, somehow, a rootless person, and this could be particularly problematic in an interwar society that, drawing on Bauman’s theory, sought to construct a fixed identity and “keep it solid and stable” (“Pilgrim” 18). Considering how the early-twentieth-century metropole overlooked the complexity of Rhysian protagonists’ identities and enhanced their vagueness, the hotel room coheres with Marc Augé’s notion of the ‘non-place’. Augé conceptualises his ‘non-places’ in opposition to what he calls ‘anthropological places’, namely those concrete and ordered spaces that integrate three qualities: firstly, they are “places of identity” as people give them a specific meaning and identify with it, as is the case with the birthplace (Augé 53); secondly, they are defined by a given inhabitant’s relations of coexistence and shared identity with other members occupying the same space (53–54), thus fostering social cohesion; finally, they have a history that grants them stability (54). The ‘non-place’, by contrast, is defined by what it lacks, namely all these three elements (Augé 77–78). This term encompasses transient spaces, such as mass transit vehicles, airport terminals or hotel chains, characterised by the barrenness or absence of interpersonal interactions and where subjects remain anonymous and metaphorically invisible to other people sharing the same space.

If the hotel room is read in the light of Augé’s ‘non-places’, Julia’s seclusion does nothing but enhance her placelessness. By embracing solitude, she is renouncing to lay hold of a sense of belonging through social cohesion. The bonds with the few who know of her existence have been shattered, all the more so after finishing her relationship with Mr Mackenzie, and now her existence is restricted to living alone in a transitory space which she might abandon sometime

in the near future. The hotel room is, hence, devoid of any sense of stability or significance for Julia, who can merely ascribe to this liminal space the quality of ephemeral safety from the dangers represented by what lies outdoors. This protective dimension of the hotel, fleeting though it may be, can be read in a more positive light in the context of her insidious trauma. As Emma Short explains, “the hotel can be understood as a space that permits an escape from a culturally prescribed identity” (*Mobility* 155). In accordance, Julia’s voluntary confinement in her room might be read as an attempt to preserve her liminal identity from the dismissiveness of metropolitan society, with whom she may come face to face as soon as she ventures outside the hotel. While being sheltered, she is evading the influence of the straitjacketing social order that Mr Mackenzie and his lawyer represent: an “organized society . . . in which she had no place and against which she had not a dog’s chance” (*After Leaving* 17).

Julia is aware that, as soon as she leaves her room, she will run the risk of being engulfed by a class that has deserted her. As a result, when later she meets Mr Horsfield, she recounts the story of her life to him with imprecision since she is afraid that he may also be in the same league as those who remind her of her social exclusion: “She spoke as if she were trying to recall a book she had read or a story she had heard” (38). The vagueness of her account is somewhat dissociative, as she barely distinguishes between reality and fiction. As exposed below, some highlights from her story indirectly point to different situations that are recurrent in Rhys’s fiction and that conform the heroines’ cumulative traumas, such as abandonment, repudiation, or shame. The blending of factual accuracy and fiction explicitly mentioned in the quotation, therefore, seems to lay bare how Rhys challenges the boundary of verisimilitude in this limit-case. Julia’s imprecision as a temporary biographer coheres with the author’s recall of some shattering events from her life that, due to their elusiveness, cannot be turned into an utterly truthful testimony. The fragmented and incoherent story that Julia verbalises is a trauma narrative shared with a character that, as will be explained in Chapter 4, can be deemed an

empathetic listener. Still, the victim's vagueness is suggestive of an uneasiness that reveals that, due to her insidious trauma of displacement, she is terrified by the likelihood of being rejected.

In her summarised story (37–39), Julia tells Horsfield that she abandoned London after the armistice, more concretely in February 1919. Then, she stopped by several European cities with the man she left London with and, after a layover in Ostend, went to Paris by herself. On her first arrival to the City of Light, she sat for a sculptress named Ruth. Even if this account may seem imprecise, it bears striking resemblances to Rhys's biography. She left for Holland in early 1919 and, in April of that same year, married Lenglet in The Hague (Angier 100–103). While the nomadic period is concordant with biographical facts, there are two minor deviations from verisimilitude that enable the author to look back on some traumatic experiences to do with the threat of being forsaken, stressing this novel's status as a limit-case. Both divergences in Julia's story can be said to point to her alienation-related traumas. First, the disclosure of her landing in the French metropole actually points to Rhys's second stay in Paris. While Julia acknowledges having travelled to Paris alone, Rhys returned there in the summer of 1922 with her husband (Angier 122). Yet, she was soon left helpless: Lenglet fled Paris, as he was being tracked for selling currency on the black market while in Vienna (Angier 117, 122). In this context, Rhys found herself in need of finding an occupation to earn a living, and it is at this moment—and not during her first stay—that she met the English sculptress Violet Dreschfeld, whom Pizzichini describes as “a classic British gentlewoman, competent and stoical” (164).

Rhys was subjected to the scrutiny and final rejection of the artist she posed for, and this disavowal may have prompted a compulsive desire to please (Pizzichini 164–166). Likewise, Ruth often dismisses Julia, though more scathingly than Violet: “She thought me stupid and would say little things to hurt me. Like somebody flicking at you with a whip” (*After Leaving* 39). Not surprisingly, Julia's subsequent dread of disapproval explains why she fails to justify

her departure from London: “I was just going to tell her why I left England. . . . One or two things had happened, and I wanted to go away. Because I was fed up, fed up, fed up” (39). She is afraid of openly expressing her feelings for fear of being censored, in this case by an English connoisseur whose severe criticism might symbolise the rejection and misreading to which the colonial other, including white Creoles, were susceptible in the metropole. To fend for herself, she leaves her explanation in suspense when she is about to disclose the truth to the sculptress. The ultimate aim of her caution when it comes to justifying herself is possibly to protect her from any judgement of her explanations as excessive or passionate, as happened to Rhys at the Perse School. Likewise, the justification Julia provides in her conversation with Horsfield is vague: though proving an empathetic listener, he is nonetheless an Englishman, and this might account for Julia’s prudence.

As suggested by her reiteration that she was “fed up”, Julia appears to have been stricken by London. In a way, the influence of the metropolis on her has taken the form of an underlying pain of alienation, aggravated by her unfruitful interactions with English people and a resulting fear of rejection. Yet, unlike Marya, at the present time she appears not to be tormented by her memories of spots like Tottenham Court Road; it is people more than places that afflict her. What is manifested is that Julia has grown to show indifference to the English metropole. This is evinced by her feedback to Horsfield when he asks her whether she would return to London. She fixes her eyes on him with an unwinking stare, somehow expressing aloofness. In addition, she replies: “I don’t know. I might go back to London. There’s nothing to stop me” (42). Whether or not she returns to England, what is telling about her response is her assurance that no hazard deters her from going there. In due time, she will actually head for London and visit her family, who later on is revealed to have played a role in her estrangement. In consequence, through both her response and her determination to revisit the metropolis, she demonstrates a degree of resilience in the aftermath of metropolitan alienation. The journey across the Channel

offers her a twofold opportunity to heal from trauma. On the one hand, it enables her to confront her fear of rejection. On the other hand, the transitory stay with her relatives allows for a reconnection with her roots and, by the same token, the rekindling of her manifold cultural identity.

The critical moment in Julia's getaway to London is the reunion with her dying mother. From the outset, this central section in the novel makes it clear that the mother-daughter bond has long been shattered. This is manifested, for example, in the sterile communication between the two, a result of the old woman's paralysis and of an emotional detachment that is hinted at by her gazing at her with "bloodshot, animal eyes" suggesting that "nothing was there" (71). It is essential to stress at this point that the salience given to the mother in this interlude indicates that she is the family head. She is the one that receives more attention on the part of the narrator, the protagonist, and her carers—her daughter Norah and Miss Wyatt—and her hierarchical position is somehow implied in her characterisation as a person "with high cheek-bones and an aquiline nose" (70). Julia is aware of her mother's commanding position, and so before visiting her the narrator brings to the fore her fear that the withered yet authoritative woman could "put her outside the pale, as everybody else had done" (69). Such a report of her worries contributes to disclosing that there is an association between Julia's insidious alienation in the metropole and the figure of the mother. As a woman settled in the unwelcoming London and who barely recognises her visiting daughter, she has come to represent Julia's distressing reminder that she is an invisible outcast with no claim to a sense of home. Furthermore, the geographically and emotionally detached mother is the forewoman of a family microcosm that, as explored below, mirrors the disdain and reproval to which Julia is constantly exposed in London.

This episode in the novel is loosely based on a brief journey to England that Rhys made sometime in the winter of 1925. The Dominican writer's departure for Europe at sixteen had severed for good a relationship with her mother that had always been fragile. It is important to

remark that, as Thomas Staley notes, Minna Rees Williams (née Lockhart) moved to the British metropole in poor health after her husband's passing (5–6), ultimately settling there until her death. Minna's establishment of a permanent abode in a city that Rhys perceived as a hostile place widened the distance between mother and daughter, and this is a circumstance that greatly accounts for the link between the senseless mother and the indifferent metropole in her second novel. As recalled by Pizzichini, during this getaway on the eve of 1926, Rhys presumably paid a visit to her withering mother, who was being taken care of by Jean's younger sister Brenda (192). As pointed out before, Minna Rees had by no means played the role of the loving mother. Nine months before Jean's birth, she had buried her little daughter Brenda Gwenith, who had passed away of dysentery. Thus, the family might have regarded the newly born child as the fill-in of her deceased sister (Angier 10–11). In her discussion of Minna's troubled mind, Angier pinpoints the effects of a mourning mother on her child: "It can be left with a lifelong sense of emptiness, of being wanted by no one and belonging nowhere" (11). This pain of unbelonging was worsened by Minna's mistreatment of the black sheep among her offspring. As Rhys narrates in her "Black Exercise Book", she was often beaten by her mother. At one point in the notebook, she even acknowledges having felt ashamed of letting her father know about the whippings: "How could I tell him that I was being beaten too often and much too severely teased too much thrust back on myself and given a kick that would last for the rest of my life" (45). Both the disjointed syntax and the hurried delivery of ideas reflect that this is a narrative of trauma. As the victim attests to her mother's beatings, she reveals that they have had a long-lasting effect on her psyche, and this points to the pain of displacement that permeates her work, both fictional and non-fictional.

Inevitably, Rhys grew emotionally detached from her mother. As a matter of fact, in *Smile Please* she concludes the section entitled "My Mother" thus: "Gradually I came to wonder about my mother less and less until at last she was almost a stranger and I stopped

imagining what she felt or what she thought” (46). In *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, Rhys’s indifference to her unloving mother takes the form of Julia’s abandoning her family, which is perceived by Uncle Griffiths as desertion (*After Leaving* 61). Along similar lines, Elaine Savory contends: “The Rhys protagonist leaves home partly because her relationship with her mother or family is ruptured and conflicted” (*Jean Rhys* 63). On her return to the English metropolis, any reconnection with a seemingly deserted household is deemed unattainable, and this is manifested in the city’s general apathy: from the coldness of the flower seller (*After Leaving* 49) to the hostility of her sister Norah, who refuses to accommodate her (54–55). In view of such instances of neglect, it could be argued that, symbolically, Julia’s maternal family and London become allies in forsaking her, thus aggravating her vulnerability as an outcast: “A sensation of loneliness overcame her. She thought that there was something in the expression of the eyes of a human being regarding a stranger that was somehow a dreadful give-away” (62). Interestingly, the narrative draws attention to how Norah and her paralysed mother often glare at Julia, hence projecting their hatred and making the deserter feel belittled. Even if they are exhausted, they make an effort to fix their eyes on Julia, and this might be interpreted as an act of control that further alienates her.

Amid rancour and lovelessness, Julia manages to keep a stiff upper lip. She is aware of her marginal if not meaningless position in the family, but her solitude does not bring about the acting out of her trauma. While her layovers at Acton during her return to London could be regarded as masochistic, her confrontation with them is subversive. As the narrative gradually unveils more information about Julia’s family, her recurrent visits take on an ambivalent sense that is summarised in the narrator’s statement that “[h]er mother had been the warm centre of the world” (77). This sentence peers into Julia’s train of thought as she sits by her mother’s bed and, as implied by the use of the past perfect, it seems to enhance the protagonist’s displacement as a neglected daughter pushed to the margins of her family. At the same time, however, it can

be interpreted as a subtle strategy on the part of Rhys to suggest that it is Julia herself that has opted for moving outside the centre. In that respect, in deserting her family she has succeeded in escaping a source of oppression embodied by her mother. Not coincidentally, it is disclosed at this point that, when being a child, her mother sometimes slapped her (77), and such evidence brings to mind Rhys's traumatic experience of being beaten by Minna. Julia's apparitions at Acton can be interpreted in this light, as "a *contestation* of oppressive authority" (Dell'Amico 58; emphasis in the original). Considering this narrative's status as a limit-case, each visit might stand for Rhys's revisiting an edgy relationship with her mother that is an integral part of her trauma of unbelonging. While the author uses memory to better understand their traumas and, in a way, work them through, Julia also resorts to her recollection about her mother as a "warm centre" to explore a dimension of her bond with her mother to be discussed in what follows.

The potentially restorative facet of Julia's (dis-)connection with her mother is implied by the adjective "warm". This modifier is recycled in the paragraph that follows: "It was strange sitting there, and remembering the time when she was the sweet, warm centre of the world, remembering it so vividly that mysteriously it was all there again" (77–78). Besides hinting at some sporadic acts of maternal tenderness, the emphasis on warmth may allude to the tropics. The link between radiance and the tropics is enhanced by the mother's origins. She is Brazilian, even if she has been reluctant to satisfy Julia's curiosity about this country (76), and in the early description of her countenance it is mentioned that she is "dark-skinned" (70). Her exotic origin is on a par with that of Rhys's mother. Minna was a white Creole and, in addition to that, it was rumoured that her grandmother had Cuban blood (Angier 7). The question of genealogy makes Julia's mother an ambivalent character. In other words, she is a liminal woman in terms of both origin and function.

With regard to her mother's function, on the one hand, she stands as a neglectful figure of authority that contributes to strengthening her daughter's displacement. What is even more

striking is that Julia has been unable to communicate with the paralysed woman, and this makes Rhys's second novel particularly interesting as regards its representativeness as a narrative of alienation. The sterile verbal interactions with her mother might point to the alleged experience of Caribbean white Creoles based in the metropole, whose chance to connect with other fellow expatriates in the unfamiliar London was slim. Julia seems similarly disheartened for not being offered the opportunity to forge meaningful affective bonds with an oblivious family in a city far from home. Furthermore, both her edgy relationship with them and her awareness that she is now detached from that far-off warm centre bespeaks a distancing from her origins that gives more significance to the focaliser's initial perception in her hotel room. Julia's vague recall of a tropical country she apparently had never seen (9) might tie in with the lack of solidity of her bond with her origins. Such an exotic setting seems to be constructed simultaneously as a site of desire and unbelonging, and this is further illustrated by the Creole mother's reluctance to speak about her native land. Although the reasons for this aversion are not explicitly revealed in the text, the mother's silence as a Creole character might be in keeping with other Creoles' ambivalent view of their overseas birthplace. Just as the protagonist cannot identify the remote and unknown tropical country as a homeplace, the mother has physically distanced herself from it by migrating to London, and this might be another oblique reference to this novel's status as a narrative that represents the unbelonging of West Indian Creoles, in this case in their native country.

Before exploring the restorative implications of the "warm centre", it should be observed that this novel addresses a key circumstance that accounts for the displacement of Creoles. Like *Voyage in the Dark* and, more explicitly, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, this narrative indirectly tackles the legacy of slavery and the imprint it left on former planters. Rhys hints at this question in the scene where Norah picks up an edition of Joseph Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*, a novel set in Borneo that touches on colonial difference. Tellingly, the lines Norah reads underline the

vulnerability of a hopeless other that has been brutalised by colonial rule: “The slave had no hope, and knew of no change. She knew of no other sky, no other water, no other forest, no other world, no other life” (75). It would be far-fetched to draw a correlation between the character in the intertext and Julia’s displacement, as their respective experiences of trauma are of a different nature. Still, the focus that Norah-as-focaliser puts on this passage is significant enough because it follows an exchange of glances with Julia. The visual encounter of the sisters may point to a mutual recognition of a common pain that binds them together and whose roots are unearthed in the intertextual allusion. In that respect, this is the only meaningful dialogue—though wordless—that Julia establishes with a Creole character in the novel. What momentarily links these sisters, besides their blood ties, is their identification through awkward glances of the fact that, as Creoles, they might share a sense of unbelonging coherent with their being trapped between two relatively unfamiliar settings: their memories of an elusive native land haunted by the ghost of slaveholding and a present life in the metropolitan centre that will grow uncertain when the mother dies. Significantly, their allegedly simultaneous understanding of a trauma-related question takes place in a scene that foregrounds both the encounter between reality and fiction and the recognition that their pain goes beyond individual experience, both questions being the foundations of limit-cases.

On the other hand, the Creole mother’s ambivalent nature also allows for a reading that subtly hints at a sense of empowerment on the part of Julia. Her puzzling memory of her mother as a warm centre may also suggest a shift in her perception of this character: from being an alienator, she has increasingly become a bridge that allows the displaced daughter to reconnect with her roots. The mother’s paralysis thwarts any verbal communication between the two, but her mere presence is the catalyst of memories that bridge the gap between the homeless Julia and her origins. For example, the recollection of the word “orange-trees” conjures her process of weaving “innumerable romances about her mother’s childhood in South America” (*After*

Leaving 76). Similarly, Rhys often daydreamed about her life in the West Indies and the stories of her family to compensate for the feeling of emptiness deriving from neglect (Pizzichini 16).

Besides strengthening her ties with the absent mother, the protagonist's rekindling of her roots is key to the revival of her cultural identity. While at the beginning of the novel there is puzzlement as to her geographical and social background, the hiatus in London offers a more thorough insight into her heritage. The spark of imagination produced by her encounter with the dying mother has unveiled a multifarious identity. Strikingly, the rekindling of her complex roots has taken place in London, and this is strategic: Rhys has turned the unsympathetic and oblitative metropolitan centre into a cathartic locus that helps to harmonise the disjointed identity of the alienated Julia. To an extent, the sojourn in London has provided the protagonist with a reconnecting pathway: "Winning back her connections, taking up things where she had left them, she might regain a sense of direction" (Maurel 39). By the end of her stopover in the metropolis, she has overcome the bounding "walls" (*After Leaving* 62) of alienation-induced anxiety. She has grown into a resilient woman, and this is suggested by her impressions as she watches the cremation of her mother: "Julia had abandoned herself. . . . At the same time, in a miraculous manner, some essence of her was shooting upwards like a flame. She was a defiant flame shooting upwards not to plead but to threaten" (94–95). Momentarily, Julia leaves behind her emotional numbing and perceives herself as a flame. The flare is defiant, and this might point to Julia's resolution to head for London and face one of her main sources of displacement. As argued above, she appears to have succeeded in surmounting the metaphorical barriers that confined her to destitution, and this attainment is highlighted by the flame's upward movement. In addition, her cultural identity has been symbolically rekindled, and so the flame is suitably connected with her essence. However, Julia's feeling of empowerment does not imply totally vanquishing trauma. Rebecca Colesworthy marks that "in this moment in the chapel, Julia has no addressee to support her view, at least none other than the reader" (145). The lack of an

empathetic listener might be read as a warning that she may be still susceptible to other people's rejection. As Julia is aware of this hazard, her vision concludes as follows: "Then the flame sank down again, useless, having reached nothing" (95).

Julia's vision at the chapel of the Crematorium then finishes with a cautionary note that should nevertheless be read in a positive light. The apparent uselessness of the flame reminds the protagonist that the task of emotionally connecting with people is burdensome. As a matter of fact, when returning to Acton she expresses her distrust of human beings to Norah: "Animals are better than we are, aren't they? They're not all the time pretending and lying and sneering, like loathsome human beings" (97). Nevertheless, on this occasion Julia does not fall prey to a submissive fear of rejection. As she walks around Notting Hill, she no longer feels belittled by the presence of potentially hurtful eyes: "She looked into the faces of the people passing, not suspiciously or timidly, as was usual with her, but with a gentle and confident expression" (101). What is more, she feels "peaceful and purified" (101). Judging by her sense of relief, it could be argued that her epiphany in the chapel has proved therapeutic. Her realisation that she is stronger than ever has positively affected her self-esteem, and her confidence while bumping into strangers may point to a potential working through of her trauma of alienation. The effect of her vision on her visual interaction with people brings a new insight into the question of the absent addressee. While it is true that Julia never verbalises her epiphany, the narrator's report of her feelings makes readers complicit with her healing. It could be argued, then, that an ethical bond is created whereby Julia's testimony engages in a dialogue with the experience of readers, the implicit addressees of her story. As a result, the sharing of Julia's moment of realisation is a hint that her trauma testimony may have a restorative potential when turned into a relatable testimony to be heard or read by a potentially empathetic listener.

The fierceness of Julia's revelation at the chapel makes this highly visual experience an unequivocal example of fortitude in the novel. Having underlined the epiphany's relationality,

there should be a focus on an instance of aural perception that may contribute to strengthening the representativeness of this limit-case. Shortly after her mother's death, the benumbed Julia is startled by the music played by a barrel organ. At first, the tune makes her want to cry, but this desire is soon replaced by a yearning for sleep. On her arrival at the boarding-house, her sleep deprivation does not prevent her from restoring her mental activity. Stimulated by the melody she has heard in the street, she tries to reassemble its lyrics:

Yes, weekly from Southampton,
Great steamers, white and gold,
Go rolling down to Rio
(Roll down—roll down to Rio!)
And I'd like to roll to Rio
Some day before I'm old. (91)

It is likely that Julia had become familiar with this song during her infancy, as she barely remembers its words at the present time. As an adult, she direly attempts to recapture its story because she identifies with it. The overseas journey from England to America inversely mirrors that of her mother and, by the same token, those by Jean and Minna. Thus, the impulse to cry might be read as a symptom of having lost a childhood paradise. This association with loss is not incidental: on that same day, Julia has been dispossessed of the maternal figure for good and the song reminds her that the voyage—in this case from the tropics to Britain—had already meant an irreconcilable distancing between the two.

While it is true that the song initially prompts a pang of nostalgia linked to the question of loss, it is optimistic in tone. This is supported by the insert *yes*, the exclamation mark and the lyrical subject's willingness to head for Rio. The song presents an underlying glee that correlates with the protagonist's evolution from sorrow and paralysis to activity and resilience.

The longing expressed by the end of the stanza is strongly linked to the mental exile she experiences at her room in Paris. Yet, there is a key difference between the two imagined journeys: whereas the former is experienced by a despondent, alienated daydreamer whose identity is undetermined, the latter is conjured during her process of cultural rekindling. Hence, the rolling to Rio could be said to reflect her reconnection with her roots, a process that overturns the colonial obliteration of her cultural identity. In a similar fashion, Rhys is formally suggesting this connective process by resorting to the link between literary and non-literary art. As Heidi Maibom contends, not only do the different arts evoke affect, but they mainly contribute to our “*understanding* of others’ experiences, whether emotional or not” (7; emphasis in the original). Hence, this instance of intertextuality allows for an empowering, horizontal dialogue between the song’s narrative and Julia’s situation, and such a dynamic interplay is in keeping with the idea of the curative and transformative function of limit-cases.

Julia’s revival of the transatlantic passageways between the tropical colonies and the English metropolis proves a decisive milestone in her process of working through her trauma of displacement. As hinted at before, her ten-day stay in London is beneficial in that it unveils the interconnectedness that her positive liminality offers. Significantly, on her return to Paris she rents a room on the Île de la Cité. The insular quality of this spot might point to Julia’s status as a liminal woman. As Thacker puts it, this Parisian setting ultimately emerges as “a geographical microcosm of Julia’s own position in the text, shuttling between Paris and London” (*Modernism* 52–53). At this point in the novel, she is no longer the detached woman suffocated by the sea of derisive people glaring at her. Rather, she has evolved into a both connected and connective island. Accordingly, the Île de la Cité reflects her status as an axis linking Paris and London, as well as the tropical colonies and the inland metropolis.

It should also be noted that Julia’s change of residence implies a move towards the core of the French capital. Her transition towards the core of Paris, on the one hand, signifies her

increasing centrality, which is underpinned by both the rekindling of her cultural identity and her transition from invisibility to some sense of agency. The central role that she has grown to play is manifested from the outset of the novel's third and last part, titled "Île de la Cité":

Her hotel looked out on a square in the Île de la Cité, where the trees were formally shaped, much like the trees of a box of toys you can buy at Woolworth's. The houses opposite had long rows of windows, and it seemed to Julia that at each window a woman sat staring mournfully, like a prisoner, straight into her bedroom. (129)

Notably, by the end of the narrative Julia has become more than a symbolic geographical axis. She is presented as a focal point where the positions of focaliser and focalised converge. As she attempts to visually link her experience with that of other female outcasts, she is recognised as an example to be looked at. She is more visible than ever, and the myriad of forlorn looks contribute to enhancing the relatability of her story. Yet, such a representativeness is, on the other hand, highly disturbing. Her stay at the rickety hotel on the Quai des Grands Augustins can be said to mark her as a Left Bank migrant. To use Shari Benstock's oft-quoted phrase, she was "an outsider among outsiders" (448), as Rhys was during her stay in interwar Paris. While she seems increasingly empowered and oblivious to her hypervigilance, her visual encounter with metaphorically imprisoned fellow women points to her acknowledgement that she is also an outsider trapped by her fate.

The exchange of glances that opens the last section might be said to remind Julia of her previous paralysis induced by social rejection. Like Marya, she felt she was a prisoner doomed to derision and misrecognition. The remembrance of her alienation-induced anxiety appears to make the protagonist aware of her improvement. As she leaves her room, she feels "calmer and happier" (130). She strolls around the Parisian streets and enjoys the pre-summer heat. Such a pleasant weather sharply contrasts with the "grey fog" (49) and "heavy darkness" (62) of

London, symptomatic of apathy and displacement. As she walks Les Halles, however, it is unclear whether she no longer feels controlled by the insidiousness of belittling contempt. This is emphasised by the ambivalence of the novel's ending: "The street was cool and full of grey shadows. Lights were beginning to come out in the cafés. It was the hour between dog and wolf, as they say" (138).

On a first read, the ending lines seem to acknowledge Julia's evolution into a wolf: she has overcome her self-protective detachment from society and, in line with her self-recognition as a defiant flame, has decided to freely roam around the Parisian streets. Still, her attentiveness to the looming shadows reflects that some part of her remains paralysed at the threshold of her transition. By the end of the narrative, after accepting Mackenzie's money and saying goodbye to him she has been left alone in a district that is unfamiliar for her and whose lack of light renders her invisible. This situation is what seems to have reawakened both an uneasiness and a hypervigilance symptomatic of her insidious trauma of alienation. The unnerving atmosphere of an unfamiliar setting is a surreptitious generator of displacement in the next interwar novel. Its protagonist, Anna Morgan, is cast into the unknown world of the metropole with virtually no one to lean on. Unaccustomed to the vicissitudes of underdog life in London, the eighteen-year-old Creole protagonist is a long way from becoming a wolf. Such a maturation process involves a confrontation with an unbelonging that, as explained in the following section, is closely linked to her cultural identity.

2.3. Caught between Empowerment and Delusion: Dreaming of a Voyage in Reverse in *Voyage in the Dark*

Rhys's third published novel has been widely deemed her "most clearly autobiographical novel" (O'Connor 83). As Rhys corroborates in the last lines of the European section in *Smile*

Please, the exercise books that she scribbled in Fulham were “the foundation for *Voyage in the Dark*” (156). I would like to expand on O’Connor’s contention by arguing that, besides being the interwar novel where she makes the most overt references to her biography, it is the modernist narrative that best reflects her Creole consciousness. Entirely told in retrospect, this coming-of-age novel can be read as a testimony of survival amid metropolitan dislocation. Rhys lends the voice to the young adult Anna Morgan, an autodiegetic narrator that struggles not to fall into a black hole during her hazardous path through darkness. She strives to give an account of her endurance in pre-WWI England, an oppressing and unfathomable land that has deteriorated her well-being. From the outset of the novel, the detrimental effect of the metropole on Anna’s psyche is brought to the fore. She recalls in the first lines of her narration: “It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again. The colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different” (*Voyage* 7). Her landing in this nebulous world is presented as shocking and disconcerting, and her subsequent references to the pervasive cold, her fear and the shutting of her eyes (7) might be read as subtle allusions to a trauma that will appear more manifest as the narrative unfolds. The stimuli she perceives are radically different from those she is familiar with, and she appears to be unable to readily acclimatise to her situation. In keeping with the sense of traumatic rupture hinted at before, the bafflement produced by the opening lines mirrors how Anna is overwhelmed by the colours and sounds she perceives, to such an extent that this abrupt encounter with the unknown temporarily deters her from remembering the world she knew.

The abruptness inherent to this experience brings about a collapse of understanding, which is suitably enhanced by the image of the curtain. The analogy between Anna’s entrance into an apparently unwelcoming country and the camouflage-inducing cloth may anticipate one of the key conflicts in the novel, namely a pain of metropolitan alienation which amalgamates

a series of insidious traumas to do with uprooting, unbelonging and, as explored more in depth in Chapter 4, the so-called ‘case of the underdog’. It is not coincidental, then, that she reacts to this feeling of perplexity by closing her eyes and imagining that she is back in her homeland. In the case of Rhys, the pang of nostalgia induced by her disillusionment with England was unthinkable during her transatlantic voyage. In *Smile Please*, she remembers her feelings as she was heading for Southampton: “Already all my childhood, the West Indies, my father and mother had been left behind; I was forgetting them. They were the past” (94). Yet, what follows both expatriates’ arrival in the metropole is not a voluntary rupture with their past, but a firm willingness to retrieve it. Both react to their disillusionment by clinging on to their recollections of a lost childhood, presumably because their destination offers no prospect of a home. Along these lines, Andrew Allsworth contends that Anna—and, by the same token, Rhys—resorts to memory in an attempt to “re-locate herself ‘home’” (25). In this context, the paralysing shock stressed at the beginning of the novel might be read as potentially traumatic, the harbinger of deracination.¹⁵ In accordance, the simile of the descending curtain would acquire a new meaning: the burial of everything that was well-known for Anna might point to a certain erasure of her identity. Hence, the opening lines of this testimony could be said to subtly raise the issue of colonial neglect. As the ensuing analysis discloses, the Creole protagonist’s identity is prey to the influence of the mainstream metropolitan society, embodied by British characters such as Walter Jeffries, explored in Chapter 3, or Aunt Hester.

As the newly arrived protagonist expands her social circle, the problematics of her status as an outsider is unhinged. As is the case with Marya in her first meeting with the Heidlens, her exotic origins place her in a position of disadvantage during the social gathering with the two English men she meets at Southsea, namely Mr Jones and Mr Jeffries. In a similar manner, the

¹⁵ In her essay “The Colonial Voice in the Motherland”, Judie Newman argues that the opening pages of the novel depict what she calls the “trauma of arrival” (48).

question of her provenance is broached at some point in the rendezvous. Jones is startled by how cold her hand is, and Maudie—Anna’s English roommate—makes a remark about her companion’s origin: “She can’t help it. She was born in a hot place. She was born in the West Indies or somewhere, weren’t you, kid? The girls call her the Hottentot. Isn’t it a shame?” (*Voyage* 12). Regardless of Maudie’s intentions, it should not be overlooked that her explanation is untimely. Rather than let Anna justify herself, the English, fair-haired woman takes over the conversation and raises an issue that is unrelated to the coldness of the Creole’s hand. Moreover, she speaks with a patronising tone, and this is strengthened using a question tag and a rhetorical question, both of them suggesting hypocrisy more than empathy.

The general colonial disregard for the colonies is shown in Maudie’s identification of the West Indies with vagueness, as marked by the adverb “somewhere”. Later in the narrative, such hints of ignorance are complemented by the obtuseness of Joe, an American acquaintance who teasingly remarks that he has travelled across the Caribbean islands and that he supposedly befriended Anna’s father (107). While Maudie’s words should not be judged as mordant, the epithet she reports is a term of abuse. The English chorus girls have categorised Anna as “the Hottentot,”¹⁶ and such display of contempt has racist overtones. In a way, the insult that devalues Anna’s origins echoes the grimaces of Rhys’s schoolmates at Perse or the derision from the audience she recalls in *Smile Please* (107). Even if both expatriates remain altogether silent, their unconventionality renders them prey to daily ostracism, an ever-present threat that points to insidious trauma. As is explored in this section, she frequently manifested this type of trauma through her alertness to the possibility of being constantly pored over by disdainful eyes. Remarkably, Angier says of Rhys’s first steps in the metropolis that such scrutiny was to

¹⁶ Sabrina Strings explains that the term “Hottentot” was coined by Dutch settlers in the Cape colony to refer to the Khoikhoi ethnic group (72). With the passing of time, this designation evolved into an insult with racist implications. Linda E. Merians goes on to explain that, in the course of the eighteenth century, the use of this term in Britain involved a serious alarm that the pristine British society was degenerating (123).

“trip her up, and the pale blue eyes, the pale white faces, would turn and watch as she fell over” (37). Rhys uses this narrative, therefore, to look back on a paralysing anxiety produced by insidious trauma and, in so doing, rely on the limit-case’s transformative potential to work through those traumas. It should be warned, though, that the situations in which Anna manifests such related symptoms as hypervigilance and confusion between reality and imagination do not necessarily correspond point by point to the author’s experience of trauma, and this is evidence of how she tests the truth/lies boundary.

Anna is aware that any emotional outburst could be deemed improper by the apparently judgemental people she is surrounded by. For example, when she offers to give evidence of her age by showing her birth certificate, Mr Jones categorically replies: “That would be excessive” (*Voyage* 12). Afraid that she could make a scene, Anna opts for remaining in the background. For this reason, when she incidentally giggles she ponders: “I was thinking it was funny I could giggle like that, because in my heart I was always sad, with the same sort of hurt that the cold gave me in my chest” (14). At the core of her innermost self, there is a deep pain of alienation that bespeaks trauma, and this is suggested by the coldness that has been piercing her since her arrival in Britain. Her psychological wound is presented as painful and pervasive, and is likely to get worse as the Creole protagonist is exposed to the vicissitudes of living in a metropolitan centre with virtually no fellow outcasts to interact with. She is too paralysed to express her emotions and, as a result of this, there are very few instances where she unveils her degree of attachment to the West Indies in front of others. Indeed, she knows no Creole people in London, and the only familiar person to whom she may resort in the metropole is a jingoistic aunt that stands for a privileged position which Anna will never occupy.

Overall, Anna preserves an utmost silence that may reflect both her inner paralysis and a deep fear of rejection. Her reluctance to explain herself clearly, reflected in the novel through broken utterances, intended ellipses and ambiguous statements, is a by-product of her trauma.

Her tendency towards obtuseness characterises the onset of her romance with Walter Jeffries, which is explored more in depth in Chapter 3. As the English man tries to get intimate with his partner, she remains stupefied, her emotional numbness potentially being the legacy of traumatic shock. At this point, her discourse's lack of continuity is enhanced by the fact that she is talking to an unknown English man in an unfamiliar setting. More significantly, it might be read as a mechanism of the mind that protects the subject from further aggressions to do with the influence of the metropolis on her welfare. Indeed, she is intimidated by a male, English character who, as such, is associated with power, thus standing as a potential stressor. Even though the affair appears to be providing Anna with an emotional shelter, she continues being exposed to the vicissitudes of life in the metropolis and, as discussed in the dissertation's next chapter, to the will of a male partner whose intentions are unclear. She is fully aware that she is susceptible to abuse for being different from what was normative, and this can be seen in an episode where, shortly after her date with Walter, her landlady confronts her due to her assumedly ill-mannered behaviour. She is censored for returning home at an ungodly hour, and it is hinted at that her smart attire is unfit for her.

The altercation with the landlady plays a key role in further alienating Anna. The householder settles the argument by insulting her: she lays emphasis on her tenant's "drawly" voice and unfoundedly calls her a 'tart' (26). This instance of verbal abuse triggers Anna's stream of thoughts on her metropolitan displacement:

I didn't answer. My heart was beating like hell. 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*,¹⁷ it

¹⁷ "The Iron Shroud" is a Gothic short story written by William Mudford in 1830. In this horror fiction, a hero of Naples, Vivencio, is incarcerated in an iron cell whose proportions shrink as a new day comes. The story depicts the increasingly collapsing psyche of an overwhelmed victim that cannot flee his destiny. By the end of the seventh day of his imprisonment, the contraction of both the walls and ceiling crushes him to death.

was called. It wasn't Poe story; it was more frightening than that. 'I believed this damned room's getting smaller and smaller', I thought. And about the rows of houses outside, gimcrack, rotten-looking, and all exactly alike. (26)

This highly graphic passage enables a thorough depiction of the victim's complex response in the aftermath of aggression. Her initial reaction, summarised in the first two sentences, points to the psychic shattering produced by the insult of the English landlady. The shock inherent in this experience is transmitted through the emphasis on Anna's silence and, as is usual in trauma narratives, by means of broken language. From the second sentence on, however, sentences are notably longer, and this shift in terms of rhythm might be in keeping with the symptom Anna attests to in the second sentence: trauma-related hyperarousal. The hastened beating of Anna's heart, which functions as a *volta* in the paragraph, might reflect a change in terms of the type of trauma she is reliving. The longer sentences focus on how Anna reexperiences the threat that the walls might turn against her and contribute to her suffocation. The walls of her hotel room, destined to protect her from the outside world, are in this case another symbol of the insidious, ever-present threat that belittles the victim. Besides metaphorically crushing her, they stand as a barrier that separates her from an urban world where she will never belong. The idea that she is different is enhanced by the pattern of English houses she distinguishes from afar: they are cut from the same cloth and, furthermore, they are bound together; Anna, by contrast, is a loner that has little chance of forging any fruitful bonds with a society that marks her as different.

The ruminations of the Creole woman lay bare her despair at being unable to meet the demands of a contemptuous, narrow-minded society. Just as the heroines analysed above, Anna is overpowered by the neglect of a world where she can find no solace. With each new aggression, her sense of unbelonging is magnified, and this is deftly expressed through the intertextual reference to the contracting walls in Mudford's story. As happens to Marya in the Heidlers' studio, she feels imprisoned in a hostile reality that is making her shrink at full tilt.

For her, there seems to be no escape but to evade such displacement through imagination and memory retrieval. Her tendency to resort to the inner self shows more than an unwilling consent to her doom. While it is true that she does not strive towards recognition in the story, her role of narrator contributes to foregrounding the strategic function of her flow of thoughts. Prior to the landlady episode, she enters a clothing store and, as she inspects the alluring coats in stock, she craves for a mental exile: “*This is a beginning. Out of this warm room that smells of fur I’ll go to all the lovely places I’ve ever dreamt of. This is the beginning*” (25; italics in the original). Even amid the luxury of these flashy clothes, she feels disconnected from her present, and thus she dreams about escaping her colourless life in the metropole by travelling abroad. In a way, this narrated interior monologue could be said to have biographical overtones, as it foreshadows the countless journeys made by Rhys during her peripatetic stage. Considering that these European passages strengthened Rhys’s multifarious identity, it could be argued that Anna’s imaginary expeditions stand as a mighty response to cultural obliteration. By attesting to her craving to become a many-sided individual, Anna is then counteracting the colonial erasure of her identity.

Shattering though the colonial neglect may be, the traumatised Anna gathers strength to delve into her cultural identity by rekindling her past. The West Indian memories that permeate into this narrative of displacement offer a subtle but sardonic critique of colonial essentialism. One of them is a follow-up to Maudie’s identification of her birthplace as “a place in the West Indies or somewhere”. Unaffected by the comment, Anna grows indifferent to Maudie’s chatter and turns to her thoughts: “Lying between 15° 10’ and 15° 40’ N. and 61° 14’ and 61° 30’ W. A goodly island and something highland, but all overgrown with woods’, that book said” (15). Her temporary disconnection from the annoying conversation permits the re-emergence of an excerpt from a geography textbook that gives the precise location of the island. The allusion to this childhood memorabilia serves as ironic feedback to Maudie’s ignorance. More

importantly, it may stand as a sarcastic response to the Empire's disregard for its overseas colonies. Anna recasts a piece of academic writing that, as Joanna Johnson has observed, was probably written in the metropolis (43). Through a playful mental recitation of a book crafted in the colonial centre, she somehow challenges the dominant discourse of the Empire. She quotes from a paragraph that, though pinpointing the coordinates of the setting, does not offer a trustworthy depiction of its landscape. Anna's knowledge of the island, then, is evidently better than that of the academic, but she refuses to share it in the social gathering.

The protagonist's reluctance to openly share her Caribbean experience with her English interlocutors combines with that of Rhys. As V.S. Naipaul observed, the Dominican writer refused to "explain herself" as a West Indian (29). Instead, she chose vagueness, which has previously been said to be closely linked to the fragmentariness of the memories pervading her narratives. In that respect, when she breaks her silence to share with Walter certain details about her origins, her ability to speak is frustrated: "And it all went through my head, but too quickly" (*Voyage* 46). Her ability to speak is frustrated by her trauma of alienation, and so her torrent of ideas may imply that she is terrified by the likelihood of being ridiculed. Anna is aware that a detailed account of her story could be devalued by her insular English audience and, therefore, her storytelling hints at a strategy aimed at counterbalancing the power hierarchies governing the verbal interaction between Anna and Walter. Besides being hazy, Anna's story disrupts linear chronology, in what constitutes an example of Jenny Edkins's 'trauma time'. The protagonist's reconstruction of her past in front of Walter takes the form of an ill-assorted account that jumps from one event to another without delving into them. There is a lack of logical continuity, since the storyteller starts by making opaque reference to a slave list she saw at Constance (45), and then freely associates two disparate circumstances in the same paragraph: the remembrance of a Venezuelan border from her school and her father's abrupt return to the island with his second wife, Hester (46).

In line with trauma time, the rupture of continuity inherent in Anna's mini-biography is central to Rhys's subversion of the power structures governing the metropolitan centre. Such a witty destabilisation might not be deliberately performed by the early adult character. Indeed, Anna is too meek to confront a figure that embodies the external reality that oppresses her. This is a strategy, then, that the author intentionally uses with a twofold aim: firstly, and in keeping with limit-cases, to revisit her trauma of displacement; secondly, to challenge the sovereignty of an Empire that neglects the autobiographical subjects' story and identity. The disregard of the British Empire for the genealogy of such a Creole subject is illustrated by Walter's aloof answers as Anna tells her story. For instance, when she traces her ancestry back, her addressee replies with a disjunctive question—"Are you really?" (45)—that suggests both incredulity and lack of interest. Later, he overlooks the complexity of the West Indies by declaring that he will not probably like it due to the tropics' excessive heat and lushness (46). Remarkably, his reactions to Anna's story are revealing not merely of his colonial disregard; they also lay bare that the uninterested recipient feels uneasy while listening to his interlocutor's hazy and largely unorganised speech. As with Mr Heidler, Walter downplays Anna's story, saying "[y]ou sound a bit tight" (47). His awkwardness might be read as an effect of the subversiveness underlying her story, which is suggestive of the workings of trauma time: the disarrangement of events shocks the English man just as this conception of temporality disrupts linearity to destabilise sovereign power. He may be vexed, then, at the possibility of not understanding the meaning of a story told by a subject that has already been shattered by the trauma of alienation and, as explored in Chapter 3, other traumas to do with gender.

Walter's sovereignty as the privileged English man expected to guide the conversation is somehow breached in this section of the novel. In this context, Anna seems to take advantage of her leading role in the interaction to speak out about her roots. Though being paralysed by dislocation and metropolitan disdain, she is intent on making the story of her identity relatable:

“I suppose it was the whisky, but I wanted to talk about it. I wanted to make him see what it was like” (46). Despite Walter’s indifference, she truly believes that her cultural identity must be brought to the fore, and finally asserts: “I’m a real West Indian. . . . I’m the fifth generation on my mother’s side” (47). The soundness of this declaration makes it apparent that Anna is no longer intimidated by her lover’s scrutiny. Her previous jittery has given way to a firm endeavour to declare her Creole identity, and this evolution in terms of tone may be interpreted as evidence of resilience. Although Walter judges her words as an aftereffect of being tipsy, such impression stems from his ignorance as much as from his colonial narcissism. Anna has not asserted her cultural identity on impulse. Rather, her verbal statement could be read as a conscious attempt to integrate her traumatic experience¹⁸ while embracing an ancestry that runs the risk of obliteration.

Having been unable to find in Walter an empathetic listener, she makes a crucial move: she leaves aside her fleeting but ardent desire to make heard her Creole identity. Except for an incidental allusion to the West Indies in an exchange with two American men, she remains silent as to her origins. From this moment on, she will exclusively revisit her birthplace through memory retrieval. The sporadic but telling mental voyages to her childhood in the Caribbean have been construed by Molly Hite as “violent disruptions of involuntary memory” (49). The intermittent leaking of these memories should not be exclusively regarded as abrupt or shattering. While they emanate from Anna’s dire attempt to compensate for the loss of a home, they can be seen as a deliberate—and hence not involuntary—act of resistance on the part of both character and author. Rhys’s use of stream-of-consciousness techniques to represent Anna’s Caribbean past is strategic in that it answers back to the neglectful reduction of Creole

¹⁸ This is evidence of how the conscious verbalisation of emotions can facilitate recovery from trauma. This enabling practice correlates with both Anna’s autodiegetic narration and Rhys’s authorship. In her interview by Vreeland, Rhys acknowledged that she wrote *Voyage in the Dark* because it relieved her (223). Bearing in mind that this is her most clearly autobiographical interwar novel, her feeling of reassurance bespeaks the therapeutic function of storytelling.

identity. In the words of Mary Lou Emery, “[t]he formal devices that structure these apparently subjective events allow the heroines to create and re-create their displaced selves, defiantly refusing a one-dimensional reduction of identity” (“The Politics” 419). Accordingly, Anna demonstrates some resilience in making the effort to reminisce these allegedly disrupting memories and putting them into words, ultimately placing them at the forefront of her testimony.

The sprinkling of West Indian remembrances is an integral part of Anna’s consistent project to sail through her hardships in the colonial centre. The nostalgic recourse to her lost paradise enables her to cope with her trauma of displacement while asserting the complexity of her Creole identity. Subsequently, this limit-case testimony acquires a subversive potential when Anna’s cultural many-sidedness is brought to the fore against the Empire’s essentialism. The clash between the two outlooks is manifested in Anna’s edgy relationship with Aunt Hester, a bigoted character. This character is based on Aunt Clarice, the sister of Rhys’s father, of whom Jean was afraid because of her frostiness (Angier 34). In this novel, Rhys presents this dogmatic British woman as Anna’s stepmother. As she explains to Walter, her father married Hester immediately after selling a plantation, and then the family lived in the town for some time (*Voyage* 47). Rhys’s subtle deviation from factual accuracy is not incidental, but it highlights the status of Anna as an uprooted Creole. The Caribbean writer was aware that her voyage across the Sargasso Sea had quashed the familiar warmth of her island (Pizzichini 47). Rhys’s entrance into the unsympathetic world of England had brought about the loss of Dominica, which she identified as “the only home I ever had” (in Angier 655). In *Voyage in the Dark*, upon the irreversible loss of Anna’s motherland, Hester takes on the role of an inefficient surrogate mother that cannot provide the Creole with a home, in physical and emotional terms. When Walter requests her address at the beginning of the narrative, she refers to Hester’s dwelling as her “permanent address” (*Voyage* 13), but she never comes close to

even imagining it as her home. For her part, her stepmother similarly treats Anna with indifference, outrightly dismissing her unconventionality and an assumed lack of manners.

The narrating Anna characterises Aunt Hester through a piquantly ironic paragraph that stresses the English lady's tendency to categorise:

She had clear brown eyes which stuck out of her head if you looked at her sideways, and an English lady's voice with a sharp, cutting edge to it. Now that I've spoken you can hear that I'm a lady. I have spoken and I suppose you now realize that I'm an English gentlewoman. I have my doubts about you. Speak up and I will place you at once. Speak up, for I fear the worst. That sort of voice. (50)

Anna amusingly distorts the magnitude of her aunt's eyes so as to censure her rigorous scrutiny. As noted later, she has an "inquisitive look" (57) that represents the protagonist's exposure to such microaggressions as derision or condemnation of her origins as undesirable, and Anna's nearly obsessive attentiveness to her gaze bespeaks an anxiety connected with insidious trauma. Not surprisingly, her imposing instructions still reverberate in her mind and produce an effect of disorientation and distress. Hester's voice has grown into an invading and coercive force that further estranges her. As Deborah Kloepfer has remarked, the English aunt's exhortations are "representative of a repressive cultural and linguistic structure" (449). Still, the narrating Anna no longer feels intimidated by her aunt's utterances. On the contrary, she parodically recasts what Hester might speculate when facing a less classy stranger, and such a narrative strategy might point to an evolution in Anna: while she was previously stupefied in the presence of characters related to the repressive system Kloepfer alludes to, as a mature narrator she challenges the foundations of the dismissive discourse embodied by Hester. Her somewhat mocking passage hints, then, that Anna's process of looking back on such a traumatic stressor

through storytelling helps her better understand her traumas while potentially moving towards healing.

Hester is portrayed as a conceited woman: she perceives herself as a self-righteous English lady and is intent on demonstrating her hierarchy by speaking Received Pronunciation. For her, speech is inextricably linked to manners and class. It is through her speech that she proves an English purity that, by contrast, her niece is supposed to lack. On one occasion, she remarks that, despite her efforts to teach Anna to behave like a lady, she still talks “like a nigger” (56). Moreover, when remembering Anna’s uncle Ramsay she gets off the point to observe: “Exactly the laugh of a Negro he had” (56). Such uncouth aggressions to assumedly unrefined accents show that she is unwilling to negotiate in-between positions. As a product of her polarised view of the world, she readily assigns inadequate—and certainly offensive—labels to what fails to meet her slanted standards. Hester’s insularity, then, could be said to echo the power imbalance defining the sterile interactions between coloniser and colonised. In the words of Anne Cunningham, “Hester’s overtly marked Britishness and her insistence that Anna act like a British lady certainly mirrors to some degree the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized” (385).

To a certain extent, her monomaniac struggle for Anna to adopt an English code of manners relates to the colonisers’ imposition of their ways of being. More importantly, the minimisation of her niece’s identity through flawed labelling might reveal a narcissistic, colonial aversion to recognise a space of hybridity. As Ania Loomba explains, “[d]ifferent colonial regimes tried . . . to maintain cultural and racial segregation precisely because, in practice, the interactions between colonising and colonised peoples constantly challenged any neat division between races and cultures” (69). Such blindness to a middle ground was to hinder the expatriates’ efforts to belong in a world governed by strict binary oppositions. As a response to this, Rhys precisely draws on the colonial drive for inflexible categorisation to criticise the

Empire's unidirectionality. As can be seen in Hester's characterisation, she is typified: she is sardonically ascribed the categories of 'lady' and 'gentlewoman'; as for her voice, rather than idiosyncratic, it is the typically patronising voice of the coloniser. Besides evincing a censorious judgement of the Empire, the stereotyped construction of Hester could be said to fulfil a key function: it may enhance the representativeness of this limit-case testimony. By attesting to the endurance of both Anna and herself in front of Hester and Clarice respectively, she is relating these stories to those of alienated West Indian exiles subject to the scrutiny of obliterative colonial censors.

As hinted at above, the cultural segregation upheld by the Empire was a logical outcome of an ideology of power built around binaries. In the opening pages of her "Essay on England", Rhys addresses the social and economic disparity she observed in the metropolitan centre, and expresses her resentment that "some people have everything and other people have nothing—that the white people should have everything and the black have nothing, in money" (2). These lines evince Rhys's empathetic concern about the burden of the colonial outcasts, whom the hierarchical organisation of the Empire has condemned to misery. At this point, it should be added that the asymmetrical distribution she highlights applied not only to wealth but, more interestingly, to compassion. She may be criticising that the perpetuity of colonial binaries translated into a lack of care towards the 'other'. Even though Rhys cannot be classified as a colonial Other, she is yet another victim of the Empire's polarised worldview, as her complex cultural identity was far from being appreciated in its entirety. What appears to be particularly compelling about Rhys's in-betweenness at this point is that her multifarious background might make her more appreciative of the power relations between full-blooded English whites and Caribbean blacks. As a Dominican white Creole, Rhys could not identify herself as one of the former, and it is possibly her liminal nature that positions her as a hinge between the two poles. Furthermore, such a position is enhanced by how greatly she was moved by the squalor of the

black, and this is relevant for understanding the issue that Anna raises after Hester leaves for Yorkshire: the relationship with Francine.

In another mental revisitation of her native land, Anna draws on her childhood memories to bring back the character of Francine, one of her family's servants. This black woman is based on a girl with the same name who is briefly tackled in *Smile Please*. She appears to have been a domestic worker for whom Rhys developed a sense of admiration. She delighted Jean with stories "full of jokes and laughter" (*Smile Please* 31), and they became friends at some point during Jean's late childhood. Similarly, Anna grows nostalgic as she remembers the bliss produced by her interaction with the servant: "The thing about Francine was that when I was with her I was happy" (*Voyage* 58). Devoid of emotional shelter, the expatriate may be clinging on to her memory of Francine to compensate for the lack of empathy she finds in England. Still, her recollection casts light on a circumstance that points to the 'paradoxes of belonging' alluded to in this chapter's introduction. While Anna associates Francine's affection with a sense of home, this feeling of familiarity and trust is eventually fractured on the grounds of race. Having no prospect out of the family estate, the black housekeeper is to an extent living through the legacy of slavery. Her subordination to the family she is caring for, as well as Hester's suggestion that she should be dismissed (58), leads her to adopt a distrustful attitude.¹⁹ When she looks Anna askance while doing the chores, the Creole child grows to realise that

¹⁹ The edginess characterising the relationship between Anna and Francine is a product of racial difference. Their impossible friendship is in keeping with that of Antoinette and Tia in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The Creole protagonist's affinity with her childhood friend goes through some critical moments in the first part of the novel. In the opening pages, Antoinette calls her "cheating nigger" (*Sargasso* 10) after Tia collects her money for winning a bet. In turn, Tia answers back by arguing that black people receive at the moment more respect than white Creoles (10), and leaves the scene with Antoinette's dress. When Antoinette's family estate is intentionally burned by a group of Dominican blacks, the protagonist notices that Tia is holding a stone and yet starts crying when staring at her Creole friend (24). Even though they are bound to remain distanced for good, Tia is brought to centre stage in Antoinette's final dream. As the protagonist of the reverie runs away from the fire, Tia beckons her to jump and join her at the swimming pool where they used to play (123). This imaginary leap is in many ways similar to Anna's mental exiles to the island: it entails an escape from an alienating reality, namely being incarcerated in an English place, and it makes her feel both relieved and in tune with her West Indian origins.

her Creoleness is problematic: “But I knew that of course she disliked me too because I was white; and that I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white” (62).

The emphasis on the child’s dissatisfaction with being white is a strategy that helps Rhys challenge the univocality of both imperialist discourse and its constructions of cultural identity. Anna’s aversion to being likened to whites is more than an after-effect of the shock produced by Francine’s countenance. While it is true that her aloofness provokes a certain uneasiness on the Creole child, Anna’s ruminations quoted above unveil a strong affinity with a black person who, as happens to her in London, is mistreated by such a parochial white character as Hester. Rhys may be stressing Anna’s emotional bond with Dominican blacks, in keeping with hers, to underline the connectiveness of her liminality. Along similar lines, Anna Snaith argues that such affinity can be interpreted as an “anti-imperialist reversal” whereby Rhys—and, likewise, her Creole heroine—resists and responds to the one-sided discourse of Englishness (84). Peter Kalliney elaborates on the subversive dimension of this strategy: “The early Rhys uses cross-racial fantasies to mark herself as an outsider and to criticize prevailing codes of metropolitan bourgeois conduct” (“Jean Rhys” 423). In this sense, both exiles—Rhys and Anna—set about confronting their fear of rejection, ultimately celebrating their exclusion from the systems of respectability or purity. As is the case with Julia Martin in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, it is in the metropole—the locus of oppression—that Anna explores the relational dimension of what Jessica Berman names “her unmapped position as a Creole” (83). By firstly assessing and eventually asserting their polycentric identities, these liminal outcasts appear to be somewhat overcoming their trauma-induced disorientation. In fact, they can be said to have transfigured the meaning of their un-mapping: they have evolved from a vague position that enhances their displacement into an attestation of relationality that is geared towards working through their alienation.

Despite the looming unfamiliarity of the Caribbean island, it did not completely cease to be a source of comfort for both Rhys and the narrating Anna. In the piece “Jean Rhys: A Remembrance”, David Plante, Rhys’s confidant and transcriber of her memories in the late 1970s, reproduces a poem that the Dominican writer had been mulling over: “Two hells have I / Dark Devon and Grey London— / One purgatory: the past—” (“A Remembrance” 266). The *hell/purgatory* binary she conceives as she is working with Plante on her autobiographical project may bespeak her (dis)connection with the two conflicting cultures that constitute her identity. Her identification of Britain with Hell undeniably marks her alienation. As for the other side of the coin, it remains elusive. The association of Dominica with an idyllic Eden is suggested in a childhood note where Rhys puts into words a song that Aunt Jane used to sing to her: “Faraway in Arcady summer never passes / Something remembered, something not quite forgotten” (“Faraway” 1). As Rhys—and, by the same token, Anna—leaves behind her innocence the island is no longer a pastoral setting, but something closer to a purgatory.

Rhys’s cryptic allusion to this remote past can nevertheless be read in a positive light. The purgatory, as an in-between realm, might point to the relational liminality of both Rhys and her protagonists. Indeed, in this representative testimony Anna has been revisiting this unsettling limbo to assert her cultural hybridity amid obliteration. More interestingly, the introspective exiles to this purgatory imply an act of purging or cleansing. In mentally sailing back to her island, Anna finds relief. Therefore, retrieving and verbalising her West Indian past is a conscious, therapeutic enterprise that can help her heal from her traumas, especially those of deracination and displacement. Not coincidentally, she has clung to her past whenever her integrity has been at stake, namely upon her arrival in England, after being insulted by her landlady, or during faulty interactions that have aggravated her displacement. In like manner, her last two corroborative recollections of the island follow two respective aggressions that shatter her to pieces: Walter’s unannounced departure and her botched abortion.

The first of these remembrances is triggered by a letter from Vincent Jeffries. At the urging of his cousin, he notifies her that Walter has decided to bring the romantic affair to an end. Upon her first reading of the letter, Anna conjures up an ominous encounter with Uncle Ramsay, whom she called Uncle Bo:

I got up to the table where the magazine was and Uncle Bo moved and sighed and long yellow tusks like fangs came out of his mouth and protruded down to his chin—you don't scream when you are frightened because you can't and you don't move either because you can't—after a long time he sighed and opened his eyes and clicked his teeth back into place and said what on earth do you want child. (*Voyage* 79)

Given the grotesque emergence of beast-like fangs, it is open to question whether this figment is a dream or a faded reconstruction of a frightening but real episode. At any rate, the onset of this memory is a projection of Anna's alienation. Walter's rejection seems to have dealt a blow to her sense of belonging, and her perplexity translates into an uncanny portrayal of her West Indian uncle alongside an overwhelming sense of paralysis.

In his critical study, Staley links the characters of Walter and Ramsey/Bo on the grounds that both have rejected Anna and that, noticeably, both have resorted to letters to do so (65). In the case of the latter, it is not so clear that he has betrayed the Creole woman. Such assumption stems from Hester's misinterpretation of a letter from Ramsey where she accuses her of not sharing with her niece the funds from the sale of an estate owned by Anna's father. Blinded by pride, she intently tries to make it clear that she shouldered the burden of financially helping Anna, implying that Ramsey has forsaken them (54). However, she appears to be overlooking the actual lines where he firmly expresses his willingness to help Anna: "If you feel that you don't wish her to live with you in England, of course her aunt and I will have her here with us" (52). Bearing this in mind, it does not seem appropriate to closely relate the role of Walter to

that of Uncle Bo. In this context, the eeriness of the imagined Bo is simply the product of Anna's traumatic disorientation amid rejection.

The disquieting ambiguity characterising the first part of this figment speedily gives way to a restorative feeling of relief. As she rereads Vincent's letter, Anna, stricken by grief, recalls the time when she was sobbing and her father came to hug her: "[T]hat time when I was crying about nothing and I thought he'd be wild, but he hugged me and he didn't say anything. . . . He hugged me and then he said, 'I believe you're going to be like me, you poor little devil'" (81). The construction of the father as a loving figure closely follows that of William Rees Williams. Even if he was often absent due to his medical duties, Rhys was always attached to him. As a matter of fact, it should be remembered that she leant on him when her mother beat her. In the section "My Father" from *Smile Please*, she remembers him as a "kind and gentle" man who was ready to cater for her needs (72). For both Anna and Rhys, the father is a loving figure whose kindheartedness contrasts with the deceptive concern of malefactors such as Aunt Hester and Walter.

The opposition between disturbing English characters like Hester and Walter and Caribbean-based supporters may reflect that Anna clings on to her West Indian past as a way to flee the persistence of her insidious trauma of alienation. As mentioned above, the Caribbean island is not an idyllic homeplace, as postures such as Francine's shocking detachment and the mindset of Meta—to be mentioned later—show how the legacy of slavery affects the Creoles' sense of belonging. Still, both Anna's attachment to her coveted island and her deliberate attention to this setting in her narrative evince that it is a reconnection place: firstly, it enables her to assert a testimony that helps her explore both sides of her cultural identity amid metropolitan obliteration; secondly, it enables her to fleetingly escape her paralysing alienation. However, neither the nostalgic recall of the island nor her storytelling can guarantee a complete overcoming of her metropolitan displacement. One of the main hindrances to this restorative

endeavour is her insidious trauma of alienation, which unendingly threatens to remind Anna of her unlikeliness to start anew. The hampering force of her trauma provokes an uncertainty regarding Anna's working through that, as discussed later, permeates the novel's ending.

Lastly, Anna inwardly revisits her homeland in the aftermath of her abortion. Though successful, this shattering experience further contributes to her alienation. What is underscored from the outset of this final section is Anna's utter solitude. She gazes at the foetus and thinks: "I'm glad it happened when nobody was here because I hate people" (*Voyage* 155). Anna's penchant for isolation can be read alongside that of Rhys in 1913. One year after her rupture with Lancelot, she realised that she was to have a baby, apparently by an unidentified man (Angier 75). She eventually had an abortion and, despite not feeling guilty or remorseful, she cut off all contact with her acquaintances (*Smile Please* 118–120). In both cases, detachment from people should not be judged as a capricious act of selfishness; it is through this intentional act that they protect themselves against further derision. Anna's disengagement from reality reaches its peak when, partly due to the effect of medication, she sails back to her native island. This compelling memory is a sweeping account of a Dominican masquerade that takes the form of an italicised monologue. Emery reads this reverie as an emotional refuge that may "shield her from what is happening in the present" (*World's End* 75). Notably, it mirrors the pattern of Anna's trauma narrative: an evolution from alienation-induced paralysis to resistance.

At first, the protagonist of the dream watches the masked dancers from a distance. Such reluctance to participate in the celebration stems from one of Anna's fears as a child, to which she makes oblique reference prior to the abortion: "[T]hat time at home with Meta, when it was Masquerade and she came to see me and put out her tongue at me through the slit in her mask" (*Voyage* 151). The allusion to Meta brings to the fore one of Rhys's most distressing episodes in her Dominican childhood: the hostility of Meta, a black nurse she describes as "the terror of my life" (*Smile Please* 29). To frighten the impressionable Jean, she put on a mask and stuck

out her tongue. The effect of this gesture is described by Rhys in an unpublished paper entitled “Down Along”: “All those three days I was terrified of going back to afternoon school. I was terrified of meeting the masks, who went about in groups, and might surge round my sister and myself, making trilling noises” (10).

Halfway through the interlude, there is a transition back to the abortion clinic. In this interlude, Anna’s new landlady pleads, “[i]t ought to be stopped”, while Anna babbles that she is giddy (*Voyage* 157). It could be argued that the function of this temporal abrupt jump is to buttress the juxtaposition of Anna’s Caribbean past (the masquerade) and her metropolitan present (the botched abortion).²⁰ Interestingly, the fluidity of the vision is breached at the same time as the landlady prays that the patient stops bleeding. Moreover, Anna’s shakiness triggers the succession of the masquerade monologue. In addition to this, it is interesting to note that, by the end of the italicised passage, there is a change in terms of movement. Whereas the first part of the dream is characterised by sluggishness, the second one underlines frantic activity: “*I’m awfully giddy—but we went on dancing forwards and backwards backwards and forwards whirling round and round*” (157). As soon as Anna acknowledges her giddiness, the hitherto paralysed Creole partakes in the celebrations by dancing, and this decision could be read as the harbinger of resilience amid alienation. As Sally Minogue and Andrew Palmer put it, her dance can be seen as “an act of defiance against her imposed isolation” (109). Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik draw on Bakhtin’s theories of carnival to expand on the redemption implied by her involvement in the spree: “The masks of the carnival bring about temporary freedom and dislocation from cultural hierarchies” (159).

²⁰ The successful integration of these binaries matches the idea behind the writing of this novel, as discussed by Rhys in a 1934 letter to Evelyn Scott: “The big idea —well I’m blown [sic] if I can be sure what it is. Something to do with time being an illusion I think. I mean that the past exists —side by side with the present, not behind it; that what was —is” (*Letters* 24).

By confronting her alienation and embracing the liberating Dominican masquerades, Anna seems to have temporarily moved away from the feeling that the unwelcoming walls might crush her to death. Her memories of the island have contributed to this ephemeral escape from alienation. As Erica Johnson corroborates, she has drawn on her island memories “in an attempt to construct the home she desires” (*Home* 64). While the question of establishing a real home is open to debate, it could be argued that her survival represents an act of resilience that might give the ambivalent ending of the novel a positive flavour. Yet, it should be noted that Anna’s reflection on starting “all over again” (159) is disquieting, even more so as the novel ends with her being a giddy patient lying on a bed. As Scott Cohen has contended in relation to motion, “Anna occupies the position of a negative tourist, travel is torturous, arrival is anything but hospitable, and nothing is outside the realm of work” (52–53). Therefore, by the end of this narrative of a voyage which, as the title indicates, is not precisely blissful, the apparent resilience shown by the Creole protagonist should be read with caution. The novel’s final lines are, hence, a form of chiaroscuro: whereas they might hint at an edifying start for the heroine, at the same time, they suggest that such a beginning entails an insidious cycle of race-based neglect leading up to metropolitan alienation. Not surprisingly, her crude reality is that of having aborted in a frosty place located miles away from the island and where she has no sympathetic relatives and no Creole counterparts to relate to. In this respect, the protagonist’s paralysis could be read as a form of inertia that links her to the next heroine to be tackled. Sasha Jansen seems to have frequently repeated to herself the man tra that a potential beginning is in store for her, and yet her abiding disenchantments have made her an aloof, uprooted, and solitary woman aware of her perpetual unbelonging.

2.4. “Now the Circle Is (In)Complete”: The Possibility of Escaping the Embrace of Defeat in *Good Morning, Midnight*

Published in April 1939, this is Rhys’s last work before the long hiatus in her career. As if to prefigure her evanescence from the literary scene, this novel marks the culmination of her modernist cycle of metropolitan alienation. Formally speaking, this narrative experiment can be deemed the apex of her innovation in the use of introspective techniques and disrupting jumps that produce ambiguity. In terms of thematic evolution, the closure of this cycle implies a bitter acquiescence to defeat. Its protagonist, Sasha Jansen, is a cheerless woman in mature adulthood that has been incited by a friend to return to Paris for a change (*Good Morning* 11). Similarly, by 1937 it seemed evident to Leslie Tilden Smith, Rhys’s second husband, that his middle-aged wife, whose creative gust had come to a standstill, needed a change of scene. Presumably with the help of his sister, he collected a sum of money so that Rhys could revisit the City of Light and get inspiration for her ongoing project (Angier 363). Rhys’s sojourn in Paris stimulated the completion of this novel within no more than one year. However, on this occasion the hitherto restorative city did not put an end to her angst. In this bleak testimony of inertia and devaluation, she delves into her awareness that ageing offers no possibility for renewal. Taking the title as a synopsis of this sour realisation, it can be argued that both Rhys and Sasha have embraced their midnight on the assumption that a new beginning is out of reach.

Relying on the role of the experienced Sasha as an autodiegetic narrator, Rhys gives voice to the unwilling acceptance of her fate. At the beginning of this testimony, Sasha reflects on her having continuously been left in the lurch: “You jump in with no willing and eager friends around, and when you sink you sink to the accompaniment of loud laughter” (10). This initial disclosure takes place as she heads for a lavatory, unable to stop crying, and looks at herself in the mirror. It should be noted that the washroom is empty, and this offers Sasha a temporary

shelter that protects her from the derision she acknowledges in her monologue. In this somewhat comforting yet makeshift place, she has the opportunity of assessing a self-image unspoiled by the disapproval of others, and hence the mirror could ultimately allow for self-gratification (Rademacher 140). However, the reflection is far from crystal-clear: “I’m a bit of an automaton, but sane, surely—dry, cold and sane” (*Good Morning* 10). She appears to be comforting herself by claiming her sanity, and in this case her feelingless behaviour would evince a positive indifference to the neglect of others. Still, the image of stability proves an unreliable one. As she ponders later in the narrative, her face is nothing but a mask: “I can take it off whenever I like and hang it up on a nail” (37). Her deceptive composure disguises that, at heart, she is a shattered woman whose insensitive demeanour is a product of trauma .

Sasha’s conduct may have evolved into that of an automaton due to her fear of rejection. From what she dwells on in the passage quoted above, it can be inferred that her apprehension is an outcome of her long-term exposure to the dismissive glances and jeering faces of people. As is the case with all Rhysian heroines—especially the more experienced ones—, Sasha has undergone a cumulation of disdain-related microaggressions that have given rise to a cemented alienation. As argued throughout this section, the Rhysian heroines’ alienation is defined by its insidious nature, and this is reflected in Sasha’s feeling that anyone, whether a close acquaintance or a stranger, will surely mock her. Hence, she desperately tries to hold her anxiety at bay as she sits to drink in public places for fear that she could make a scene. In a 1936 letter, Rhys justifies her unrestrained behaviour at the parties the socialite Evelyn Scott held to introduce her to the New York bohemian intelligentsia: “It is true that all the worst messes I’ve ever been in my life (and the Lord knows I’ve been in bad ones) all the worst mistakes have started because out of a weak futile conceited gutless desire to please I’ve done *something I didn’t want to do*” (*Letters* 33; emphasis in the original). In like manner, the fallen woman in this limit-case testimony grows anxious due to her paranoia about anyone rejecting her. Though

being a habitu  of Parisian caf s, she is highly discomfited, and such restlessness is clear evidence of her alienation. As she sits at Th odore's, a familiar spot, she reflects on her wariness of the clientele: "These people all fling themselves at me. Because I am uneasy and sad they all fling themselves at me larger than life" (*Good Morning* 43). While there is no evidence that she is being glared at, she is distressed by the likelihood of being shunned. It could be argued that she has internalised that she is an object to be ridiculed, and so she may interpret any quick look as harmful.

As she finishes her coffee, she catches sight of two English women whom the owner approaches and talks to. Sasha is unable to overhear the conversation, but she grows alert when both Th odore and the newly arrived women turn to look at her and one of them enquires, "Et qu'est-ce qu'elle fout ici, maintenant?" (43). While this question may sound untimely, its intention seems to be innocuous (Raikin 172). It is probably the case that Th odore, who has recognised Sasha, has mentioned to the women that the forlorn customer sitting in the corner is also English, and so this query is formulated out of curiosity. However, the self-conscious Sasha interprets it as offensive, reformulating it as follows: "Qu'est-ce qu'elle fout ici, la vieille? What the devil (translating it politely) is she doing here, that old woman? What is she doing here, the stranger, the alien, the old one?" (*Good Morning* 46). Such inner assessment of an apparently harmless question could betray traumatic hypervigilance and is a clear instance of the insidiousness of her alienation. Her tortuous interpretation of the women's unintelligible conversation evinces that she is stuck in the acting out stage. Further, the more she mulls over the meaning of the sentence, the more deteriorated her self-image becomes. Along similar lines, Leslie Heywood argues that her alienation is "part of an internalization of the rejection that she attributes to others, and following their cue, she rejects herself" (168). So, her inner dialogue shows that alienation has grown into a self-defeating agony that curtails any possibility of reassembling her fractured Self and reconnecting with society.

Sasha is trapped in a cycle of collapse that deters her from forging intimate relationships with strangers. At the end of Part I, she receives a phone call from an unidentified man—most probably René, the gigolo—, but when she gets downstairs there is nobody on the line. Far from showing interest in the identity of the intruder, she opts for remaining detached from the outside world: “I’ll lie in bed all day, pull the curtains and shut the damned world out” (*Good Morning* 68). Once again, Sasha’s aloofness stems from her haunting suspicion of repudiation. She fears that the person waiting for her could abandon her, as many others have done, and this is suggested by her interior monologue: “There was a monsieur, but the monsieur has gone. There was more than one monsieur, but they have all gone. What an assortment! One of every kind. . . .” (68). As Sasha is overwhelmed by anxiety, her penchant for a voluntary confinement appears to emerge from a self-protective instinct. However, the act of embracing seclusion also proves detrimental for her wellbeing. As she disengages from reality, she resorts to binge drinking in an attempt to flee her grief. For instance, she recalls an episode from her life in London when she tried to drink herself to death (37). In addition, while heading for Serge’s studio, she remembers a period of lockdown when she considered committing suicide by drug overdose: “After the first week I made up my mind to kill myself—the usual whiff of chloroform” (72). Both remembrances are in tune with Rhys’s anguish during her isolation in 1913. Alone in her gloomy Bloomsbury flat, she had not managed to recover from the breakup in her relationship with Lancelot and her illegal abortion. As she recounts in *Smile Please*, on Christmas Day she received an unexpected visit from an artist model whose attention was caught by a bottle of gin on the table. Rhys confessed that she had considered killing herself in the event that her despair became unbearable: “I said I’d got the gin because if I got too blue I’d drink the lot and then jump out of the window” (126). Therefore, the room emerges as a highly ambivalent place that, though temporarily safeguarding against aggression, does not necessarily lead these outcasts to resilience. Unlike the mental exiles of the three previous

heroines, Sasha's escapist self-destructive drive is sterile: it entails that she is unable to confront her alienation and change the tide of her downfall.

It seems evident that the protagonist's traumatic unresponsiveness curtails any attempt at reconnecting with the world. Unlike the Paris-based heroines of Rhys's first two novels, Sasha is pinioned by the shadow of defeat: "I try, but they always see through me. The passages will never lead anywhere, the doors will always be shut. I know . . ." (28). She is aware that a hypothetical struggle to redirect her situation is futile, so she eventually yields to a stasis that is symptomatic of her hopelessness. In this context, the seemingly invigorating Paris translates into nothing more than an impasse in her futile search for a sense of belonging. Far from offering her a way out of her apathy, it looms large as yet another metropolitan centre that contributes to enhancing her pain of alienation. In an epiphany that is unveiled after the recollection of her suicide attempt in London, the narrating Sasha reflects on her displacement: "I have no pride—no pride, no name, no face, no country. I don't belong anywhere. Too sad, too sad. . . . It doesn't matter, there I am, like one of those straws which floats round the edge of a whirlpool and is gradually sucked into the centre, the dead centre, where everything is stagnant, everything is calm" (38). This illuminating reflection marries her experience of an outcast in England with her current situation in Paris, such juxtaposition being enhanced by the use of the present tense. As with London, the French metropole has emerged as another oppressive centre that is abducting her. Sasha, who perceives herself as a flimsy straw, is mindful that she cannot escape from this whirlpool of alienation, so she appears to embrace her fate: she is condemned to psychological and social stagnation, which, as hinted at before, she often camouflages with a mask of indifference.

Unable to escape the tentacles of the estranging metropolis, Sasha opts for succumbing to her defeat. Unlike the other leading characters in Rhys's modernist novels, she could be said to acquiesce to the annihilation of her identity, and this is suggested by her acceptance that she

has been deprived of her dignity, name, or nationality. In the light of obliteration, she lacks the resolution to relight and affirm her identity. On the contrary, she feels the need to fit the mould of mainstream society through simulation: “Faites comme les autres—that’s been my motto all my life. . . . I am trying so hard to be like you. I know I don’t succeed, but look how hard I try” (88). Such compulsion to behave like those people she perceives as belonging is self-deceiving, as it lacks a doable purpose. No matter how hard she tries, she may never blend in metropolitan society precisely because she is foreshadowing the futility of her enterprise. In addition to this, it could be argued that her rehearsals to adopt the rituals and manners of thriving Parisians may emerge from her obsession with being judged, which is undoubtedly a result of her trauma of alienation. In this sense, Sasha’s performance of her motto might be aimed at safeguarding her anonymity, effectively protecting her against being noticed and potentially judged (Goldman 135). However, she inevitably fails to abide by the rules she has imposed herself. She ends up getting drunk and on the brink of tears, the likelihood of being noticed increasing exponentially: “They all know what I am. I’m a woman come in here to get drunk” (*Good Morning* 89).

Sasha’s sterile mimicry entails that she has been dispossessed of a positive identity. Just as the adoption of an apathetic countenance, this is a self-destructive practice that aggravates her pain of displacement. What is more, it turns her integrity into what can be denominated a ‘non-identity’, drawing on Rachel Bowlby’s argument that “[p]ersonal identities in the novel are . . . non-identities, without-identities” (*Still Crazy* 41). It comes as no surprise, then, that as she recalls her return to a familiar hotel in a previous stay in Paris, she lays bare a namelessness that can be said to epitomise her existence: “Back to the hotel without a name in the street without a name. You press the button and the door opens. This is the Hotel Without-a-Name in the Street Without-a-Name, and the clients have no names, no faces. You go up the stairs. Always the same stairs, always the same room” (*Good Morning* 120). It can be inferred from this passage that her search for a sense of belonging has reached a point of no return. She

unavoidably goes back to a run-of-the-mill setting whose existence, like that of its habitués, is ignored, as happens in Augé's 'non-places'. She has thus been condemned to inhabit a world that reflects her invisibility and, as implied by the meditation's parallelistic pattern, there is no likelihood of progress. In addition to lacking an identifiable place, she has been dispossessed of a face. Such spiritless quality may be said to suggest a growing dehumanisation closely tied to her automaton-like behaviour, which may be evoked by the mechanical opening of the door. Still, her (in)existence may also be read in a positive light: it is a feature that connects the estranged protagonist with the ordinary clients of the hotel, and such instance of relationality hints at the status of this narrated experience as a representative testimony of alienation.

While Sasha's identity has been subject to obliteration, the hypothesis that her story may allow for representativeness brings some hope for reconnection. In this sense, the potential network emerging from her traumatic experience could bring about the positive transformation of her personal identity: the barren 'non-identity' might evolve into a liminal identity that, as maintained throughout this study, is more associative than exclusionary. It is at this point that the covertly subversive implications of Sasha's autodiegetic narration should be disclosed. This limit-case testimony is highly opaque, and its inherent ambivalence contributes to casting doubt as to the protagonist's identity. The narrating Sasha eludes any overt allusion to her birthplace and leaves the question of her alleged Englishness suspended. Gregg has observed that her self-construction reflects "constitutive Otherness, especially with respect to name and nationality" (154), and such discrepancy from the normative Self raises the key issue of resistance. In line with the view that Rhys exploits ambiguity to challenge dominant discourses, the portrayal of in-between identity in this late interwar novel might similarly bear some mordant critique.

A revealing episode that touches on the subversive power of ambivalent constructions of identity is Sasha's initial encounter with the Parisian hotel's *patron*. On the day after checking in, he requests her passport, apparently because its number is missing on the information card.

Sasha is experienced enough to conclude: “Nationality—that’s what has puzzled him” (13). As the narrator recalls this event, an apparent instance of absent-mindedness reveals itself as an act of resistance. She is unwilling to disclose her origins, deliberately ignoring the request of a caretaker she envisions as a disapproving judge, “a fish . . . staring at the world outside with a glassy and unbelieving eye” (13). Although the novel lacks clear-cut references to colonial oppression, this could be read as an encounter with a rigid thinking system. On arriving in the French metropolitan centre, she is alerted that she runs the risk of being looked down on by someone whose narrow-mindedness is suggested by the glassy eye. However, she does not fall prey to her trauma-induced paralysis. On the contrary, like Anna in front of Hester, Sasha is audacious enough not to be tripped up by this demanding gazer, ultimately embracing silence as a strategy. She is aware that being overly emotional would bring about nothing but derision, so she may prefer to remain reticent until she finds the opportunity to successfully write back against this potential oppressor.

The protagonist’s reticence during the encounter with the *patron* can be regarded as an act of endurance whose subversiveness is enhanced by narrative agency. As can be observed in her lyrical description of this potential oppressor, she critically plays on the idea of his glare. To begin with, she refers to it as glassy when it is a defective monocle that aggravates rather than amends the short-sightedness of the dominant discourse. Then, she ironically tries to side with him as he scowls at her attire: “I don’t blame him. It shouts ‘Anglaise’, my hat. And my dress extinguishes me” (14). This ambiguous remark is indeed an illuminating instance of both Sasha’s and Rhys’s destabilising construction of cultural identity. In a similar manner to what Anna does in her characterisation of Hester, Sasha hypothesises about what her antagonistic interlocutor may be wondering. By switching to French, she wittingly recasts his assumed ruminations. As explained above, he is puzzled by her origins, and at this point Sasha interprets that he may be contemptuously dismissing her due to her nationality. However, the gap in her

information card prevents him from reaching a conclusion as to her identity, so his seeming verdict that she is an ‘*Anglaise*’ evinces a one-sided tendency to stereotype the Other. Hence, the idea behind Sasha’s imagination of the *patron*’s inner dialogue may be that the construction of stereotypes camouflages the complexity of a given identity, just as the protagonist’s hat covers a portion of her head.

It is interesting to briefly reflect on the reason why Sasha seems to temporarily excuse the observer. Divergent though their views might be, both seem to coincide on their dislike of the clothing. By foregrounding her repulsion of an attire that appears to showcase Englishness, the narrating Sasha is disclosing not merely her disillusionment with the erasure of her complexity. She may also be attributing such obliteration to the English metropolis, and this is highlighted by her claim that her dress—presumably an English one—extinguishes her. It is suggested that Sasha feels intimidated not so much by the Parisian hotel manager as by England. Though disturbing her, the *patron*’s inflexible perusal is nowhere near as injurious as the influence of her country of residence. The noxious effect of the English metropole, epitomised by the set of clothes she is wearing, is tackled by Erica Johnson in her analysis of Creole wandering. Johnson reads the symbolism of her attire as a mark of Creole identity and goes on to argue: “[H]er English hat and the dress extinguish her insofar as they silence the non-English identity of their wearer” (“Creole Errance” 40). Johnson’s hypothesis that Sasha is a Creole woman needs to be treated with caution, however. While there is an inextricable link between Rhys’s female protagonist and the Creole author, it should be remembered that this novel is markedly elusive as regards the revelation of cultural identity. What seems indisputable is that such resistance to assign a label to Sasha’s nationality points to an in-betweenness that is ultimately strategic. As she casts an insoluble doubt as to her heroine’s identity, Rhys transgresses the discourse of the Empire as well as its exclusiveness. Liminality, in the case of Sasha, can therefore be read as a weapon that, as an autodiegetic narrator, she

may use to confront her trauma of displacement. Largely unable to relate to the people around her, she may find in her fundamentally relational liminality an opportunity to make her testimony inclusive or, in other words, representative.

The subversive and seemingly curative effect of Sasha's narrative agency persists as she explores some episodes from her past that account for her alienation. In one of these sketches, she depicts her experience as a receptionist in a Parisian boutique and puts the focus on her disastrous clash with her line manager. This patronising figure stands as an inquisitive English man that makes little effort to put himself in the place of the bashful employee. His overbearing presence makes Sasha waver, to which he replies: "This woman is the biggest fool I've ever met in my life. She seems to be half-witted. She's hopeless" (24). Struck by such a ruthless observation, she cannot help bursting into tears in public despite her strife not to be exposed to further ridicule. At that moment, she feels utterly displaced, as can be seen both in her impulse to rush away and in her reflection that she lives in a "damned world" (25). Yet, by the time she becomes a storyteller, she seems to have left behind the angst generated by the bully. Despite seeming trapped in a vicious circle of collapse, she manages to inwardly confront her oppressor by downplaying his virulence: "Now the circle is complete. Now, strangely enough, I am no longer afraid of Mr Blank" (25). In addition to this, it should be remarked that the increasingly resistant narrator is bold enough to retrieve an apparently frivolous phrase uttered by her French overseer, Mr Salvatini, and use it to typify the English headman as "the real English type" (17).

The stereotyped portrait of the English perpetrator is retaken shortly after in the narrative, concretely when she recalls her return to London five years before the time of the story. In a disheartening passage that reverberates with the London interlude in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, she literally reproduces what an unwelcoming relative of hers told her after setting foot on the wintry city: "Why didn't you drown yourself in the Seine?" (36). The acrimonious indifference of her family leads to an episode of binge drinking that reflects her urgency to flee

reality as a symptom of alienation. In contrast, the obstinate narrative voice opts for scoffing at this relative, dismissing his question as a “melodramatic” assault not to be taken seriously (36). The narrating Sasha downplays such verbal abuse as a histrionic act on the part of a representative member of a society she ironically baptises as “the extremely respectable” (36). What is more, she goes on to argue that the coarse attacks of these self-righteous people emanate from their blind adherence to stereotypes: “Everything in their whole bloody world is a cliché. Everything is born out of a cliché, rests on a cliché, survives by a cliché” (36). As with Anna’s description of Aunt Hester, the characterisation of such an oppressive elite may be read as another instance of how Rhys’s interwar testimonies challenge the alienating oppression of the Empire. In this case, the subversive narrative voice plays with the labelling tendency of those in power, which Sylvie Maurel describes as a “taxonomic process which . . . follows from rigorous observation of phenomena” (109). Sasha, wittily, is able to discern that her English oppressors completely fail to carefully examine what is on their doorstep, and so their taxonomy cannot do justice to the complex identity of both herself and the colonial outcasts that may identify with her story.

There is an interesting element in the fragmented sketches analysed above that heightens the subversiveness of Rhys’s use of ambiguity. It should be noted that, as the narrative voice revisits her past, she chooses to preserve the anonymity of her perpetrators. Such confidentiality runs counter to what has been done in the previous novels, where personal names such as those of the Heidlers and Aunt Hester are given. In this case, the narrator refers to her nasty relative as the ‘old devil’, while she renames the store manager as ‘Mr Blank’, such nickname ironically underlining the unmistakable fuzziness of these analepses. The only aspect that remains clear is that both nameless oppressors are English, and that they readily dismiss anyone that deviates, whether slightly or enormously, from their dogmatic standards. Given the nationality of the two perpetrators, it should be wondered to what extent this narrative could be representative of

the coercion undergone by England-based subjects from British colonies during the interwar period.

Noticeably, the vagueness of both Mr Blank and the ‘old devil’ connects with that of the biographical events on which these recollections are based. As for the boutique sketch, Angier merely conjectures that Rhys may have landed the job of receptionist in a dress store near the Avenue de Marigny (125). As regards the London memory, it is loosely linked to Rhys’s visit to her family alluded to in the discussion of her second novel. However, the date given by the narrator—“that famous winter five years ago” (*Good Morning* 36)—is unanalogous to that of Rhys’s layover in the English metropolis, since it actually took place in 1925 rather than in the early 1930s. Both the breach of factual accuracy and the lack of precise markers of identity of time encapsulate the essence of Gilmore’s limit-cases: the elusive nature of trauma prevents both Sasha and Rhys from verbalising a date-stamped chronicle and, moreover, the obsession with factual accuracy is undermined to focus on the retrieval and subsequent representation of the traumatic event. It could also be argued that the openness of Sasha’s—and Rhys’s—testimony also helps challenge the inflexibility of colonisers. Both author and character endorse an ambivalent discourse so as to counter the ingrained stereotypes and the rigid ideas maintained by the ones in power. In view of the interpretation discussed above, Rhys’s strategy to use ambiguity to combat the rigidity of the Empire can be read as an act of resistance amid colonial destructiveness. Yet, at the same time her penchant for fuzziness can also enhance the idea that the Rhysian heroine does not envision a clear plan for an agency-based renewal. Though evidently being an example of agency, Sasha’s testimony is still haunted by doubt and an inertia that casts doubt on whether she is likely to work through her trauma or she is to remain straitjacketed by her solid alienation. Such hesitancy is perfectly illustrated by the narrative’s ending. As with that of *Voyage in the Dark*, the final lines of Rhys’s last interwar novel leave unsolved the question of what direction the trauma victim will follow: Might her

affirmative words leave some hope for a successful way out of her alienation? Is she, by contrast, doomed to start another cycle of defeat whereby her trauma will insidiously reawaken her distrust of others and her fear that she will never fit in? Sasha's decision to draw her cryptic visitor down to her suggests that it is the second path that she unwillingly follows.

As she gazes at the 'commis voyageur' living next to her, Sasha's mind is invaded by the intrusive thought that he will be yet another human being that she will inevitably despise. The ghost-like presence of her neighbour echoes, in a way, the insidiousness of a trauma that returns once and again, as silently as this male character's entrance into her room. In this case, Sasha's symbolic embrace may evince that she cannot repel the grip of alienation. Thus, her final words imply a sterile agency that does nothing but confirm her yielding to what lies in store for her. Both the narrator's recall of her embrace and the heroine's repetition of the interjection "yes" are an intertextual reference to the final lines of Molly Bloom's interior monologue in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Still, there appears to be a significant difference in terms of the speakers' resoluteness. Molly's affirmation as she recalls hugging Leopold is auspicious: not only does she underscore the wilful embrace of an invigorating future by using the future tense, but she evokes an amalgamation of elements, from a prolific vegetation to a colourful sea (Joyce 682) that, as happens in other Rhysian texts, have a restorative effect. By contrast, Sasha's utterance as she welcomes the alienating ghost that has been knocking at her door is neither deliberate nor hopeful. As mentioned before, her final words are preceded by a negative language that casts further hesitancy on whether she is envisioning a new beginning. Remarkably, while Molly's inner speech lacks punctuation as if to suggest continuity, Sasha's interjections are separated by dashes that imply rupture, and this is yet another reminder that the Rhysian heroine can do nothing to overcome an alienation that sooner or later will break her to pieces.

Concluding Remarks

The inconclusive lines closing Rhys's modernist cycle of stories on metropolitan alienation capture the overall sense of impotence permeating all four novels. By the end of the testimonial narrative of the more experienced heroine, there seems to be little progression in terms of how Rhysian female outcasts draw near a potential working-through. The fates of the four women intermingle in the sense that all of them are doomed to stagnation. As the ending of *Good Morning, Midnight* evinces, any strife on the part of the heroines towards recovery from their alienation is futile: inevitably, at the end of it their progress will be annulled by a trauma that persistently threatens to remind them that a new beginning is out of reach.

The Rhysian heroines' awareness that the metropolis offers them no hope for belonging greatly derives from their cognisance that both this setting and the system associated with it are oppressing them. Using the metaphor of the shrinking room that Anna experiences during her touring days, each day in the city entails a silent but constant motion of the metaphorical walls of the city, which threaten to crush the heroines to death. The insidiousness of this experience lies at the heart of the dominant type of trauma discussed in this chapter. The cumulative and incessant quality of the heroines' trauma of alienation runs parallel to the daily erosion of another extended metaphor tackled in the close reading: the protagonists' incarceration. Such angst is explicitly mentioned in some epiphanic passages from *Quartet* and, though attesting to the protagonists' detachment from other people, they also hint at a commonality of experience that coheres with the representativeness of limit-cases. Their imprisonment—whether figurative or through voluntary lockdown—contributes to further alienating themselves from a society they cannot relate to, and still at the same time the realisation that they are prisoners also enables them to identify with other invisible people that have slipped into nowhere. This punctual identification of other outcasts, such as the faceless customers of the 'non-places' that these women frequent, hints not only at the question

of representativeness; they also evince a move towards empathy that is more thoroughly discussed in Chapter 4. These are among the few people with whom they may forge an emotional bond, and yet the anxiety-ridden protagonists are hindered by their fear of being rejected.

The panic at the possibility of being further derided is another outcome of the cumulative trauma to which Rhys's female outsiders have been exposed—and still are—in the metropole. At the root of this interplay of punctual events and daily oppression, there lies a series of glares and uncalled-for remarks that, as shown in the analysis, shatter the heroines' psyche at an early stage. For instance, the hostile look of Francine, the negligent attitude of Hester or the parochial lectures by the Heidlers impinge on the minds of women that, at that point in this Rhysian cycle of alienation narratives, are not as experienced as the indifferent Julia or the weary Sasha. After years of unwillingly listening to and looking at such instances of belittlement, the heroines have internalised that anyone will judge them as stereotypical characters, such as '*l'Anglaise*' or '*la vieille*'. Such a cemented awareness turns any interaction with their outside world into a threat, as they take it for granted that any metropolitan-based person, from passersby to hotel patrons, is cut from the same cloth: they are assumed to be morally superior people bound to make faces at them and remind them of their difference. These women's trauma-induced assumption is in many ways destructive: besides leading to an increasingly more deteriorated self-image, it leads to self-effacement. As they cut off virtually any link with the world outside, their displacement is perpetuated. Likewise, by detaching themselves from an unwelcoming yet multicultural city, their chances to meet other cultural outsiders—whether Creole or not—are reduced to nil. The absence of a fruitful interaction with peer misfits leaves them devoid of an empathetic listener having undergone a similar process of cultural othering and identity simplification. Thus, both their reconnection with their roots and the rekindling of their identity are rendered an unfeasible task but for an element that proves crucial in these testimonies: the heroines' mental exiles.

One of the key findings in the analysis conducted in this chapter is the restorative function of certain mental exiles experienced by the protagonists. These psychological voyages should not be read as a product of traumatic dissociation; whether deliberate or unconscious, they hint at the Rhysian victims' longing to reconnect with a remote and long-lost land on the other side of the ocean. All Rhys's heroines enjoy at some point this quasi-mystical experience except for Sasha: she is too hopeless to fathom any type of reassortment of her identity and, what is more, *Good Morning, Midnight* is by far the most elusive of the four modernist texts when it comes to tracking the cultural origins of its leading character. Sometimes, they conjure these cherished settings, whether explicitly or more suggestively, when alone in environments that cause neither disturbance nor anxiety to them. This is the case with Marya while sunbathing in the Mediterranean Sea, or with Julia as she remains confined to her room at the beginning of her story. More frequently, however, such revisitations happen in the midst of overwhelming situations that threaten to further alienate the victim: this is what happens to Anna, who clings on to the memories of her Caribbean island to flee an unbearable present marked by alienation. Besides leading to bereavement, such voyages are a strategic device aimed at counterbalancing the corrosive effect of European metropolitan centres on the heroines' identity. As they leave behind these sites of alienation, they are brought into contact with that side of their multifarious identity that, due to the acclimatisation to the standards of life in the metropolis, can gradually be degraded until it fades into oblivion. It should be highlighted that, in the case of Julia, her reconnection with an origin of which she has long been unaware is enabled by an actual voyage to Britain. In a rare instance of deliberate agency, the typically aloof Rhysian outsider confronts her fear of displacement by calling on her dismissive London-based family, and this substantial journey allows her to symbolically reconnect with her Brazilian roots in a metropolitan centre that reduces what lies outside the capital to elsewhere-ness.

In line with the pervasive ambivalence of Rhys's work, the heroines' mental reencounters with what lies at the margins of the metropolis often lay bare that such cherished places cannot guarantee a solid sense of belonging. Even though the liminal protagonists generally find solace in these remembrances, the island that they are trying to reach remains elusive throughout this modernist cycle of alienation. Their mental exiles never translate into their setting foot on their alleged homelands. Rather, they remain stuck in the paralysing metropolis, so it is by no means coincidental that this imaginary destination is presented, as in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, as an exotic place they have never known. As narratives of alienation, Rhys's modernist novels disclose that the slippery nature of these places is connected with the dreamy subject's identity. Considering the link between the heroines and their artificer, their in-betweenness contributes to frustrating any hope for a perfect symbiosis with the island. While being repudiated by the metropolis, the assumedly Creole autobiographical subject also comes to grasp the implications of her Creoleness in her native land. The legacy of the old Creole plantocracy is not pored over in Rhys's modernist novels, and yet in *Voyage in the Dark* it seems to be the source of certain attitudes that trigger Anna's disquietude and make her feel somewhat unwanted, such as Meta's jeering face or Francine's resentful look. The autobiographical subject feels undesirable, hence, both in her native island and in the metropolis. Therefore, it is in such episodes where it grows perceptible how the selected limit-cases attempt to represent in its entirety the workings of the pain of alienation affecting the loosely connected community of Caribbean white Creoles based in the metropole during the first decades of the twentieth century. They cannot claim to a sense of full belonging in either of the settings and, to aggravate their displacement, the novels remind us that they are not likely to establish an intimate connection with other cultural misfits coming from the overseas colonies.

The salience given in the written text to how the heroines resort to their mind to reassert their fractured identity ties in with the therapeutic function of transforming their inner life by

narrativising trauma. Both the reported thoughts of Marya and Julia and the autodiegetic narration of Anna and Sasha point to the core goal that Rhys pursued when writing these testimonies: as befits limit-cases, she sought to integrate her traumatic experiences—in this case the trauma of alienation—by constantly revisiting them, if in fictional form. The restorative function of this storytelling practice goes hand in hand with the use of narrative devices aimed at destabilising such traumatic stressors as the power structures governing the relation between the motherland and its colonial subjects. In keeping with the subversive role of ambiguity, one such strategy is the disruptive use of trauma time in place of linear time. The intrusion of abrupt temporal jumps in these trauma narratives poses a threat to a linearity connected with the logical order imposed by the nation-state and heralded by characters such as Mr Heidler, Hester, or Walter Jeffries. In an early stage, this technique is punctually used when the heroines—most notably Anna—are struggling to share their story with privileged addressees who, given their assumed moral superiority, dismiss such accounts in the same way as they repudiate the complexity of these subjects' identity. At this point, it is worth noting that the sporadic adoption of trauma time in this context gives rise to a large-scale exploitation of this device in the form of analepses. If punctual use of trauma time was meant to challenge the sovereignty of these characters, its extended use in the selected testimonies is aimed at destabilising what they represent: the power structures of the metropolitan centres that so oppress the protagonists of Rhys's modernist novels.

The sustained analepses comprising a large portion of *Good Morning, Midnight* represent the culmination of Rhys's endeavour to explore her insidious alienation through trauma writing. As early examples of the limit-case, the selected modernist texts enable her to better understand her puzzling unbelonging through the recurrent presence of motifs and events that, besides relating to her trauma, have a relatable quality. Likewise, the fractured temporality of her testimony—relying on trauma time—offers a framework for representing alienation that

not only allows for a potential integration of the traumatic experience; it also offers Rhys a way of subtly defying the system that insidiously brings both her cultural misfits and her to pieces.

Through storytelling, enhanced by the narrative agency of the two latter heroines, Rhys drives at a restorative and potentially subversive project that is nonetheless thwarted by the combined impact of different traumas. It should be remembered that, as the final lines in *Good Morning, Midnight* attest, the Rhysian misfits have no alternative but to accept that they are subject to the influence of a trauma that continuously threatens to reappear. Whether the different experiences labelled under the category of ‘alienation’ are integrated or not, the autobiographical subject is still susceptible to other forms of trauma, both punctual and, more importantly, insidious. One of the circumstances making them vulnerable to further shattering is, as explored in the chapter that follows, the problematics of their gender and class. These characters are, borrowing Juliane Lopoukhine et al.’s phrase, “interwar bohemian female *déclassées*” who, on account of being both women and economically destitute subjects, are prone to undergoing systemic oppression. Their awareness that they are both dependent on and subjected to a series of male benefactors is the product of a series of experiences to be close-read in the ensuing analysis of these limit-cases on *déclassé* women. Furthermore, in line with the pain of unbelonging examined above, Chapter 3 reads the oppression experienced by the representative *déclassée* (auto)biographical subject as both a harbinger and a booster of insidious trauma.

3. “INTERWAR BOHEMIAN FEMALE *DÉCLASSÉES*”: THE RELIANCE ON UNRELIABLE MALE BENEFACTORS FOR SURVIVAL

The critical reading of Rhys’s modernist limit-cases demands an assessment of their artificer’s position as a woman writer. In her fiction, gender roles figure as a salient concern inextricably linked to other dynamics of oppression. Notably, this relational dialogue between environments of power imbalance is graphically implied in Sue Thomas’s enumeration of the recurrent issues Rhys pores over in her writings: “[E]mpire, gender, sex, race, class, and desire” (*The Worlding* 2). It is by no means coincidental that her perusal of gender is situated apace with her analysis of the Empire, as both systems have traditionally relied on binary oppositions. Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that Western discourses of gender and Empire are stereotypical to the extent that they have constrained the definition of the subordinate other, who is constructed in relation to the dominant self. In the case of women, they have long been defined as related to hegemonic masculinity. Thereby, traits such as rationality, self-determination and leadership are taken as quintessentially male attributes against which femininity has been delineated, the result being a gendered conceptualisation of the ‘ideal’ woman as embodying passivity, obedience, frailty, and a proclivity to the private sphere (Garner 206). The internalisation of this socially-based slanted construction of femininity curtails the autonomy and worth of women, and is at the core of the patriarchal system of which Rhys was well aware of.

Rhys wrote her modernist fiction at a time when first-wave feminism was in full swing. Coetaneous British women writers such as Mina Loy, Elizabeth Bowen or Virginia Woolf were already intermingling their exploration of the female consciousness with an increasingly less covert debate on the new possibilities offered for women in light of cutting-edge political and social breakthroughs. Rhys’s stance on this auspicious pathway for women, however, does not give much room for optimism. She was sceptical about the possibility for women to find a way

out of precariousness, even more so as the interwar years were defined by uncertainty (Plock 90). This pervasive attitude of mistrust is likely to have been shaped by her keenness to critically observe and inspect the reality that surrounded her. She daily suffered through the experience of having a subordinate social status, both as a Creole from an overseas colony and as a non-affluent woman. She was no stranger to the powerlessness induced by patriarchy, and she drew on her struggle to live through this system to give life to her heroines (Le Gallez 6).

It is undeniable that Rhys's awareness of her subjection to patriarchy contributed to her uneasiness. The sharp alienation to which her ethnicity condemned her was intensified by her frequently disturbing relations to men, especially during her early years in Europe. As a heavily disoriented newcomer with virtually no acquaintances, it seems not surprising that she was an easy prey for apparently considerate male intruders. As Thomas Staley explains, her experience with men at this stage contributed to nourishing her view that her female dependence could not be helped (7). From these interactions, Rhys learnt that men had taken advantage of her helplessness to toy with her. It seems evident that they had benefited from their more privileged position in terms of class and gender to exert their influence over the outsider as they pleased. This left her with a feeling of shame that accounts for her scepticism of women's way out of patriarchal subjugation. Furthermore, these humiliations may be said to have contributed to her gender-related traumas, which add to her dislocation due to her origin. As discussed below, the PTSD associated to her gender role strain has a twofold nature. What lies at its root is the shattering effect of some punctual events that took place during her adolescence, both in Dominica and in the metropolis. Yet, as is the case with the traumas explored in the previous chapter, the distress of both the author and her female characters is mainly shaped by the everyday exposure to coercion and neglect.

There are two key traumatic events based on gender hierarchies that sparked what might be denominated Rhys's traumas of patriarchy. The former was experienced on her native island

and was of a sexual nature. The latter took place in London and, though having little to do with physical abuse, had a more destructive repercussion on both Rhys's unbelonging and her trust in others. The first experience is the sexual harassment she endured at the hands of an English friend of her mother. The fondling undergone as a child can be said to have been crucial for the formation of Rhys as a woman broken in two, as it constitutes what Thomas calls "a sexual rite of passage from naive girlhood to 'doomed' womanhood" (*The Worlding* 27). The account of this sexual aggression is located towards the middle of the "Black Exercise Book", and the fact that this notebook was not published makes this ruptured testimony an even more precious narrative when researching into Rhys's traumas and her portraying them in her fiction. The second happening is her relationship with the financier Lancelot Grey Hugh Smith. Both the painful denouement of this love story and Rhys's resultant episode of depression are reconstructed in two vignettes from *Smile Please*, namely "The Interval" and "Christmas Day". As explored in this chapter's subsection on *Voyage in the Dark*, this episode from her initial years in the metropolis provided the basis for the affair between Anna and Walter in *Voyage in the Dark*. Hence, it is dealt with only in broad lines in this introduction.

Rhys starts her narrative of Mr Howard's abuse by underlining how "captivated" she is by this "handsome old English man of about seventy two or three" ("Black" 47). More than his outward appearance, what allures the impressionable Rhys is the refinement of his speech, alongside his genuine interest in both the island and her (48). However, as they sit in the garden, she is instantly distressed by her interlocutor's remark that, as a girl of fourteen, she is "quite old enough to have a lover" (49). Her reaction is that of confusion and agitation: as she describes it, her heartbeat seems to stop before it speedily quickens, somehow foreshadowing what awaits her. It is while she is pondering on a convenient answer that Mr Howard unbuttons her dress and fondles her: "I feel his hand touches my breasts. I sit perfectly still staring at the branch of the tree which hangs over the bench thinking this is a mistake a mistake" (49–50).

The mature narrator uses a violent juxtaposition of two senses—touch and sight—to represent the overwhelming effect of this experience and to shift from the perpetrator’s action to the perspective of the victim, a recently shattered adolescent whose immediate reaction is that of numbness. The fissure of the victim’s mind is hinted at by her contemplating the bough, which may be read as an instance of dissociation. What ensues is the activation of denial as a mechanism of the psyche: she direly tries to appease her pain by repeating that what has suddenly dawned on her cannot be real.

Rhys’s self-deception haunts her in the following paragraphs and even regulates her bond with the trespasser. Whereas on the first few days she shows reluctance to stroll by his side and rejects his chocolates, she finally mulls over whether she is being rude to him: “Mr Howard doesn’t like me. I was puzzled then annoyed then anxious was I rude? I’m always offending people was I?” (52). As well as preliminary denial, self-blame has been identified as a common response to childhood sexual abuse (Moran, *Virginia Woolf* 98). Yet, what is particularly intriguing about Rhys’s self-censure is her apprehension that she does nothing but annoy others. This intrusive thought may be read as an internalisation of the severe criticism on the part of her unloving mother, whose abusive practices—including the beatings mentioned in this dissertation’s previous chapter—permeate this notebook. In this framework, the victim’s reticence to hang around with the family’s guest—hence contravening her expected role as an obedient woman—appears to make her unfit for social interaction. She is, then, caught between two alternatives that irrevocably condemn her to helplessness and that are likely to transform her event-based trauma into an insidious one. In accordance, unwillingly accepting the English aggressor’s company might entail a cumulative sexual trauma, while her defence against any further aggression boosts the likelihood of being looked askance.

By the time Howard leaves for England, it appears that Rhys has been left with an awareness that, whether she chooses acquiescence or reluctance in her interactions with her

victimiser, she is doomed to devastation. In a moment of epiphany, she reflects: “But something in the depths of me said, Yes, that’s true. Pain humiliation submission—that is for me. It fitted in with all I knew of life, with all I’d ever felt” (“Black” 63). In view of such recognition of vanquishment, it can be argued that Howard’s sexual abuse left on her a traumatic imprint of abasement that was worsened by the lack of empathy she found in her close acquaintances. The convergence of abuse and thoughtlessness has also been noted by Teresa O’Connor, who goes as far as to argue that this injurious combination may explain why Rhys’s subsequent relationships to men were unlucky (25). The wound inflicted by Howard dwells alongside a daily chance of being devalued, manipulated, and finally disregarded, as happened in her liaison with Lancelot. It is this pattern of social rejection that prevails in Rhys’s inspection of gender-related traumas and that plays a crucial role in configuring the cycle of defeat, passivity, and dependence on men in which her heroines seem to be stuck.

As Rhys tried to make a living out of her unstable job as a chorus girl sometime in 1910, she met Lancelot, an affluent stockbroker who doubled her age (Angier 61). Despite her initial dislike of a man she perceived as the prototypical gentleman appearing in books, she came to worship him as a dream come true (Rhys, *Smile Please* 114–115). What she most cherished about him was that he found in him an attentive partner that provided her with safety. She acknowledges in *Smile Please* that she was lucky to have “not only a lover, but a friend” (116). Yet, by the autumn of 1912 Lancelot came to the conclusion that this artless and childlike woman was unsuitable for him. He sailed off to New York, apparently on business, and broke the relationship through a letter (Pizzichini 107). Lancelot’s abandonment was certainly a blow for Rhys, but what actually left an unhealable scar on her psyche was the stockbroker’s decision to send her money through his cousin Julian and then a lawyer. She interpreted this act of presumed generosity as a humiliation, and it triggered both a deep fear of rejection and a firm conviction that she was a “useless person” (*Smile Please* 121). Leah Rosenberg has identified

in Rhys's blind submission to Lancelot an analogy to the power dynamics of the incident with Howard: "Rhys again played the exotic virgin, while Smith held the power in the relationship and broke off the affair when it suited him" (187). Although it is unlikely that the financier physically abused her, he exerted his male dominance by pulling the strings in the relationship and easily subduing Rhys. Read in the context of patriarchal hierarchy, Rhys's meditation on her uselessness can be understood as a realisation that, as a debased woman, she is bound to be dependent on a male benefactor, at least emotionally. Lancelot's departure metaphorically left her miles away from a shelter to rely on, and this eventually led to a dislocation that she underlines in her autobiography: "I am a stranger and I always will be" (*Smile Please* 124). Such forthright observation on the part of Rhys suggests that her encounter with the dynamics of patriarchal power proves as belittling as her awareness that her ethnicity makes her an outcast. Both types of circumstances similarly amount to an everyday experience of alienation that is by nature traumatic and that gives reason for Rhys's pervasive resignation.

The general mistrust imbued by the constant aggressions and disappointments Rhys went through gave substance to her detachment from the feminist movement. In his commemorative piece, David Plante reproduces the exact words uttered by Rhys on this matter: "I'm not at all for women's lib. I don't dislike women exactly, but I don't trust them" ("A Remembrance" 272). Her unwillingness to align with the women's movement does not imply, however, that her works cannot be read from the perspective of feminism. Indeed, she has aroused the interest of feminist criticism and of female scholars, and even today her status as a writer attesting to and making a case for the tenacity of women remains open to debate. The evolution towards a renewed scholarly concern about the feminist dimension of her work has been, nevertheless, an unsteady one. In the years following her death, little attention was paid to this question: as Helen Carr observes, Rhys's presence in seminal volumes on women modernists was, to say the least, peripheral as these critical studies often focused on nineteenth-century or else present-

day writers (11–12). It is not farfetched to hypothesise that her twenty-seven-year absence from the literary sphere may account for the seeming forgetfulness of feminist critics from the late 1970s and early 1980s, who might have been for the most part solely intimate with *Wide Sargasso Sea*. What seems more evident is that one of the factors potentially frustrating a straightforward feminist reading of Rhys's texts is her ambivalence. As Elaine Savory explains, "Rhys is of course problematic for feminists, since she denied affiliation with feminism, but portrayed women as subversives within male hegemony" (*Jean Rhys* 211). The contradictions at play in her fiction impede a crystal-clear recognition of this writer as feminist or non-feminist and, as happens with the question of her cultural identity, the failure to attach labels to such an elusive figure makes it necessary to be tentative when surveying her narratives.

The examination of the feminist debate by early scholars on Rhys appears to be cursory, the main approach being the autobiographical one. Initial studies such as Peter Wolfe's censure the author's complicity in perpetuating the tyranny of patriarchal power (25–26), but forsake an in-depth examination of the topic. In her 1981 monograph *Jean Rhys: Woman in Passage*, Helen Nebeker draws on Jungian archetypes and hints at the heroines' inevitability to fall into "descriptions of regular victims in a patriarchal male-dominated world" (ix). The early critics' insistence on the inability of both the author and her stupefied heroines to alter the unshakable cobweb of male dominance was largely responsible for the emergence and consolidation of the so-called 'Rhys woman'. This term, repeatedly used in critical studies on Rhys, designates the prototypical female protagonist that features in Rhys's fiction, appearing under different names and at different stages of her cycle of downfall. This destitute woman is characterised by gloom, inaction, and subservience. In his 1967 review of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Walter Allen summarises the demeanour of this character as a woman that "is hopelessly and helplessly at sea in her relations with men, a passive victim, doomed to destruction" (5). It appears that the overall fragility and numbness of Rhysian female characters determines their unhealthy relationship

with men, such vicious connection contributing to their impending destruction. However, it has been noted that Allen's callous description of the Rhys woman should not be taken for granted: he seems to be only vaguely familiar with the early novels (Mellown 106), and so a closer look into the workings of women's dependence in these four influential novels may expose the flaws of both his definition and the archetype of the Rhys woman.

It would be delusive to disclaim the heroines' powerlessness that early criticism on Rhys underscores, and yet a number of scholars—precisely women—have called for a refashioning of the archetypal 'Rhys woman'. One of the leading figures in doing so was Paula Le Gallez, who in her monograph *The Rhys Woman* argues that the label 'passive victim' is an inadequate description for Rhysian female characters, and that the heroines' inaction reflects a culturally determined behaviour (4). Other relevant critics (e.g. Howells, Harrison, Maurel) have gone beyond this call for a redefinition of Rhysian women and have attended to textual cues that are revealing of an empowering drive. Interestingly, it has been found that one of the mechanisms Rhys uses to combat patriarchy-induced vulnerability resonates with an anti-colonial strategy explored in the previous chapter: talking back to the oppressor. Covert though this response may be, the creation of this dialogue gives the floor to previously muted underdog women while sowing the seeds of a contestation to male univocality. Likewise, Coral Ann Howells or Nancy Harrison have explored the dynamics of 'talking back' as an arena for resistance against patriarchal order. In the words of Howells, Rhys rises to the challenge of "constructing a female speaking subjectivity for [her] heroines" (6), and Harrison goes as far as to hint at the transgressive effect of such speaking selfhood: "[T]he recording of a woman's unspoken response within the set framework of masculine speech or discourse is the point" (63).

The intrusive entrance of both Rhys-as-author and her female characters into the realm of discourse is a potential act of transgression in that it destabilises the firm foundations of an

ideological framework.²¹ In other words, it serves a woman writer like Rhys to potentially threaten systems of authority, namely colonialism or patriarchy. This optimistic viewpoint is endorsed by Sylvie Maurel, who maintains that the Anglo-Caribbean writer's narrative of the feminine is "a deconstructive force" that shatters dominant models of jurisdiction (8–9). Maurel goes on to list some remarkable techniques whereby Rhys performs her arguably destabilising endeavour, such as the proclivity to narrative and semantic openness, the witty use of irony, or the pungent mimicry (9). The allusion to mimicry is by no means inconsequential: though not being especially prominent in her modernist texts, this process is performed by the white Creole heroines of her 'West Indian novels', especially in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, to combat the systemic oppression and the invisibility they are subjected to as colonial subjects. Borrowing the words Homi Bhabha uses in *The Location of Culture* (1994), the "displacing gaze of the disciplined" (89) can be seen in Anna's and Antoinette's parodical recasting of the discourses of characters like Hester and Rhys's Rochester. Their imitation transcends mere repetition, evolving into a threatening strategy that undermines the power structures alienating the colonised Other. The endorsement of patterns of subversion like mimicry is, according to Patricia Moran, what defines Rhys's narrative practice. In her view, the author deploys a "masochistic aesthetic" that "in dramatizing and exaggerating the relations of submission and dominance, sets up an oppositional site within power hierarchies" (*The Aesthetics* 17). Contrary to the long-standing view that Rhysian women's acquiescence only aggravates their helplessness, Moran's stance implies that the narrative magnification of their yielding may be far from showing an utter compliance with male dominance. In taking for granted that these women are predisposed to consent, patriarchal systems are overlooking that behind the silence of these heroines there is a potentially destabilising force: their urge to speak. In this sense, the practice of attestation

²¹ In her seminal essay "The Powers of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine", Luce Irigaray contends that the ultimate goal behind the female voice's entrance into the systematic world of discourse is " 'destroying' the discursive mechanism" (308; emphasis in the original). For that purpose, Irigaray deems it necessary to endorse 'mimicry' as a crucial strategy that may "convert a form of subordination into an affirmation" (308).

helps Rhys render visible the unspoken response of her female characters, and certainly that of an (auto)biographical subject whose agency had been hitherto curtailed.

It is evident that, in her fiction at large and in her four modernist limit-cases in particular, Rhys dives into the realm of male-dominated discourse to rescue victims of this system like her heroines and herself from utter inarticulateness. To begin with, Rhys's works evince a downplaying of ruling conventions in that they dispose of the narrative authority championed by the classical omniscient narrator. The use of a volatile narrative voice allows for a more steady and unmediated pouring of the heroines' undeclared viewpoint. The permeation of the heroines' inner life is expedited by their leading role as internal focalisers. As happens with their outlook on marginalisation based on ethnicity and class, both Rhys and her heroines take advantage of their first-hand knowledge of estrangement to become keen observers of their surrounding reality, and such proficiency at focalisation can be read as a challenge to the prevailing 'male gaze'. Indeed, very often Rhys displaces the male gaze (Hamam 117), and this poses a threat to the patriarchal assumption that women are barred from occupying the subject position of looking, hence being relegated to the rank of the 'object' (Tyler 74). Such discursive practices enable the leakage of the previously silenced women's voices, and the culmination of this struggle towards discursive resistance to patriarchal obliteration is the performance of narrative agency.

The agency that testimonial practice offers to both Rhys and some of her women proves an indisputable narrative weapon against male-dominated discourse. In the case of her interwar limit-cases, the protagonists of the last two novels are granted the role of autodiegetic narrators, somehow counterbalancing their descents into the abyss—Anna's abortion following her move to prostitution and Sasha's internalisation of defeat. Even if her former modernist novels make use of a heterodiegetic narrator, the immersion in the heroines' stream of consciousness points to the subversive effect of yet another instance of agency: the activation of memory. Being shut

off from the male realm of public debate, both Rhys and her women resort to their minds to cope with their experience of detachment. As they strive to produce a testimony, this awakening of memory grows deliberate. The novels manifest a readiness on the part of both narrators and focalisers to restore memories that, though painful, have been turned into a tangible story, and this intentional endeavour might be ultimately subversive. Indeed, when paralysing remembrances are consciously restored to articulate a narrative, they can materialise as a dynamic force that gives agency to victims while potentially allowing for social action. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson highlight, “citing new, formerly unspeakable stories, narrators become cultural witnesses insisting on memory as agency in its power to intervene in imposed systems of meaning” (*Getting a Life* 14–15). It is not farfetched to argue, then, that Rhys’s trauma testimonies can transform a numbness-inducing intrusive thought into a transformative memory that can meddle with and even reshape hierarchical systems, in this case patriarchy.

The social significance of trauma testimonies brings back to mind the representativeness of the genre addressed in this study. The practices of memory and storytelling offer the socially awkward autobiographical subject the possibility of forging symbolic connections with other women through a sharable and identifiable narrative of female experience. The collective extent of the pains these novels discuss turns female protagonists—and the author herself—from remaining stranded to potentially becoming part of a collective, and this incites a need for reconsidering and even renaming the typical heroine of Rhys’s narratives. Accordingly, the archetype of the exhausted, unsophisticated, and frequently moody ‘Rhys woman’ should give way to a more ambivalent construct that, while acknowledging her degraded position, hints at her blooming agency. One such critical definition is the notion of *‘flâneuse’*, through which the wandering protagonists of Rhys’s novels—especially Sasha Jansen—have been recently analysed (e.g., De la Parra Fernández 215–232; Dell’Amico 7–39; Elkin 39–68; Martínez del Barrio 139–149; Wagner).

It should be remarked that the designation *flâneuse* is the feminine version of *flâneur*, a gender-exclusive term that started being used in the early nineteenth century to refer to men strolling around the city with no destination whatsoever and for the sake of pleasure. Deborah Parsons observes that, in the nineteenth-century *Encyclopaedia Larousse*, the *flâneur* is described as “a figure who loiters in the city, shopping and watching the crowd” (17). With no responsibilities to take care of, this wanderer had much time at his disposal to grow observant of urban society and get an insight into its workings. In the words of Lauren Elkin, “the *flâneur* understands the city as few of its inhabitants do, for he has memorised it with his feet” (3). Though going unnoticed in the middle of the gigantic metropolitan labyrinth, this unpreoccupied citizen actively interacts with the city and takes his impressions as the underpinning of his art. This elevation of the *flâneur* to the category of an urban artist was suggested by Charles Baudelaire, who in 1863 nominated this figure as a “painter of modern art” able to reproduce “the multiplicity of life and flickering grace of all elements of life” (9). This analogy between *flânerie* and the representation of life is crucial for the understanding of Rhys and her heroines as a modernist female version of the *flâneur*, as solitary observers that both get and provide a deep insight into daily experience in the city. However, before explaining the implications of Rhysian streetwalking, it should be warned that the female practice of *flânerie* was not unproblematic in the alienating metropolis.

Whereas the *flâneur* enjoyed a privileged position as a conspicuous bourgeois man (Elkin 3; Ferguson 26), the female streetwalker was originally regarded as a prostitute (Wolff 19–20). As Elizabeth Wilson explains, “the problem in nineteenth-century urban life was whether every woman in the new, disordered world of the city—the public sphere of pavements, cafés and theatres—was not a public woman and thus a prostitute” (93). To all appearances, it was difficult for passersby to draw the line between a *flâneuse* and a prostitute, as unaccompanied women in public places were considered at risk and a risk themselves to male pedestrians

(Walkowitz 21). Such equation is highly debatable, as the *flâneuse* had freedom of mobility in comparison with the prostitute, who was manacled by the controlling gaze and harassment of men (Rabinovitz 9). In agreement with the possibility of unlimited movement, Rachel Bowlby identifies a remarkable feature of the *flâneuse* that may be said to match the purpose of Rhys as a critical writer. For this scholar, the practice of *flânerie* reads as “transgressive, or the walk that crosses and challenges set lines of demarcation, a step from a place represented as beyond the pale, out of bounds” (“Walking” 29). As a matter of fact, female streetwalking involves an evolution whereby women move from the strait-laced world of the private sphere to the boundless universe of the public street. This deliberate progression may be read as an act of resistance against expected gender roles and, overall, against patriarchal rule.

The Rhysian women’s intermittent *flânerie* can be interpreted as an example of defiance amid oppression, in which patriarchy plays a prominent role. Momentarily, these heroines leave aside their listless existence in their dull hotels and lose themselves in several outdoor locations. Though not being exactly wilful, these wanderings are “an act of survival” (Wagner par. 8). In this respect, *flânerie* calls into question the view of the ‘Rhys woman’ as an apathetic victim, as it represents the search for a way out of paralysis, invisibility, and silence. Similarly, Carol Dell’Amico argues that Rhys’s *flâneur* literature “counters its anxieties by conceptualizing solutions to modernity’s challenges” (33). Hence, as a solution geared towards survival, the heroines’ treading through the streets could be seen as a potentially enabling act that could be likened to their struggle to cope with their traumas, especially their insidious alienation. Not surprisingly, among the obstacles posed by the grand structure of modernity, Rhys’s modernist testimonies of female experience in the metropolis stress the pain of dislocation and, notably, the scarcity of financial resources, which is a consequence of a rampant consumer culture. The displaced Rhysian women opt for *flânerie* not only out of pleasure; as shown in the analysis below, they sometimes walk around the city in search of a male benefactor, usually a male

lover, that may provide them with economic support. It is the figure of the male lover that is supposed to succour the wanting woman in terms of affect and money (De la Parra Fernández 220), and this urgency to resort to these suitors is problematic in that it stresses the female protagonists' dependence on men.

It has been observed that the *flâneuse* of the early twentieth century, suitably represented in Rhys's modernist novels, was frequently compelled to seek for male suppliers upon whom she became dependent (Griffin 61). Overall, this situation of reliance on the financial resources of the male breadwinner also applied to non-affluent women during the interwar years. Even if this period witnessed an increase of women landing in clerical jobs such as that of the typist, women's opportunities were mainly restricted to domestic occupations and personal services (Dewey 118). Not only did interwar women resign themselves to embracing poorly paid jobs amid limited opportunities, but they had to cope with high rates of women's unemployment, which were accentuated by the soldiers' return from the battlefield after WWI (Todd 45). Above all, early-twentieth-century women had no option but to endure the constraints imposed by the male-dominated spheres of politics and the law, and Britain was no exception to the rule. At the same time as women over 30 were granted enfranchisement with the introduction of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, the model of the privatised nuclear family, with the male figure as the unquestionable provider, was becoming preminent (Hollows 57). In a similar way, unmarried women, or those wives that were not subject to the handcuffs of this family unit, had little likelihood of escaping economic dependence on a man. As Jane Garrity underlines, British-based interwar women working outside the home were offered few chances of promotion, so they could not lay claim to economic independence (Garrity 45).

As disclosed by the brief sociohistorical discussion above, there are manifold points of convergence between both Rhys's and her heroines' gender-related hardships and those of the early-twentieth-century *flâneuse* and interwar women at large. This network of relationships

can be said to support the ensuing analysis of Rhys's limit-case narratives as a shareable testimony of distressed women whose gender imposes a limitation on both their autonomy and their welfare. Bearing in mind the hypothesis that their testimonies go beyond individual experiences of trauma, this chapter addresses them as representative of a broad and open-to-redefinition social group that could be denominated "interwar bohemian female *déclassées*". This phrase is borrowed from the introduction to the volume *Transnational Jean Rhys: Lines of Transmission, Lines of Flight*, at the beginning of which Juliana Lopoukhine, Frédéric Regard and Kerry-Jane Wallart use this designation to refer to one of the territories Rhys's fiction touches on. Although the authors do not unpack its meaning, it is a self-explanatory and comprehensive term that hints at some remarkable features of the 'Rhys woman' and the Rhysian *flâneuse* while adequately placing Rhysian characters—and, by the same token, their artificer—into a historical, cultural, and social reality. By relating them to this specific background, Lopoukhine et al. may be trying to point to the intrinsic complexity of these characters, upheld in this dissertation's previous chapter. In addition, the denomination proves particularly useful for the discussion of the heroines' insidious trauma. Not coincidentally, it appears that the meaning-loaded word par excellence in the phrase is the adjective *déclassées*, which is indicative of not only their social inferiority, but chiefly the everyday degradation they are subjected to.

The *déclassées* to be discussed have been displaced to the margins of a patriarchal society that, along the same lines as imperialism, threatens to magnify both their displacement and vulnerability on a daily basis. These worn-out women are often on a shoestring budget mostly due to their inability—or else unwillingness—to support themselves. Eventually, their financial instability is worsened when they squander their limited money on clothes and spirits, and at that point they must face the reality of depending on a male lover to subsist. On many occasions, not only does their dire quest for a benefactor bespeak their need for money; notably,

the destitute women represented in Rhys's modernist limit-cases see these men as the potential emotional shelter that the city has long denied them. This unspoken yet easily identifiable cry for protection leaves them at the mercy of apparently caring providers that easily beguile them, ultimately leaving their puppet-like partners in the lurch. The experiences of being manipulated and abandoned by men are reminders of their destituteness as underdog women, and contribute to their accumulated pain of rejection and alienation on the part of a hierarchical and merciless society. The insidious experience of gender-related helplessness adds to other punctual traumas that, though less explicitly tackled in the novels, are discussed in this chapter as they are revealing of the precarious existence of the interwar *déclassées* these testimonies represent.

Though unable to successfully sail through in the interwar social life, the heroines in some way partake of the bohemian lifestyle that attracted so much curiosity in the modernist city. The much-needed embrace of *flânerie* enables them to frequent cafés and night clubs, and even catch a glimpse of the bohemian artistic circle through their acquaintance with painters such as Miss De Solla (*Quartet*) and Serge (*Good Morning, Midnight*). In the case of Rhys, her life in the interwar metropolitan centres of Vienna, Paris or London was not precisely one of “bohemian ease” (Rubik 63), and yet she has been ascribed the quality of ‘bohemian’. For instance, the early biographer Thomas Staley describes her life as “nomadic and bohemian” (1), and Octavio González lays bare Rhys's attraction to the Left-Bank artistic and intellectual circle in particular by calling her “a Left-Bank bohemian fiction writer” (125). Interestingly, Peter Kalliney highlights that she “emerged as a recognized participant-observer of bohemian life” (*Commonwealth* 224). This keen perusal of bohemian activity recalls the aforementioned interpretation of Rhysian characters as a modernist female version of the Baudelaireian *flâneur* and, at the same time, might point to the potentially subversive role of these female testimonies.

While it is true that none of the Rhysian protagonists are artists, they display a penchant for visual scrutiny that runs parallel to that of their creator. This mastery of observation

translates into a perceptive record of their impressions on the multiple faces of life, and these perceptions are the backbone of the artistic testimonies through which they obliquely comment on and even distort the worlds they live in. The subjective deformity of reality, which may entail a degree of critique, is in itself an instance of transgression that is embodied by the metaphorical journey that, as explored below, both Rhys and her heroines may appear to make through testimony: from silence and lifelessness to agency; from a leaking focalisation to autodiegetic narration in the latter novels; from marginalisation and humiliation as women to a tentative entrance into the male-dominated world of discourse; from the assumed scholarly view of passive victimhood towards an overcoming of that label via the restorative process of trauma writing; and, lastly, from utter neglect to the achievement of a representative narrative that is in harmony with the experience of other *déclassées*. As the ensuing analysis shows, these outcast characters have barely any hopes of successfully completing this journey, and yet their understated attempt to do so proves valuable evidence that provides rationale for a reassessment of Rhys as a woman writer.

3.1. Back to Square One After Playing the Game of Postures: The Legacy of Devotion to the Commanding Host in *Quartet*

From the outset of the novel, the solitary Marya displays an indifferent aimlessness²² that does nothing but showcase her vulnerability. The female painter Miss De Solla easily recognises her lack of ambition when she asks Marya, “What are you doing in this part of the world?” (*Quartet* 7), and she gazes at her patronisingly before her interlocutor answers, “Nothing. I was feeling melancholy, to tell you the truth” (7). Marya’s absence of drive bears some resemblance to that of Rhys in 1923 and 1924. As implied in Angier’s account, her jobs as a mannequin and as an

²² Joseph Wiesenfarth hints at the aimlessness of the apathetic protagonist by describing *Quartet* as a novel “about human life as senseless” and an enactment of a “philosophy of futility” (66).

artist's model had been insufficient for improving the family economy, and the high frequency at which Jean Lenglet left her alone in Paris did nothing but imbue a feeling of exhaustion and detachment (128–129). When recalling this period of stasis in *Smile Please*, she highlights how uneasy her doing nothing made her: “It’s the long, dead, dull stretches when nothing happens and time is heavy on my hands, as they say, that’s what gets me down” (153). Both the recurrent absences of her husband and her financial frailty had given rise to apathy. As is suggested in a 1949 letter to Peggy Kirkaldy where she discusses her fate to write, during this period of inertia her passivity could only be overcome by “a series of coincidences—Mrs Adam, Ford, Paris—need for money” (*Letters* 65).

Rhys tried to counteract the tedious stage she was going through and set her heart on translating three articles by Lenglet and getting them published. For this purpose, she contacted Helen Pearl Adam, an American journalist she had met in London and who was married to *The Times* correspondent in Paris (*Smile Please* 154). The articles were rejected but Mrs Adam inquired after Rhys’s work in progress, and this made her remember the disturbing exercise books she had written while in Tottenham. These manuscripts were sent to Ford Madox Ford, who agreed to publish a reworked section of her materials—an extract of what later gave shape to her short story “Vienne”—in an issue of the *Transatlantic Review*. While this literary success meant a new lease of life for her, she was soon brought back to a harsh reality. In December 1924, her husband Jean Lenglet was arrested and she did not hesitate to resort to Ford and his partner, the Australian painter Stella Bowen. Smitten with the indulgence of her literary benefactor, she started an affair with Ford that is fictionalised in *Quartet*.

It may be farfetched to argue that the Rhys-Ford-Bowen *ménage-à-trois* left a traumatic trace of paralysis on Rhys’s psyche that equates to the humiliation derived from the wrongdoings of Mr Howard and Lancelot. Apart from the speculations by Rhys’s biographers, there is not much insight into the dynamics of submission and compliance that, following the

events chronicled in *Quartet*, may have governed the specific bond between the subservient female *déclassée* and the privileged male protector. Indeed, it should be noted that *Smile Please* abruptly comes to an end when Mrs Adam returns her the notebooks reworked as a typed manuscript, and that virtually no papers before 1931 have survived in the form of correspondence between Rhys and Ford. The only intimate account by Rhys that touches on this event is the sketch “L’Affaire Ford”, stored at the McFarlin Library of the University of Tulsa, and yet it fails to give a portrait of Ford as an allegedly corrupting male figure.²³ While this affair is not indicative of Ford’s role as a trauma perpetrator, as explained below it brings to the fore Rhys’s helplessness as a destitute woman that, unable to care for herself, is left at the mercy of people who can take advantage of her situation. In this sense, both the initial reference to Tottenham—which, as argued in Section 2.1, is a site of post-abandonment humiliation—and Miss De Solla’s condescending gaze may be read as a foreshadowing of one of the main topics in this testimony, namely the protagonist’s anxiety at being discredited by a patronising society that daily reminds her of her negligible position in interwar society.

There appears to be no biographical account of Rhys’s first meeting with the Fords. The fictional encounter at Lefranc’s, where Marya is pushed into the background and marked as an outsider, may be interpreted as an intentional deviation from biographical accuracy that serves as a frame for subsequently representing the insidious experience of the interwar *déclassée*. In this scene, Marya starts shivering as the group sits on a terrace that is “empty and cold” (*Quartet* 13). Her tremor reflects that she is feeling belittled by the presence of Mr Heidler, the one that is taking the initiative in the conversation. At first glance, this man is perceived by Marya-as-focaliser as “kind, peaceful and exceedingly healthy” (13). This first impression seems to do justice to Ford’s noteworthy sensitive nature, which, according to Lilian Pizzichini, made him

²³ At the end of “L’Affaire Ford”, Rhys acknowledges that, upon her return from the sunny South of France, she feels desolate and gloomy in Paris. Having no person to rely on, she deliberates: “Perhaps it wasn’t so strange that I started to look on *benevolent* Ford as my only friend” (7; my emphasis).

cling on to the gentlemanly virtue of providing for the “rescue of a fallen woman” (170). In an attempt to assure the quivering Marya that he means no harm, the Ford-like Mr Heidler places his hand on her knee. Yet, it is not clear whether the intentions of his touch imply a source of relief or rather one of apprehension.

Marya’s reaction to Heidler’s contact is a succinct but compelling passage of interior monologue where she mulls over: “Ridiculous sort of thing to do. Ridiculous, not frightening. Why frightening?” (13). She may appear to be downgrading Heidler’s action, but the brevity and reiteration of this unspoken train of thought suggest that Marya is troubled and, arguably, shocked. These words recall Rhys’s iterative inner voice when Mr Howard fondled her and she mechanically convinced herself that it was unreal, so in a way this preliminary use of a stream-of-consciousness technique hints at the disavowal of a potentially traumatic event. Not surprisingly, Heidler’s physical contact is described as “heavy as lead” (13), such metal-related qualities figuratively pointing to the onerous experience of carrying the weighty burden of trauma on one’s shoulders. At any rate, Marya eventually moves so that Heidler withdraws his hand. Remarkably, she makes this gesture in a “cautious but decided” way (13), and this can be read as one among the few instances where she willingly reacts against potential oppression on the part of men.

On the very few occasions when Marya is in the company of unknown men, her lack of composure is underscored. In the analepsis that summarises her first steps as a chorus girl, her fear of the touring company’s manager is highlighted: “He terrified Marya; her knees shook whenever he came anywhere near her” (15). As happens with the scene at Lefranc’s, it could be hypothesised that this intimidating male figure, absent from Rhys’s (auto)biographical accounts, might be another instance of a significant divergence from accuracy that outlines Marya’s helplessness and suffering. The analepsis reveals that the tremor as she was sitting opposite Heidler is not new to her; in both cases, it suggests a severe anxiety when she is

physically close to men. It is not disclosed whether her distress at the presence of men is accounted for by a traumatic event, but it should be noted that the narrative hints that any potential interactions of Marya with men can be detrimental for her. For example, when the narrative moves on to the moment in which she, as focaliser, gathers her impressions on Stephan Zelli it is remarked: “[She] had *painfully* learnt a certain amount of caution” (16; my emphasis). It is suggested that her wariness may be justified by a painful experience, and this is evidence that Marya’s vigilance and distrust may have a traumatic rationale that recalls Rhys’s incidents with such intruders as Mr Howard and, especially, Lancelot Hugh Smith.²⁴

What is particularly disturbing for Marya is that, as happened in Rhys’s relationship with Lancelot, her financial instability may lead to an urge to forge a bond with a man that can ultimately bring about distress. This is acknowledged during the analepsis on the touring company: “For Marya’s relatives . . . were poverty-stricken and poverty is the cause of many compromises” (15). This telling remark is an anticipation of what awaits Marya in the course of her ensuing stay with the Heidlers: by accepting the allegedly selfless help of this couple, especially Mr Heidler’s, she enters a circle of subservience and humiliation that, as has been explored in the previous chapter, turns into an alienating and degrading prison.

What precipitates the rise of Marya’s intimate bond with the Heidlers—whose names are H.J. and Lois—is the arrest of her husband Stephan, a figure that is tackled in greater depth in the last chapter of the dissertation devoted to the figure of the underdog. This sudden event, which deprives her of the only person with whom she feels happy and protected, detonates a series of reactions that entail the coming back of trauma: “Her heart had stopped; then began to beat so violently that she felt sick. Her hands were damp and cold” (22). Amid despair, she sets out to find De Solla in Paris, but eventually she halts her hurried streetwalking as she

²⁴ It should not be overlooked that Mr Heidler’s first name is Hugh, as Miss De Solla divulges at the beginning of the narrative (*Quartet* 10).

catches sight of the Heidlars. She carefully observes them as she ponders: “What’s it got to do with them, anyway, and what can they do?” (23). She has realised that it is actually the Heidlars that may provide her with the protection she needs, and following this realisation she resumes her walking at a slower pace. Marya’s deceleration, which contrasts with the quickening of her heart after the arrest of Stephan, might imply a sense of relief that is nevertheless illusory.

On the following day, as Marya strolls around Paris with no destination in mind, she is suddenly invaded by a sense of fright on which she elaborates as follows: “It went too deep. You were too mysteriously sure of its terror. You could only walk very fast and try to leave it behind you” (28). This disturbing feeling is characterised by mysteriousness and an impossibility to locate it deep within, and such traits may be said to hint at a trauma that reappears and threatens her, echoing the Rhysian women’s experience of what Moran denominates “fear of the return of the repressed” (*Virginia Woolf* 14). As the only option to leave behind the haunting fear is to walk more quickly, the slow rhythm she has settled into proves not helpful at all, and this is highly telling because the negative implications of that leisurely pace, previously enticed by the sight of the Heidlars, bring into debate whether these helpers may become similarly noxious. In fact, it is interesting to remark that the unnamed entity of which she is afraid is described as “cruel and stupid”, and the quality of being stupid bears some resemblance to the adjective *ridiculous*, used before in relation to H.J.’s possessive touch. If taken as an intratextual link, her disquieting thoughts might, then, anticipate the potentially traumatic impact of her impending relationship with her alleged benefactors, especially H.J.

In “L’Affaire Ford”, Rhys jumps from her agreement to send to Ford her personal papers reworked as “Triple Sec” to the Fords’ request that she live with them after Lenglet is arrested. After explaining that she had “hardly any money”, she clarifies: “But though I quite liked them both I felt extremely reluctant to go and live with them Ford was very benevolent and I

told myself that, as usual, I was imagining things in my reluctance” (3). Likewise, Marya shows an initial unwillingness to settle into the Heidlere’s apartment. It is during a conversation with Lois that she discloses the reasons for her objection: “I’ve realized, you see, that life is cruel and horrible to unprotected people. I think life is cruel. I think people are cruel. . . . You’re wonderfully kind, but if I come to stay with you it’ll only make me soft and timid and I’ll have to start getting hard all over again afterwards” (*Quartet* 42). The reference to cruelty is highly relevant. To begin with, it points to insidious trauma, as Marya’s awareness that she has been exposed to cruelty is suggestive of the experience of neglect that she shares with both the other Rhysian women and the social groups they represent. In a more specific sense, cruelty is the other attribute of the unidentified entity she is terrified of, and in light of the worries she has brooded over in the streets, it is not misleading to hypothesize that what ultimately makes her uneasy is the fact that she will live alongside H.J.

Mr Heidler is the one ruling over the lodging she is temporarily allowed in, an apartment that, symbolically, works as a site of patriarchy. In that respect, her entrance into the world of the Heidlere implies a potentially debilitating ordeal that, as foretold by Marya, will make her bashful and obedient. Her freedom to say whatever comes to her mind is curtailed as though she were a “caged animal” (58), and from the outset it is evident that her assertiveness—if any—has come to a standstill. As Lois suggests her staying with them, Marya glances nervously and grows submissive while her benefactress speaks to her and H.J. takes over the act of looking (39). Marya expresses her gratitude “in a low voice” (39) and remains “subdued” for the rest of the meeting (40), thus yielding to the power of a couple whose leading figure is the apparently restrained man who has taken control of the internal focalisation during this crucial meeting and whom later on Lois acknowledges to be “the man, the male, the important person, the only person who matters” (64).

Focusing on the central figure of H.J., his act of looking over the scene while his female companion is introducing Marya to their world is an indication that, henceforth, he will be the one in charge of supervising his *protégée*. As Marya's first days with the Heidlrs go by, the novel narrows down to the intimacy between her and the male provider, who thus far has remained unnoticeable. Gradually, H.J. comes to the forefront as his leadership is hinted at and filtered through the perspective of Marya:

Marya always brought the cup and the sugar, for he was very majestic and paternal in a dressing-gown, and it seemed natural that she should wait on him. He would thank her without looking at her and disappear behind the newspaper. He had abruptly become the remote impersonal male of the establishment. (47)

It is suggested that Marya-as-focaliser has soon realised that H.J. embodies the authority of the household. He is assumed to be an imposing man who is not easily overcome by emotion, even showing a degree of coldness that brings to mind his lead-like and firm touch on Marya's knee at the beginning of the narrative. In addition to his composure, as the narrative unfolds, his drive towards action is made more evident. When the first private conversation between the two takes place, he summons Marya showing a forthright, commanding tone in his request that she "come along" (56). H.J. is resolute to take Lois's absence as an opportunity to approach Marya and openly confess his attraction to her, and the fact that this advance takes place within his household not only reinforces his patriarchal position; as Nagihan Haliloğlu observes, she is beckoned as a "kept woman rather than granted free sexual agency" (189), and this turns her into a doll²⁵ whose freedom, integrity and fate are at the hands of a potentially corrupting male seducer.

²⁵ For the duration of her stay with the Heidlrs, the narrative underscores Marya's awareness that she is a "doll" (67) or else a "marionette" (82). For their part, her English providers substantiate her self-perception that she is easy to tame by frequently infantilising her and repeating the drill that they are saving her from "a very dreadful existence, an unthinkable existence" (100).

All along this intimate encounter, H.J. wields authority over Marya, urging her to remain both silent and stiff and sounding obstinate as he leaves no room for her to take issue with his recognition that he possesses her: “I knew that I could have you by putting my hand out, and I kept off you” (57). With regard to H.J.’s discourse, Elizabeth O’Connor has similarly foregrounded H.J.’s gravitation towards making it clear that he exerts power, such narcissistic drive overriding his love for his prospective mistress: “Rather than a passionate confession of love, the dominant theme of Heidler’s speech is smug self-justification and a confident exercise of power” (134). Initially, Marya reacts by showing a rage that is far from reflecting resistance. She deems his attitude “rude and unkind and unfair” (57), and her use of the polysyndeton may entail a mounting anxiety that points to her being shocked rather than defiant. Increasingly, her shock gives way to disorientation when he performs his expected role as a soon-to-be lover: “He left money on the table, followed her and took her arm in his. When he touched her she felt warm and secure, then weak and so desolate that tears came into her eyes” (57). Her perplexity prevents her from elucidating whether both H.J.’s caress and the money he gives her are a sign of care, or else whether these apparently altruistic manifestations are a token of ignominy.²⁶

It is the possibility of being humiliated that seems to disturb Marya, who shortly after her benefactor leaves the room remembers the voice of an unnamed sculptor who once told her: “You’re a victim. There’s no endurance in your face. Victims are necessary so that the strong may exercise their will and become more strong” (58). The re-emergence of this suppressed memory bespeaks the haunting effect of trauma, which becomes evident when she undresses “dizzily and with difficulty” (58). As the curt utterance by the unidentified man resurfaces, she identifies herself as a victim of an oppressive system that scavenges helpless people like her to

²⁶ Marya’s unsteadiness as regards H.J.’s intentions ties in with Rhys’s ambivalent impression of Ford. In a 1970 interview by Peter Burton, she declared that, while he was undoubtedly kind-hearted and generous, he was also “the most awful liar” (107).

perpetuate its power while curtailing that of its subjects. Indeed, by the end of her interaction with H.J., Marya craves for an agency that she will be denied throughout her metaphorical imprisonment at the Heidlers' apartment and that can only be fathomed through the narrative representation of her stream of consciousness: "It was an unborn child jumping, leaping, kicking at her side" (59). Her already feeble agency is promptly erased as she painfully grows aware that H.J. is an oppressor under the guise of a devoted helper and prospective lover. Even if he fervently declares that he loves her during their second face-to-face conversation (60), he downplays her underlying trauma by calling it "a fear complex" (61) and by reproaching her for being "so excitable" (61). The cumulative feedback by H.J., which evinces emotional abuse, affects her to such an extent that, by the time Lois returns home, she finds herself overpowered by trauma-induced paralysis: "She drew her feet up on the sofa, clasped her hands around her knees and stared fixedly in front of her" (62).

Marya's inertia is heightened by her recognition that she has become dependent on H.J. During a hasty interaction with Lois, she tries to articulate a convincing reason behind her longing to leave the Heidlers' apartment headlong, but she immediately realises that this is "useless" (63). Lois is witty enough not to overlook that an affair between H.J. and Marya is taking place, and this is reflected in the telling question she shoots: "As woman to woman, do you suppose I believe that?" (65). As is shown in her ruminations, she is aware that her partner has been making love to Marya and that he seems to be fantasising about his infatuation with her (63–64), but she does not appear begrudging or uncongenial. Her acquiescent observance runs parallel to that of Ford's wife Stella Bowen, who, in Seymour's view, "turned a blind eye to an affair which she had no power to prevent" (105). Bowen's impotence is somehow evoked in Lois's position as a female inquirer that, like her addressee, has carried the personal burden of being a member of society subjected to patriarchal rule. Nevertheless, as Marya perceives it, she and Lois are "different people" (*Quartet* 63). Hence, it is unlikely that Lois attains full

empathy with Marya's cause, as Lois is a privileged and self-sufficient woman that does not belong to the world of the interwar female *déclassée*.

What is of great interest for the discussion of Marya's status as a female underdog is that, judging from the question she poses, Lois seems to be cognisant of both H.J.'s plans and the helplessness of his victim. This hypothesis is supported by the narrative voice's report of her deliberation: "She twisted her hands in her lap, thinking: Oh, no, my girl, you won't go away. You'll stay here where I can keep an eye on you. It won't last long . . . He'll get tired of her as soon as she gives in. Pretty! She's revolting. You can see when you look at her that she's been chewed up" (64). Marya, for her part, is not oblivious to the fact that she is beholden to a male protector: "How gentle he is. I was lost before I knew him. All my life before I knew him was like being lost on a cold, dark night" (66). Her feeling of deep indebtedness is fraught with danger, as it leads to a cult-like attachment to her male companion that prevents her from noticing her position as a destitute woman with whom unscrupulous men such as H.J. can toy. It is Lois that keenly realises that Marya's integrity is at stake, but she chooses not to let her know about her standpoint. By doing so, Lois somehow becomes complicit in H.J.'s seeming manipulation of a victim that is bound to be cruelly abandoned.

Lois is not at all inclined to empathise with the plight of her female companion. Rather than condemn H.J.'s disloyalty, she becomes his ally while emotionally detaching herself from Marya. As Anne Simpson notes, "[i]n *Quartet* the family group acts as an agent of masculine desire, placing women like Marya in debased positions and casting women like Lois in its own male image" (84). The narrative gives evidence of how the hitherto caring benefactress openly behaves as a cruel schemer at the service of patriarchal rule, and this can be seen in a passage where the three go to a music hall. This experience, which recalls the outings of the Fords and Rhys to Parisian bars such as the Nègre and the Dôme (Pizzichini 178), does not mean Marya's successful entrance into the world of intellectual bohemia, but leads to an act of humiliation.

Lois looks down on Marya as she makes a comment that suggests her dismissiveness of her guest's inertia: "There was a young woman called Marya. Who thought, 'But I must have a caree – er'" (*Quartet* 69). Not only does she poke fun at Marya by mimicking her stuttering, but she rebukes her inability to make a living for herself, thus poking fun at her helplessness.

The subsequent glimpses into Marya's mind underscore her restlessness as an effect of an aggression that by no means stands alone. She feels "impotent" (70) and seized by a fright she compares to that of both an incarcerated child and a captured animal (71). On this occasion, her paralysing sense of powerlessness is not appeased by H.J., who coldly minimises her suffering by remarking: "But that's not playing the game, isn't it?" (70). His explicit allusion to the game proves beyond doubt that he is intent on beguiling her. He ironically unveils his degrading scheme by referring to it as a game, and this brings into the debate the idea that both H.J. and his female accomplice have been posing as supporting figures (Draine 331). As the novel unfolds, they have presumably been unmasked as perpetrators that will make Marya's apparently safe stay with them an alienating period that can be understood as an insidious experience of patriarchal downgrading.

In this novel, initially conceived as a play,²⁷ both the Heidlers and Marya are playing the roles that society expects of them. Whereas Marya is assigned the part of the debased woman whose helpless position forces her to remain docile, H.J. and Lois act as laid-back, bourgeois intellectuals that take advantage of both their privileged position and their sharpness to deceive their *déclassée* guest. As Marya sees it, her protectors are "inscrutable people, invulnerable people, and she simply hadn't a chance against them, naïve sinner that she was" (*Quartet* 79).

²⁷ In one of the first letters Rhys sent to the actress Selma Vaz Dias in 1949, as she considers the possibility of turning *Good Morning, Midnight* into a play she remarks: "I did write one of my novels as a four act play and have the MSS somewhere. I mean I saw it first as a play" (*Letters* 62). This novel, where number four alludes to its major characters, is unquestionably *Quartet*, on which Seymour argues the following: "The high degree of drama in *Quartet*, as compared to its relatively plotless successors, owes much to the fact that Rhys had imagined it being performed on stage" (116).

It can be argued that a key difference between these contrasting positions is that, as advantaged people, the Heidlars can playfully put on different masks to camouflage their function as patriarchal oppressors, Marya is inescapably exposed as a defenceless victim. In like manner, the distribution of the roles to be performed by the Fords and Rhys respectively is reflected in the following passage from Stella Bowen's autobiography *Drawn from Life*:

[H]ere I was cast for the role of the fortunate wife who held all the cards, and the girl for that poor, brave and desperate beggar who was doomed to be let down by the bourgeoisie. I learnt what a powerful weapon lies in weakness and pathos and how strong is the position of the person who has nothing to lose, and I simply hated my role! (167)

Considering the link between Rhys's biography and her heroine's histories, Bowen's reflection strengthens the idea that Marya cannot perform a role different from that of the ill-fated puppet at the mercy of people in a stronger position than hers. In spite of her yearning to abandon a game where she feels "something to be made love to every time the mistress's back is turned" (78), she is irresistibly drawn to the influence of H.J., who now and again triggers her trauma-related paralysis: "Then as she stared back at him she felt a great longing to put her head on his knees and shut her eyes. . . . To give in and have a little peace. The unutterably sweet peace of giving in" (*Quartet* 84).

Even if Bowen lays bare what awaits the interwar *déclassée* both Rhys and Marya stand for, it is implied in the second half of the passage that her underdog guest should not be readily underestimated. There seems to be tenacity behind Rhys's and Marya's role of the desperate destitute, and thus it is unviable to address them in the light of the passive victimhood attached to the 'Rhys woman'. In pointing to a hidden layer of perseverance, Bowen's remarks may be read alongside the argument that Rhysian protagonists should not be regarded as prototypical. Such a character as Marya is by nature complex, and her intricacy is aimed at challenging the

typification to which she is subjected under the yoke of the Heidlers' patriarchal discourse. The scrutinising couple have a pungent for "discussing types" (34), as evinced by their tendency to pigeonhole the women who regularly attend Lois's parties, such as the cabaret singer Cri-Cri and the Elizabethan-looking Lola Hewitt.

As far as Marya is concerned, the Heidlers' spot-on identification of her destituteness—especially in terms of financial resources—leads to a reductionist classification that matches their perception that she is valueless. Noticeably, there are virtually no examples of the couple's utterance of stereotypes to address Marya. Yet, it is not improbable that they have been omitted in the narrative, because her self-perception as "L'Enfant Perdu or The Babe in the Wood" (72) and the *petite femme* (87) implies that she may have been exposed to such views for so much time that she has internalised them. It is not surprising that she does nothing to combat those stereotypes in front of her oppressors. People like the Heidlers and Monsieur Lefranc, a minor character who interprets Marya as a '*grue*'—a harlot—when he apparently realizes that she is having an affair with H.J., are representatives of public opinion, one which clinically attaches to down-and-out subjects as Marya narrow labels that imply, in the words of Maurel, "that no real development is possible" (18). It can also be noted that the Heidlers infantilise her and, furthermore, they ignore her suffering by dismissing her as "hysterical" (*Quartet* 81). What is more demeaning is that they go as far as to leave her off their taxonomy. This can be seen when, at the onset of the altercation in Brunoy, H.J. restricts Lois's initiative to answer back to Marya on the grounds that only he knows how to deal with "this sort of woman" (81). In addition to reflecting H.J.'s master-like dominance over Marya, his dismissive admonition betrays that his mistress's identity is being effectively erased, as she has been reduced to a mere type that he is neither able nor willing to pinpoint.

Once deprived of her agency and identity, it seems that Marya finds herself in a situation where, drawing on Bowen's words about Rhys, she has barely anything to lose. The quarrel at

the Heidlers' country house in Brunoy, during which Marya slaps across H.J.'s face for his insinuation that she has been taking advantage of the couple's gratitude for their money, marks a turning point in the relationship with her male provider. As Cathleen Maslen explains, this event corroborates that, by and large, the human relations she has forged—and particularly that with the Heidlers—involve inauthenticity (64). The affluent couple have been shown to be posturing throughout the *ménage-à-trois* and, judging by H.J.'s observation, his guest has also partaken of this game of pretence since she seems to have concealed that she is solely interested in the money her lover can give her. As a result, she grows painfully aware that her affair with H.J. was never a genuine love story and that, as Lois had presaged, would end soon. This feeling of impending cessation is triggered by her decision to leave for a hotel room near Montparnasse, never to return with the Heidlers.

Being physically detached from H.J. brings about the feeling of having “something hard and dry in her chest” (86) as she imagines her provider reassuring her by saying that he loves her. Now that she has gone back to square one in her experience of isolation and abandonment, the pain that breaks through her chest seems to foreshadow the reappearance of traumas to do with forsaking and alienation. As circumstances have forced her to remain separated from two male figures she has equated to shelter, it may be argued that she has been dispossessed. It has been noted by scholars such as Maurel that the protagonist's reaction to her return to the cycle of desertion is a passivity that “evolves into sheer indifference” (21). Marya's tendency to disinterest is enhanced, for instance, by how unprofitable her ensuing *flânerie* is revealed to be, since she perceives herself as a “quite dead” (*Quartet* 96) person that readily dismisses as “too stupid” (96) the idea of stopping by the Heidlers' studio, probably the only way for her to get support. While her descent into lethargy holds true, it should also be remarked that, from the climactic episode in Brunoy to the return of Stephan from prison, Marya exploits her role as focaliser to pore over her trauma in a less opaque way. Bearing in mind the above-quoted

reflections by Stella Bowen, the position of having nothing more to lose may be giving Marya a relative strength that, in this case, is suggested by her recourse to focalisation. As a result, this limit-case narrative gives a more forthright portrayal of her emotional wound at the same time as the internal focaliser boldly explores some sources of her trauma, among which the venomous influence of the well-off male seducer stands out.

The pain induced by the game orchestrated by H.J. has turned Marya's perception of the affair into an obsession described as "arid, torturing, gigantic, possessing her as utterly as the longing for water possesses someone who is dying of thirst" (91). She has been overpowered by a perpetrating agent that has preyed on her economic and emotional dependence to possess her. What follows is a series of clandestine meetings with Heidler in her room. The outcome of those encounters, in which he makes love to her and consistently hastes his departure, is the intensification of both Marya's humiliation and her gender-related trauma. For her, H.J.'s visits are "an endless repetition" (93), which brings to mind the acting out of trauma. It is made clear that their sexual encounters, described as "a torture" (93), are a reminder of her submission: "Her lips were dry. Her body ached. He was so heavy. He crushed her. He bore her down" (93). By the time she gets used to this succession of sex, hasty walkout and abandonment, she has come to the conclusion that she is "the little woman who lived in the Hôtel du Bosphore for the express purpose of being made love to" (92). On the surface, Marya's revelation seems to entail that she grudgingly identifies herself with the prototypical *grue* that Monsieur Lefranc has commented on earlier in the narrative. Notably, the beneficiary of Marya's commodification, in this case H.J., gives her money before departing, and this symbolic act appears to align her with the figure of the prostitute. Marya's epiphany, whereby she grows cognisant of her moral degradation, seems to aggravate her emotional wound. Indeed, the moment when H.J. leaves some money for her is represented using a highly fragmented style that may mirror both the crushed psyche of Marya and her inability to wholly process her perpetrator's words: "Lois has

got hold of two Czecho-Slovakians and that young American chap – you know – what’s his name? – the sculptor – for tonight and I promised I’d turn up. Are you all right for money? I’d better leave some money, hadn’t I?” (92). Her distress at the fact that her dependency has made her nothing more than an object with which H.J. can toy is a symptom of a cumulative trauma that seems to have shattered her.

At the same time, Marya’s revelation could be read in a more positive light as a subtle critique to the male lover’s indulgence in sex to the detriment of a woman who, as some critics have pointed out, has been turned into a commodity (e.g., Berman 87; Karl 37). Moreover, it should be noted that, amid her paralysed state, Marya gathers some strength to identify that her experience runs parallel to that of other destitute women: “She began to imagine all the women who had lain where she was lying. Laughing. Or crying if they were drunk enough” (*Quartet* 93). Remarkably, some pages before she forms a similar judgement as she scrutinises her bed: “It was impossible, when one looked at that bed, not to think of the succession of *petites femmes* who had extended themselves upon it, clad in carefully thought out pink or mauve chemises, full of tact and savoir faire and savoir vivre and all the rest of it” (87). Marya’s recognition that her experience of debasement is potentially shareable is evidence that her trauma can be read as representative of analogous interwar female subjects who have become skilled in yielding to the demands of a privileged male seducer so as to subsist. In giving prominence to the focalisation of Marya, this narrative offers an opportunity to take a critical stance toward patriarchal oppression before the heroine is banished from the world of male-dominated discourse.

By the end of the novel, Marya’s definitive return to inertia is prompted by two incidents that hint at the corrupting influence of her relationship to men, namely H.J.’s interruption of the affair and the final scene in which Stephan hits her. Shortly after her husband’s return to Paris, H.J. meets her at a café to officially finish their relationship, coldly disregarding her

statement that she loves him (115). On the day before the appointment, the overwhelming feeling that has possessed her all along the novel reappears: “[T]hen her obsession gripped her, arid, torturing, gigantic, possessing her as utterly as the longing for water possesses someone who is dying of thirst” (113). It is not by chance that the phrasing of this ordeal is identical to the description of how she regards her love affair with H.J. when she is locked down in her hotel room. The disturbing textual repetition of her paralysis-inducing emotional pain can be read as an example of acting out that makes it clear that both her trauma and the remembrance of the male perpetrator condemn her to repeat the cycle of defeat, passivity, and submission. As Thomas explains, “[t]he repetition of images works to realize the cyclical dimension of her psychomotor-agitation” (*Modernist Bearings* 40). Marya is so ruffled by her obsession that she is unable to move towards a disengagement from her oppressor, both psychologically and physically. This belittling obsession with H.J. is comparable to the imprint Ford could have left on the mind of Rhys, as hypothesised by Angier: “Jean knew it was over, but she couldn’t let go. . . . [T]he person she depended on would be life itself to her; if he left her she would feel that she was dying” (152).

It is literally this sense of impending death that is invoked at the end of the novel. Stephan, enraged by his having been cheated on and by Marya’s reiteration that she still loves H.J. (*Quartet* 142), jostles her in such a way that she strikes her head against the table, laying still after the blow. It is her compulsive dependence on Ford that has led to a final motionless state that points to her defeat in the process of breaking free from the yoke of patriarchal oppression. Her last reported perception before falling unconscious is suggestive of the cumulative traumas of abandonment, rejection and dependence on men who are destined to demean her: “Now, added to all her other terrors, was the terror of being left alone in that sinister, dusty -smelling room with the enlarged photographs of young men in their Sunday -best smirking down at her” (143). The room is haunted by the ominous presence of the immortalized men, magnified by

the size of the photographs, and this seems to perpetuate the foreboding of a woman eternally confined to a prisoner-like existence marked by passivity and collapse. Moreover, the scornful smile of the men in the photographs reflects the attitude of male intruders in Marya's life. The stranded position of the *déclassée* after being deserted by her male benefactors works as a link between *Quartet* and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, a novel that, as its title appears to suggest, bears encouraging signs of a relative agency.

3.2. Caught at the Threshold between Unresponsive Consent and Defiant Agency: 'Going from Man to Man' in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*

As made evident in the opening lines, the protagonist of Rhys's second novel seems to have followed a pathway similar to that of Marya when she makes plans to depart from Brunoy and live alone in a hotel: "After she had parted from Mr Mackenzie, Julia Martin went to live in a cheap hotel on the Quai des Grands Augustins" (*After Leaving* 7). The initial set of parallels between the two dislocated women appears to substantiate a consideration of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* as a sequel to *Quartet* (Konzett 150). *Mackenzie* resumes the Rhysian cycle of desertion shortly after the heroine has been separated from a male lover whose higher status is suggested by the honorific *Mister*. This highly cryptic male figure, who hardly ever heaves into view after the relationship comes to an end, has been duly identified by critics as a character based on Ford (GoGwilt, *The Passage* 67; Stang and Cochran xiv). Going back to Rhys's fictionalisation of her affair with Ford, it seems necessary to reproduce a remark by Seymour that may set the ground for a better understanding of what this novel is about. Before pointing out that Ford arranged that Rhys could move to a hotel in the second half of 1925, she touches on her psychological turmoil upon her return to Paris to live unaccompanied by the Fords: "[She was] confined to a lonely room in which she wrote and drank and drowned herself in narcotics-induced sleep" (109). Just as this quotation stresses Rhys's distress at assumedly

being left to her own devices, the novel revolves around how Julia copes with her plight in the aftermath of her affair with Mr Mackenzie, whose legacy is a “sore and cringing feeling” (*After Leaving* 9) that hints at trauma. This is a text whose focal point is the disturbance of a woman that, at the onset of the narrative, is shown to suffer from an emotional wound that may point to trauma. Nevertheless, this Paris-based interwar female expatriate is different from Rhys’s previous female protagonist. While Marya’s paralysis at the end of the novel gives her little hope of improvement, Julia at least is presented as a woman that, as explored in this analysis, might be said to try to move past what is referred to as the “legacy of Mr Mackenzie” (9).

Both the title and the initial lines of the narrative—starting with the subordinate sentence “[a]fter she had parted from Mr Mackenzie” (7)—prefigure a seeming agency that contributes to the general ambivalence of the novel. It could be presumed at first sight that Julia is a strong-willed woman that, of her own accord, has interrupted her bond with Mackenzie. The question of whether it is she that has left him or the other way round is left open, as not much is reported about the affair. What grows strikingly evident is that, despite her efforts to let go his influence, she does not really become detached from him. As Molly Hite argues, “[t]he burden of the plot is that Julia does not lose the sore and cringing feeling although she believes she ought to, indeed that she must” (42). For example, it is narrated that she occasionally walks around her hotel room (*After Leaving* 9). It would be hazardous to hypothesise that Julia’s perambulation points to acting out, and yet it entails an underlying anxiety that is worsened by an event taking place immediately after. She receives a letter from Mackenzie’s solicitor with an attached cheque for three hundred francs,²⁸ and the ensuing description of her countenance lays bare a potentially traumatic disquietude that seems the product of cumulative pain: “As she read a

²⁸ This circumstance recalls Rhys’s irritation at being provided with money by Lancelot through a lawyer, which is revisited in *Smile Please*: “It was completely illogical, but I have never in my life felt more hurt or more angry” (121). As for the ‘Ford affair’, it has been noted that, apparently, after the end of the relationship Ford continued sending money to Rhys via a lawyer, and that his payments might have ceased during the spring of 1927 (M. Saunders 608).

strained, anxious expression never left her face, which was round and pale with deep, bluish circles under the eyes. Her eyebrows were thin, finely marked; her very thick hair was lit by too red lights and stood out rather wildly round her head” (10–11). Her manifest anxiety as she reads the contents of the letter may be indicative of her awareness that she is still dependent on her former lover and that she is unlikely to resist the grip of patriarchy, of which Mackenzie and his solicitor are representative figures.

Julia’s realisation of the subservient position to which the “organised society” referred to in the novel has condemned her is enhanced by the following narratorial remark: “By her eyes and the deep circles under them you saw that she was a dreamer, that she was vulnerable—too vulnerable ever to make a success of a career of chance” (11). Her bleary eyes are a window to a soul presumably devastated by both her awareness that she is an outcast and the aggressions she is constantly subjected to as a person in need. It can also be argued that her vulnerability may be heightened by the possibility that the effect of stress on her face makes her undesirable, such a concern linking her to Sasha Jansen. The systemic oppression that such a *déclassée* as Julia is subject to leaves little room for answering back. As she is writing a letter to Mackenzie giving vent to her “abject humiliation” (15), she interrupts the process since she eventually deems it useless. Instead, she sets her sights on walking down the Parisian streets, probably having realised that her lockdown does nothing but minimise any chance to overcome her present destituteness. Unlike Marya, Julia does take a step forward and leaves aside her apathy. Her drive towards motion is externalised later in her decision to head for London. In this case, Julia’s *flânerie* should be addressed tentatively as it is a highly ambiguous practice. It should be noted that the driving force behind her streetwalking is her urgency to be provided by her former lover, as is made evident when she turns into the street where Mackenzie dwells and feels a compulsion to see him. As Moran remarks, “[d]espite understanding on a rational level that she should avoid Mr Mackenzie . . . Julia feels compelled to stalk him” (“Chronic Shame”

196). The act of stalking the departed lover is perceived by Julia as a “foolish thing” (17), and somehow she is right as their eventual encounter at the Restaurant Albert proves injurious for each other.

Before dealing with the public confrontation of the split couple, there should be a glimpse into the little information given on their relationship. When Julia stands by the entrance of the restaurant, internal focalisation is momentarily given to Mackenzie, who is reluctantly thinking of her. Mostly told through free indirect discourse, the summary of the affair touches on circumstances that bear resemblance to some of the above-discussed events in both *Quartet* and Rhys’s relationship with Ford. As the narrator gives access to Mackenzie’s thinking, it is revealed that he is remorseful about having slept with Julia during his recurrent visits to her hotel room, and also for having unnecessarily lied to her (19). This brief section in the novel underlines his perception of Julia’s helplessness, both as an emotionally fragile person of “the soft sort” (19) and a penniless woman who, in the absence of a husband, had acquired the habit of clinging on to different male lovers: “But it was obvious that she had been principally living on the money given to her by various men. Going from man to man had become a habit” (20). As disclosed in this superficial account, Mackenzie is aware that people like Julia are no more than transient acquaintances that live in different worlds from his, and so he dismisses the idea of getting to know her inside out. It is this tendency to ignore the depth of Julia’s history that deters him from grasping the complexity of her disturbance. When she fell into despondency, he classified her suffering as irrational losses of self-control, bursts of melancholy or fits of hysteria (21), and eventually comes to deem her “a bit of a bore” (19), as the Heidlers do with Marya.

It should also be noted that not only does Mackenzie downplay Julia’s underlying trauma; as explicitly mentioned by the narrator, he is reluctant to shoulder the blame for her misread “insanity” (19) and is vexed when being called a hypocrite, and this suggests that, as is the case

with H.J.—though not exactly with Ford—he is not exactly a caring figure. The deceptive nature of Mackenzie might also be appreciated in his assumption that Julia must have recurrently come to see different men. Such a statement is highly problematic as it entails that, from his gender-biased perspective, he is misjudging her as a prostitute without giving evidence. Unlike what is argued in the next section regarding Anna Morgan, in the case of Julia the ritual of “going from to man to man” takes on a different meaning in the sense that it does not translate into trading sex for money.

Rather than hint at a possible reconciliation, the scene at the restaurant appears to make the emotional gap between Mackenzie and Julia more unbridgeable. Whereas the former grows uneasy when he starts suspecting that she wants to take advantage of him, the latter’s agitation reaches its climax as she expresses her anger at having been made fun of by both his lawyer and himself. Julia’s reaction before leaving is to hit Mackenzie’s cheek with her glove, “but so lightly that he did not even blink” (26). Though being performed in a public space, the strike is far from being an act of subversive agency. As Maslen argues, it is “unsatisfying and anticlimactic” (95), as can be inferred from the little energy she displays and, interestingly, by the “mournful and beaten expression” (*After Leaving* 26) she is possessed by.²⁹ Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that both her intrepid *flânerie* and her decision to enter the restaurant can also be read in a positive light, in the sense they lay bare her resolution to confront the main source of her trauma, a man that had previously triggered a paralysing feeling described as follows: “At the sight of him Julia’s heart began to beat furiously and her legs trembled” (17). In this context, her courage to follow his oppressor and look him in the eye is an act of resistance that, though not promising a final victory against patriarchal dominance, hints at a

²⁹ Lilian Pizzichini identifies Julia’s slap as a genuine event taking place in February 1927, when Rhys caught sight of Ford in a Parisian bar and hit him. Whether this event actually happened or not is out of the question. It is the failure to successfully combat male dominance and oppression that Pizzichini is interested in underlining, and this is of great importance for the understanding of the (auto)biographical subject’s position as an underdog woman to be pitied and even ridiculed: “The onlookers shrugged at this pathetic woman in her shabby coatmaking a scene” (Pizzichini 194).

developing mordant agency that she shows at some point during her subsequent layover in London. Given that physical agency—i.e. the ostensibly absurd slap—has been more adverse than helpful, the type of agency that Julia occasionally adopts during her stay in the English metropole is the use of language, both by means of verbal backlashes against the patronising figure of Uncle Griffiths and, as happens in *Quartet*, through a more palpable and extended presence of an inner life that casts light on her understanding of her plight. As Angier notes, Rhys engaged in a similar endeavour when her affair with Ford came to an end: for her, the best way to combat and eventually leave behind the legacy of Ford was to write (173), and this is another piece of evidence that points to the beneficial effect of testimonial practice in the aftermath of trauma.

As has been mentioned in the previous chapter of the dissertation, Julia considers going back to London at some point during the heart-to-heart conversation with Mr Horsfield in which she touches on key highlights of her life. The character of Mr Horsfield, who has a transitory impact on Julia's welfare, develops a deep emotional connection with her and, towards the end of her stay in London, temporarily becomes her lover. The case of Mr Horsfield is radically different from that of most male partners appearing in Rhys's fiction. As evinced by both his thoughtful nature and his dismissal of the possibility of talking Julia into having sex, this figure is unlikely to evolve into the money-giving lover that toys with his female victim's feelings and ultimately abandons her. Though incidentally sharing with her some of the few banknotes he has, his main role seems to be to care for a woman whose apprehension he identifies with. Like her, he is a self-conscious individual that confesses to having undergone a long period of isolation, and it is for this empathetic connection with her that, as with Stephan Zelli, he is tackled in the chapter devoted to the underdog.

By the time she sets off for England, she leaves behind a potentially reassuring male lover that might have helped her heal from the pain inflicted by Mackenzie. Now, the danger that is

looming is the influence of a former partner whom she has made plans to visit in London. This man, called Mr James, is indirectly alluded to towards the end of her dialogue with Horsfield. Before she makes reference to this male friend, she suddenly feels cold. While this freezing sensation appears to be caused by alcohol—"the cold of drunkenness" (42)—, its pervasive effect may be read as evidence of trauma: "[A]s if something huge, made of ice, were breathing on her. She felt it most in her chest" (42). Now that she is about to travel miles away from one of her main sources of oppression—the insidious legacy of Mr Mackenzie—, she is haunted by the biting feeling that she has experienced before, both in her hotel room and when catching sight of Mackenzie on the Boulevard Saint Michel. Considering that at this point she goes through this traumatic pain as she thinks of Mr James, it can be argued that what may be distressing Julia is an unequivocal realisation: due to her shoestring budget, she has no option but to go back to former male lovers. This is reinforced by her discomposure while checking whether the money given by Horsfield is still in her handbag: her anxiety increases, "as if her heart were being squeezed" (43), and this agitation is followed up by a mental revisitation of the scene where she slapped Mackenzie (43).

Julia's angst at her economic destituteness is worsened by a fortuitous encounter with an unknown man as she strolls around Paris the night before her departure. He grips her arm and follows her to her hotel room, but finds verbal resistance on the part of Julia, who calls him "*ignoble*" (45; emphasis in the original). In turn, the stranger answers back by offering money to her before she finally slams the door in his face. On this occasion, Julia's reaction against a potential assault by a man is more convincing than her slapping Mr Mackenzie, and as a result she feels exulted while pondering: "After all, I'm not finished" (45). As anticipated above, Julia seems to have abandoned the initial sluggishness of what Parsons identifies as "the rejected fallen woman" (142) to adopt a fairly combative posture that she occasionally displays while in London. Nonetheless, this subtle move towards agency cannot make her layover in the

English metropole a decisive step for her to successfully get ahead her patriarchy-related trauma. Indeed, one of the main reasons behind her journey is to get money from a man, and this circumstance contributes to casting doubt on whether this interlude in London entails combatting male oppression or else being complicit in it.

The ambiguous quality of Julia's agency throughout her sojourn in London is insinuated once she sets foot in the British capital. As she indulges in *flânerie*, she is possessed by an "exultant and youthful feeling" (49), as if each step forward meant a milestone in her process of distancing herself from Mackenzie. Her elation notwithstanding, she is concerned that the materialisation of her return to England may not exactly entail starting anew. Indeed, as she finishes writing a letter to Mr James to arrange a date with him, the report of her feelings casts doubts on whether she is treading on a pathway towards advancement: "At once all feeling of strangeness left her. She felt that her life had moved in a circle. Predestined, she returned to her starting-point" (48). While on this occasion she has taken the initiative to forward a letter to her male acquaintance, her drive may nevertheless render her both powerless and paralysed. Rather than find a way to industriously overcome her economic vulnerability, she has yielded to her impulse to repeat a pattern of behaviour that is a double-edged sword: once again, she is resolute to cling on to a male lover to get by, and even though this connection will temporarily rescue her from insolvency, it may also deepen her status as an emotionally destitute woman subjected to patriarchy. It is no coincidental, then, that after signing the letter addressed to her former lover she is literally deprived of her sense of strangeness. Reading this novel as a limit-case testimony dealing with the hardships of interwar *déclassées*, her symbolic relinquishment of unconventionality may be read as an acknowledgement that she is behaving as other women in similar position did. In this context, it comes as no surprise that the patriarchal society of the time, epitomised by figures such as Mr Mackenzie or Uncle Griffiths, might regard her attitude as the expected conduct of a certain "type" of woman—like the 'penniless wife' or the above-

mentioned '*petite femme*'—whose situation forces her to repeat the endless loop of submitting to a well-off seducer (Emery, *World's End* 122) and being eventually abandoned.

In the London interlude, which covers nearly two thirds of the novel, Uncle Griffiths is the most prominent emblem of the 'organised society' that both typifies and oppresses women like Julia. As observed by the narrator, "[a]t that time he had represented to the family the large and powerful male" (57). For a seasoned destitute like Julia, it is easy to recognise this figure's solidity and power, and hence she feels the compulsion to gain his approval. This preliminary drive towards yet another instance of submission is restrained, however, when Uncle Griffiths, in a patronising manner, openly expresses his conjecture about the way Julia is economically catered for. Following his niece's request for money, he takes it for granted that she should be supported by a husband and, when being informed that she is currently unmarried, he categorically concludes that her husband must have left her "stranded" (59). At this point, Julia boldly answers back to Griffiths twice. Using concise but assertive sentences, she refutes her relative's unsound arguments that her husband, who seemingly recalls the flesh-and-bone Jean Lenglet, was both a "bad lot" (59) and a deserter. As Angier hypothesises, Uncle Griffiths may be based on Neville Williams, one of Rhys's uncles on her father's side: "[He] would have seemed to Jean—and probably was—exactly the smug, prejudiced, establishment male she draws in Uncle Griffiths" (225). Even if Rhys does take liberties to reshape her actual interlude in London into a highly fictionalised section, she seems to deliberately convey in this limit-case her dislike of her self-righteous relative—strikingly similar to Aunt Clarice/Hester—to critically comment on trauma in the context of gender-based oppression.

At first, it is unclear that Julia's resistance to this patriarchal figure can lead to a relative degree of subversion, as after her early response she is momentarily overwhelmed by a feeling that, besides hinting at her belittling, is reminiscent of traumatic dissociation: "She felt as though her real self had taken cover, as though she had retired somewhere far off and was

crouching wearily, like an animal, watching her body in the armchair arguing with Uncle Griffiths about the man she had loved” (59). Moreover, when she gets into the street after the awkward meeting with Griffiths, her thoughts underline that she is afflicted by her status as a female underdog with little hope for improvement. At this point, her train of thought is made visible through a passage where, as happens in both the earlier novel and the quotation above, animal imagery is used to reflect both the heroine’s predestined existence and her destitution: “Then suddenly there would be a startlingly powerful bellow, like an animal in pain. The bellow was not fierce or threatening, as it might have been; it was complaining and mindless, like an animal in pain” (61). The text, which portrays her ruminations as she listens to a distant melody, relates the tune to Julia’s particular bellow, probably her verbal response to Griffiths. Whether her reaction is threatening or complaining, it is a fearless attempt to directly confront a potential perpetrator and, by the same token, her gender-based trauma. Rather than submit to silence and inertia, she has fleetingly transgressed the male-dominated discourse to express an alternative stance at the same time that her pondering on her trauma has been portrayed in a more straightforward way. This punctual but vehement female contestation of patriarchy is enhanced by some instances of undisguised contempt, namely her refusal to take his hand at the end of their interview (61) and the final words she says to him prior to leaving Acton: “You’re an abominable old man” (99). Such feedback sharply contrasts with her initial desire to please this authoritative figure, in a way suggesting that Julia has managed to show resistance amid the pressure to yield to the assumedly unquestionable power of a representative of that ‘organised society’ she was afraid of.

Unlike the tense meetings with Griffiths and Mackenzie, Julia’s reunion with her English ex-lover, the affluent and artistically sensitive Neil James, is conducted in a cordial atmosphere. It has been noted that this character is mostly based on Lancelot Grey Hugh Smith, with whom Rhys appears to have been on good terms well after their breakup (Angier 227–228; Seymour

120–121). This analogy appears to be evinced by the allusion to the termination of Julia’s affair with Mr James when she was an early adult—this being her first disappointment after romantic love (78)—and the fact that she did not publicly make a scene, which echoes Rhys’s period of confinement in 1913. The feeling that the emotional bruise of this let-down has been soothed represents a step ahead in the process of coping with both punctual and insidious gender-based trauma. Now that the painful legacy of a failed relationship with a well-off man seems to have been overcome, the Rhysian heroine feels at ease when in front of Neil. During this meeting, which appropriately takes place in the warmth of the hearthstone, there are no stimuli that trigger her reliving of trauma. Furthermore, it is suggested that the gender-based hierarchies governing her relationship with a man presently deemed a friend are somehow dissolved: “Another person. Nothing to be nervous about or sentimental about. This was simply another person—just as she was another person” (79). The internal focaliser is not intimidated by the presence of someone whom, despite being privileged in terms of class and gender, she may see as an equal. At the same time, however, the instance of repetition in the quotation hints that Julia’s view of Neil as a peer is self-delusional. Even if she is trying to convince herself that a prospect for a horizontal relationship between the two is possible, such an exchange has the potential to aggravate both her destituteness and her lack of emotional solidity.

What might clear the way for a fluid transaction between Neil and Julia is their long-standing awareness that they are playing an established role. None is oblivious to the fact that the former mistress sees the influential yet worn-out upper-class man as friend of convenience, and this is underscored through interior monologue:³⁰ “Well, you had your reward, because there was a man who had become your friend for life. Always at the back of your mind had

³⁰ In her contribution to Mieke Bal’s volume *Narrative Theory*, Monika Fludernik draws attention to the existence of second-person forms of interior monologue, which, though less common than first-person ones, foreground “[their] mediacy, fictionality, or, if you will, narrativity” (29). The mingled effect of immediacy and narrativity may enable a more powerful impact of Julia’s attestation, which in this case overtly deals with the dynamics of her relationship with Mr James in particular and with wealthy male lovers in general.

been the thought: ‘If the worst absolutely comes to the worst he’ll help’” (79). Starting from this initial plunge into the needy woman’s psyche, throughout the scene at Neil’s house the use of multiple internal focalisation is exploited to underline the diametric opposition between the roles played by the two characters. As regards Julia, she talks to her ex-lover “with a coquettish expression” (80), in a way attempting to seduce him. However, lying under her kittenish chatter there is a remarkable distress, and this is evinced by her speaking “anxiously” (80) when asking Neil whether she looks overweight. Concerning Neil, he needs no more evidence to conclude that Julia has called on him to borrow money, which he is determined to provide. However, unlike other Rhysian providers such as Heidler, Mackenzie, or Walter Jeffries, he does not seek self-interest in what Rebecca Colesworthy has named a “contractually mediated” (128) transaction between male benefactor and female destitute. Accordingly, he pays no notice to whether Julia looks attractive or undesirable. He is ready to give his money without too much fuss because, on the whole, he is exhausted and wants to be left alone.

Neil’s sense of being worn-out is hinted at in a passage written in free indirect style that highlights his mixed feelings of assuagement and dismay: “At last she has come to the point—relief of Mr James! And yet he felt harder, now that he was sure she had come to ask for money. Everybody tried to get money out of him. By God, he was sick of it” (*After Leaving* 81). At first, such apparently contradictory emotions may appear to make Neil hard-hearted when it comes to sharing his money. Indeed, following this realisation he unfeignedly asks her a question similar to that of Uncle Griffiths: “And you don’t know where your husband is?” (82). Yet, he promptly dismisses his impulse to oppose Julia and agrees to help her. What is therefore made clear by the end of their rendezvous is that, despite their respective self-conscious perceptions of themselves as depleted in energy and potentially unwanted, they mechanically repeat a role they have long played and which they cannot alter. As explained above, such awareness paves the way for a smooth interaction from which both appear to benefit. In the

case of Julia, she has managed to be economically catered for, and yet when Neil ushers her downstairs she feels despondent: “She wanted to cry as he went down the stairs with her. There was a lump in her throat. She thought: ‘That wasn’t what I wanted’. She had hoped that he would say something or look something that would make her feel less lonely” (84). While the appointment with Neil has quenched her urgent need for financial resources, it has failed to satisfy a yearning for emotional care that may in the long run intensify her pain as an alienated *déclassée*. In this sense, the mechanical performance in which both characters have partaken could be detrimental in that it could prefigure an automaton-like behaviour on the part of both Neil and Julia. Having found barely any signs of reassuring affect in the figure of her alleged friend, she fears that she might once again be cast into a state of loneliness and helplessness that gives rise to inertia. In fact, as she aimlessly wanders around London, she moves “in the manner of a woman who is tired and no longer young walking on very high heels” (101), and such sluggishness hints that, in the near future, she could metaphorically behave like an automaton, along the same lines as the battered Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight*.

To prevent an impending fall into emotional numbness, Julia turns to George Horsfield, the only male figure in the narrative that has shown an inclination towards unselfish care. After the bittersweet experience at Neil’s house, her distress at her insidious alienation is fuelled by Horsfield’s announcement that their dinner must be postponed: “When Julia opened her eyes again it was dark. The idea of staying alone in the dark room was horrible to her, and as she dressed she twice looked suddenly and fearfully over her shoulder” (103). Her trauma-induced anxiety at being forsaken is appeased when Horsfield lets her know that he has finally managed to scratch his appointment. She spends the night with him and, for the first time in years, she has the conviction that her unquenchable thirst for care has been satisfied: “You are thirsty, dried up with thirst, and yet you don’t know it until somebody holds up water to your mouth and says: ‘You are thirsty, drink’. It’s like that. You are thirsty, and you drink” (111). However,

Julia eventually succumbs to the temptation of prioritising her need for money over the genuine affect she is provided with. Shortly after their sexual encounter, she reveals to him that she is resolute to return to Paris, and as she speaks she glances at her partner indifferently (123). He grows cognisant that what Julia chiefly needs is money, and such suspicion is confirmed when she hands him over an envelope by Neil where, in addition to the attached twenty quid, there is a note stating “I am afraid that after this I can do no more” (124). At this point, it seems likely that Julia has made plans to beg Mackenzie for economic support, given that neither Mr James nor Mr Horsfield seem qualified to do so. By the end of her stay in London, then, her profitable evolution towards agency proves illusory, as her social and cultural circumstances irresistibly force her to unwillingly restart the cycle of approaching affluent men so that she may feel temporarily pleased, even if that connection is bound to deal a blow to her emotional health.

By opting for satiating her economic thirst in the first place, Julia has decisively endorsed the mechanised role of the indifferent *flâneuse* that haunts the streets in search of former lovers that likewise follow the instinct to share their money without questioning it. Even if at the end of the narrative she no longer feels intimidated by such representatives of patriarchy, she is still hindered by a trauma that she has little hope of working through. By way of illustration, as she strolls along the Quai des Orfèvres, she feels that “something in her was cringing and broken” (131), but she is both unable and unwilling to grasp her trauma, partly because what has seized her existence is her obsession with money: “In her mind she was repeating over and over again, like a charm: ‘I’ll have a black dress and hat and very dark grey stockings’” (131). Remarkably, at one of the cafés she goes in before reapproaching Mackenzie, she has a drive to talk to the woman behind the counter and share her story with her, but ultimately fails to walk up to her. Her inability to find in the female employee an attentive listener of a potentially representative narrative is evidence that Julia has discarded any attempt at a rewarding agency that may help

her progress towards a beneficial confrontation with trauma. In turn, the encounter with trauma she gives preference to—in this case meeting Mackenzie—is more sterile than advantageous.

The novel concludes with Julia drawing near Mackenzie at a café and borrowing one hundred francs from him, to which he consents by replying: “Good Lord, yes” (138). It can be appreciated that she has already adopted the automaton-like attitude mentioned above. As a matter of fact, both her steps and her look are aimless, and her language is overall broken. The only instance of Julia using concise but assertive language in this last scene is her request for money: “Lend me a hundred francs, will you?” (138). Terri Mullholland reads the novel’s final pages as proof that “Julia has more control over the situation than has been previously indicated” (101). While this contention holds true in the sense that Julia no longer feels belittled in the presence of the male oppressor, her near absence of agency by the end of the narrative stymies her command of her destiny. As Dell’Amico contends, Julia is positioned as “both a dominatrix that never was, and a newly aspiring but failed dominatrix, as it were” (78). Notably, as the day nears its end, she finds herself at the crossroads “between dog and wolf” (*After Leaving* 138), but she is so metaphorically paralysed that she cannot take a step forward and cross the threshold.

The relative agency that Julia has occasionally shown in the course of the novel seems to have given way to inertia as she inexorably gets back to the beginning of the cycle she is trapped in. The little attention paid to her inner life in the last pages of the novel evinces that she is undergoing a state of indifference bespeaking emotional drainage and, by the same token, lack of agency. In view of the erasure of the female protagonist’s agency, the novel’s denouement seems to predict, according to Savory, “future emotional crisis for Julia” (*Cambridge Introduction* 66). It is precisely this agency that Rhys tries to lend to her female protagonists in the two modernist novels published after *Mackenzie*. Although the respective fates of the *déclassées* Anna Morgan and Sasha Jansen are not different from those of Marya and Julia,

their role as autodiegetic narrators offers them the opportunity to display an agency that gives prominence to their limit-case testimonies while laying bare the therapeutic potential of storytelling amid traumatic shattering.

3.3. A Relapse of Degradation under the Illusion of a New Beginning? The Heroine's Loss of Innocence in *Voyage in the Dark*

It is this circular journey toward a nebulous future that is resumed in the next novel to be pored over. The analysis of Anna's traumatic slippage into an existential void is notably longer, as her shattering is informed by a set of circumstances that complement the motif of the dependent interwar destitute and that are not addressed in Rhys's other three modernist novels, namely an entrance into the world of the amateur prostitute and an abortion. What lies ahead the experience of Anna is uncertain, as she is an unsophisticated early adult that has not yet gone through the insidious oppression of the other Rhysian heroines. In a covert manner, on the initial pages the autodiegetic narrator hints at the newcomer's naivety by bringing to centre stage the initiative of her roommate Maudie, whose rapport with Anna is analysed more in detail in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. Maudie, a chorus girl ten years older than she is, is singled out as the one that does the talking when it comes to negotiating with the landlady or instructing Anna on how to posture—or, as she puts it, “swank” (*Voyage* 9, 39). The allusion to posturing at the beginning of the narrative is by no means fortuitous. In a way, it suggests that Anna will need to put on different masks that conceal her uneasiness to avoid further belittlement.

The onset of the novel's focal point—the affair of Anna and Walter Jeffries—bears some resemblance to the scene where Marya is introduced to the Heidlers, excepting that the young Creole runs into her prospective seducer while strolling around with Maudie. It is interesting

to note that, as is done in Rhys's debut novel, the casual encounter of the female friends with the two male passersby—Vincent Jones and Walter Jeffries—is another instance of how Rhys tests the limit of factual accuracy.³¹ As Angier remarks, “Jean probably met the love of her life while she was on tour at Southsea too: but much more decorously, at a supper party after the show, just as it was meant to happen” (61). In *Voyage in the Dark*, the striking correlation to the passage where Marya makes the acquaintance of the well-to-do couple enables Rhys to revisit the key question of female debasement in the light of male power. Rather than the uncalled-for remark by Maudie on Anna's ethnicity, what signals the protagonist's status as a future victim of oppression is some scattered yet telling textual evidence that points to Walter's making his first impressions of her.

The description of the first visual contact between Walter and Anna foregrounds how he carefully gazes at his prospective mistress: “He didn't look at my breasts or legs, as they usually do. Not that I saw. He looked straight at me and listened to everything I said with a polite and attentive expression, and then he looked away and smiled as if he had sized me up” (12). The concoction of reactions on the part of the apparently engrossed listener seems to anticipate that Jeffries is no more than a pretender. As Staley has noted, “Anna's simple naïveté draws her to him and he plays the role of seducer with consummate skill” (63). His initial curiosity is readily overridden by Anna's cognizance that his is a Heidler-like scrutinising gaze that implies a keenness on trying to possess her, as hinted at by his self-satisfied smile. Indeed, except for the initial question on how long Anna has been in Britain, little is reported about Jeffries' inquiries. Bearing in mind the role of both Rhys-as-author and Anna-as-narrator as storytellers that decide on both what to include in their testimonies and how to structure them, the absence of Walter's

³¹ Biographer Miranda Seymour has commented on how this novel occasionally blurs the boundary between facts and fiction: “*Voyage in the Dark* offered readers a carefully misleading account of its author's first encounter with Lancey. Nevertheless, discreet though Rhys would always try to be for the sake of a shy, proud man to whom she remained enduringly attached, fictionalized accounts of actual events do appear within *Voyage*” (53–54).

questioning may be read as deliberate criticism on this patriarchal figure's lack of consideration and empathy.

It grows evident as the narrative unfolds that this initial meeting leaves Anna at her wits' end. Despite admitting to Maudie that she has not liked either of the two men (*Voyage* 14), she has agreed to dine with Walter in London. When the male friends leave the apartment of Anna and Maudie, the former comes nearer the hearth: "I got very close to the fire. I was thinking, 'It's October. Winter's coming'" (14). This apparently spontaneous move towards the fireplace is highly symbolic. Not coincidentally, in Rhys's fiction the flame can be interpreted as a token of reinvigoration and defiance, as previously exposed in the close reading of Julia's epiphany at her mother's cremation and as observed in Antoinette's final reverie in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. By clinging on to the fire, an affect-laden symbol whose warmth reminds her of the Caribbean, Anna might be consciously embracing an element that may temporarily give her shelter against the potentially harmful cold, associated to the metropolis at large and every landscape or figure linked to it, including Walter. The effect of both the tangible and the allegorical cold on her is heightened by Maudie's observation that "those men have money; you can tell that in a minute, can't you?" (14).

Immediately after commenting on the two men's affluence, Maudie realises that Anna is trembling: "I've never seen anybody shiver like you do" (14). The protagonist's shuddering after the mention of wealth is a preliminary textual hint that foretells trauma. Anna is evidently aware of the danger that is on her doorstep, as the crossing of the threshold between the warm room and the cold streets entails an encounter with a virtually unfamiliar man whose economic status seems to trigger Anna's anxiety. In addition, she may have realised that she is at a disadvantage regarding gender roles and financial situation, and such a revelation connects her experience with that of Rhys when meeting Lancelot: "But still it annoys me when my first object of worship is supposed to be a villain. Or perhaps the idea at the back of this is that his

class was oppressing mine. He had money. I had none” (*Smile Please* 114). If read against the author’s life, Anna’s tremor is in keeping with Rhys’s consternation after enduring the scorn of those who frequented the chorus girls’ shows (*Smile Please* 107). Even though there is no account on whether Rhys underwent episodes of leering while staging, it has been noted in research that the chorines’ costume and performance often proved alluring for an eminently male audience (e.g., Christoforidis and Kertesz 70; Glenn 191; Willis 168). It was more than likely that such an enticement turned women on stage into both a commodity and the object of the male onlooker’s desire. Thus, it is not incidental that Anna, who was susceptible to being ogled during the shows, sarcastically hints at the lustful stare of a male ‘they’ (12) when Jeffries looks at her, as noted before.

What Anna could not possibly presage in a crystal-clear manner was that her rendezvous with Jeffries would exacerbate her quivering to such an extent that it gives rise to post-traumatic stress. The traumatic event that accelerates her descent into lethargy is Walter’s uninvited kiss. Her reaction comes about as a jumble of sensations, ranging from feeling “giddy” (*Voyage* 21) to a nervous laughter that points to both trauma-induced anxiety and alertness about subjection: “He laughed. I laughed too, because I felt that that was what I ought to do” (21). It is precisely this awareness of being taken advantage of that leads Anna to dismissively push him, and yet she is unable to fully fathom what has just dawned on her, namely a shattering event that can only be grasped belatedly. Remarkably, this ‘collapse of understanding’ is represented in the text through disavowal—her desire to “go back and be just as it was before it happened” (21)—and dissociation: “I sat down on the bed and listened, then I lay down. The bed was soft; the pillow was as cold as ice. I felt as if I had gone out of myself, as if I were in a dream” (21).

In accordance with the prominence given to the trauma based on the male perpetrator’s exploitation of the *female déclassée*, the narrative tackles the question of money as a double-edged sword. It is immediately stressed when Anna wakes up that Walter has left a letter with

some notes enclosed. The possession of money gives her temporary relief, as indicated by the narrator's statement that she "forgot about being ill" (24) and that her voice "sounded round and full instead of small and thin" (24). Her elation is complemented by the safety that the gradually more affectionate Walter appears to provide her after knowing that she has caught the flu. At this point, the bond between the helpless mistress and her proactive lover seems to have adopted an ambivalent dimension. As noted by Teresa O'Connor, he is at the same time the first alleged carer that the protagonist encounters in England and one of those prototypical seducers of the 'Rhys women' that evolve into "masters of their bodies and souls" (89). It comes as no surprise, then, that Anna's elation comes to an end as soon as her funds are depleted: "I began to feel ill again. When I breathed my side hurt" (*Voyage* 25). Her anxiety may be triggered by her concern about potentially having to yield to Walter's sexual appetite to afford more clothes. Indeed, it is becoming evident for her that her affair is based on what Emery calls "a ritual of barter" (*World's End* 86).

Anna's participation in this rite of transaction, as happens with her Rhysian counterparts, involves a never-ending loop of submissiveness and humiliation, and this idea of perpetuity is underscored in the protagonist's meditation as she lies beside Walter: "*Of course you've always known, always remembered, and then you forget so utterly, except that you've always known it. Always—how long is always?*" (32; emphasis in the original). This italicised passage, written in interior monologue, enables readers to plunge into the chaotic inner life of Anna after losing her virginity at Walter's house. On account of its notable fragmentation, this rumination seems to suggest Anna's dazzlement following the loss of her innocence, and yet the pervasive pauses do not leave in the background the idea of continuity created through anaphora, a device that, in the words of Simpson, "suggest[s] inevitable yet inexplicable returns" (24). This impending return of a hard-to-grasp reality—which, as such, evokes trauma—strengthens the idea that Anna is a *déclassée* trapped in a cycle of insidious oppression. So far, she can only escape from

this eternal return through punctual amnesia. However, far from being deliberate, this sense of forgetfulness is accounted for by dissociation, which she reexperiences after having sex with Walter—"I felt cold and as if I were dreaming" (*Voyage* 32)—and which points to both her helplessness and her position as a victim of gender-based trauma. The warmth emanating from the embrace of the two-faced benefactor, appeasing though it may seem, is bound to produce the same effect on Anna than the fire of her room when Walter kissed her for the first time: "There was a fire but the room was cold. . . . The fire was like a painted fire; no warmth came from it" (20–21).

The subsequent snapshots that this limit-case gives of the relationship between Anna and Walter seem to reinforce the idea that, though the heroine generally feels safe beside her lover, she is disturbed by the possibility of being downplayed. On the evening where she tries to give her distorted account of her West Indian childhood to him, the prospective storyteller is alarmed as she foretells that Walter will at some point make a pass at her: "I was thinking about when he would start kissing me and about when we would go upstairs" (43). This is another instance where the narrator attests to her trauma-related anxiety whereby she keeps on reliving his first kiss, but in the context of a dialogic interaction between the two her prognostication acquires a significance that further enhances her oppression by patriarchy: any uninvited advance on the part of Walter will prevent the subdued protagonist from making her story heard. Curiously enough, from the outset it is Walter that guides the conversation according to his self-interest. Rather than being a fair moderator, he is intent on exerting his influence by putting the spotlight on his task as a saviour: "I want to help you; I want you to get on. You want to get on, won't you?" (44). By doing so, he is using speech to make it clear that he is pulling the strings while trivialising both her mindset and her agency: "You're a perfect darling, but you're only a baby" (44). As is the case with the Heidlers, Walter's infantilisation of his *protégée* appears to suggest that he attaches little importance to the discernible signs of uneasiness that Anna's countenance

reflects. Indeed, he utters this condescending statement after noticing how, after he toys with the idea that she may soon get tired of him, she remains silent: “Don’t be like a stone that I try to roll uphill and that always rolls down again” (44). These words, which allude to the myth of Sisyphus, foreshadow the unhappy fate that awaits Anna, who at this point does not appear to be offered a glimpse of hope. Furthermore, Walter’s observation reflects that he is devaluing the causes of her inertia, probably triggered by her fear of rejection, while evincing that he is a tyrannical character.

As Walter takes control of the conversation, Anna seems acquiescent to his authority, as implied by her hesitation when it comes to giving elaborate answers. When he elicits her stance on his cousin Vincent or informs her about his plans to get her a job, she merely replies with a question tag—“Does he?” (43)—, or else a reiterated “I don’t know” (43, 44). At the onset of their dialogue, the only sound statement she articulates is, “I want to be with you. That’s all I want” (44), in yet another instance of her clutching onto the literal and figurative grip of her lover for the sake of survival. However, defenceless though she is, Anna shows early signs of a timid but blooming recalcitrance against male authority. It can be noticed from the outset of this section that Walter tries to direct Anna’s behaviour, using the imperative mode on several occasions: “Don’t be like that. . . . Well, look happy then. Be happy” (44). Overall, she remains unmoved as his protector requests a change of heart. Considering what Rhys explains in “The Interval”, such silence might be deemed a strategy through which the heroine protects herself from further insidious harm: “[I]t was bad policy to say that you were lonely or unhappy” (*Smile Please* 116). In addition, it should be noted that, after Walter urges her to be happy she replies by uttering a sentence that is somewhat unrelated to what he is asking for: “All right, I’ll have a whisky. . . . No, not wine—whisky” (*Voyage* 44). By not automatically complying with his demand, Anna is resisting male orders and, in a way, seems to be covertly showing that she takes issue with his assumption that grief can be worked through overnight.

At this point, the heroine's decision to drink alcohol may be read apace with the belief among some artists that drinking spirits may facilitate introspection: "[S]ome modernists held that alcohol granted access to a more authentic truth, stripped inhibition, collapsed boundaries and encouraged the free flow and association of ideas" (Birrell 306). While both Rhys and her female protagonists often turn to drinking to fleetingly evade their disturbing reality, in this case whisky appears to be a medium for a disruptive endeavour: by delving deeper into her inner life with the help of alcohol, the autobiographical subject can offer a more comprehensive portrayal of her suffering³² that responds to the male lover's dismissal of the complexity of her unhappiness. Indeed, her alcohol-enhanced access to her agitated train of thought gives rise to a fragmented depiction of her West Indian childhood that, in line with the reading provided in the previous chapter based on Edkins's notion of 'trauma time', disrupts narrative linearity to challenge different forms of authority, in this case patriarchy.

Considering the subversive potential of Anna's account, the protagonist's struggle to give shape to a full-fledged story cannot be merely judged as a by-product of her bewilderment, but as a strategy Rhys uses to critically comment on gender roles. Significantly, Anna's storytelling has an effect on the inattentive listener. It is noteworthy that Walter shows a relative degree of disengagement as his partner does the telling, as hinted at by disapproving remarks such as "I don't like hot places much" (46) or "You told me that before" (47). His disinterest may emerge not merely from his colonialist disinterest in the Empire's periphery, but potentially from his vexation at being contested: though temporarily, a supposedly helpless woman has become a

³² While research has frequently noted Rhys's sporadic recourse to alcohol during her writing process in her early years (e.g., Savory, *Jean Rhys* 20), little is said about the subversive dimension of this habit in both the author and her heroines. It has been noted by Sue Thomas that 'triple sec', which gave the title to her first refashioning of her 1910s diaries, refers to a Caribbean liquor ("Sixth Act" 35). Considering both the key role of Anna as the autodiegetic narrator of her trauma narrative and the fact that this novel is based on a reworking of the author's diaries, the allusion to a spirit drink in 'Triple Sec' may hint at the prominence of an introspection, whether induced by alcohol or not, that can be deemed subversive in that it foregrounds a presumably unspeakable and dismissed trauma. What is more, the Caribbean origin of the liquor might strengthen the visibility of Creole identity that the West Indian storytellers—Anna and Rhys—deliberately embrace amid gender-based and colonial power structures.

speaking subject in front of the one who controls discourse and has refused to strictly follow his appeals, and this can be interpreted as an instance of resistance amid insidious oppression.

Anna's timid incompletion with male orders is also appreciable in the section devoted to the couple's getaway to Savernake. Initially, the insight into her inner life as she gets into the car lays bare her traumatic apathy: "I was so nervous about how I looked that three-quarters of me was in a prison, wandering round and round in a circle. If he had said that I looked all right or that I was pretty, it would have set me free. But he just looked me up and down and smiled" (66). As happens during her recaptured memory of the cramped room in Newcastle, the motif of the imprisoned woman denotes that her fate is inexorable and that any attempt to break free from her current situation might only aggravate her destitution. She is distressed by her outward appearance because the little prosperity offered to the Rhysian *déclassée* depends on her desirability. Her welfare is therefore at the hands of Walter, who grins knowing that she has little alternative but to clutch onto the male lover's firm grasp.

Anna's fretful countenance may remind him of his mastery over her, but this feeling of conceited satisfaction is disrupted when, deep in the woods, she shows reluctance to Walter's proposal for outdoor sex in "holes where the deer shelter in winter" (68): "I said, 'Oh no, not here. Just imagine if anybody saw us.' I heard myself giggling" (68). Anna's reaction suggests bashfulness rather than anxiety at the chance of being observed, and yet a closer look at the narrator's afterthought—where the idea of giggling is underscored—may subtly point at a shrouded subversiveness. While Anna's stifled laughter might at first sight be interpreted as a symptom of her trauma-related restlessness, she sounds resolute when she eventually takes no notice of Walter's suggestion and declares, "Let's go back to the hotel" (68). Her determination leaves the door open for a sense of rebellion that, though manifested sporadically and warily, suggests a faint reawakening from traumatic apathy. In light of how the respective characters respond to each other's proposals, it can be said that this scene establishes an attitudinal contrast

that serves Rhys to ironically comment on the fact that Walter may not be fully entitled to claim control over Anna. Such is the soundness of Anna's proposition that he accepts it, remembering that his cousin Vincent is waiting for them (68). By contrast, Walter's fanciful idea proves both barren and slightly unsophisticated since, as Mullholland observes, it makes it plain that he is just toying with her: "Anna wants a permanent relationship from Walter, but he only seeks a temporary distraction in an exotic fantasy" (134). This indirect allusion to escapism is strongly linked to his plans for the relationship, as on his return from Savernake he will hastily head for a far-off destination, eluding the affair and, most strikingly, the trouble of ending it face to face.

As inferred from his playfulness and lack of sagacity both at Savernake and while Anna tells her story, Walter fails to provide the long-term caring responsibilities that she needs and even aggravates her anxiety and insecurity. By way of illustration, during their last night at Savernake the two men—Walter and his cousin Vincent—bring into conversation the moment when Anna first met Walter and, as they chitchat about this memory at Southsea, they cannot help laughing. Afraid that she may be derided, Anna heartily requests the men to stop being hilarious—"Shut up laughing" (74)—but, when realising that their guffawing will not cease, she gives vent to her previously muffled angst as follows: "I was smoking, and I put the end of my cigarette down on Walter's hand. I jammed it down hard and held it there, and he snatched his hand away and said 'Christ!' But they had stopped laughing" (74). Her recourse to violence to counteract the powerlessness of her words has been interpreted in different ways, from suggesting a "volatile" conduct (Emery, *Modernism and the Marginal* 128) to being a successful action that triggers the men's silence (Haliloğlu 78). In keeping with Haliloğlu's reading, it can be asserted that Anna's sudden and temporary awakening from traumatic inertia somehow deals a blow to the two male oppressors' belittlement. In the case of Vincent, his paternalism might be said to be more harmful than Walter's, not only because it is both unmitigated and forthright; his is a mindset defined by the conflation of patronising mockery—

evinced by utterances such as the greeting “How’s my infantile Anna?” (*Voyage* 69)—and a pinch of misogyny. The negative portrayal of Vincent in this section of the novel is somewhat accounted for by Rhys’s acrimony towards Lancelot’s cousin Julian, whom she thought had spoiled her affair with the stockbroker (Angier 68; Seymour 54). Vincent’s biting dismissiveness can be appreciated in his remarks on women.³³ For example, as he makes small talk on a book he has presumably read—Florence L. Barclay’s 1909 novel *The Rosary*—he firstly mistakes its female author for a man, and when corrected by Walter he ironically replies: “Well, even if a woman wrote it she should be knighted” (*Voyage* 73). More remarkably, shortly before in the section Walter notices that Germaine seems troubled, on which Vincent comments: “She started the argument on the way down here. She was all right before that. It’ll end in a flood of tears. As usual” (71). As is the case with both Walter’s cousin and other male figures in Rhys’s work, he attaches no importance to his female partner’s discomfort. Germaine’s story or social milieu are not even sketched in the novel, but it is interesting to remark that she displays solidarity with a fellow woman like Anna as she reacts to her pressing down the cigarette on Walter’s hand: “‘Bravo, kid’, Germaine said, ‘Bravo’” (74).

The two women’s shared feeling of being on the verge of tears unveils the misunderstood suffering of a subject aware that she is to be forsaken. Even if Anna has been daring enough to intervene to stop Walter’s laughter, she continues feeling manacled by her much-needed bond with her protector. As she mulls over after the incident, “I wanted to pretend it was like the night before, but it wasn’t any use. Being afraid is cold like ice, and it’s like when you can’t breathe. ‘Afraid of what?’ I thought” (76). Her wanderings hint at a sense of denial which, alongside a paralysing fear that is analogous to experiencing the cold of ice, is revealing of her traumatic suffering. Unable to make sense of her trauma, she cannot either fathom or verbalise

³³ Julian’s contempt for women has been noted by Staley, who describes him as “an example of the bullying male who, having exploited women, through guilt or perversity has a sadistic desire to show them up as insincere and even villainous” (124).

her fear, and yet it can be inferred from her request “Don’t forget me, don’t forget me ever” (76) that, as she talks to Walter, who will soon be off to New York, she presages that the stockbroker will abandon her. This pervasive terror comes true some weeks after the outing at Savernake, when she receives a letter written and forwarded by Vincent where he explains on behalf of Walter that “the thing could not go on for ever” (80). Anna’s failure to integrate this traumatic event is manifested through an instance of dissociation quoted in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, whereby Uncle Bo looms large as an intimidating figure. Upon rereading the letter, Anna shows a degree of shock-related bafflement akin to the inability to scream or move pointed out in the quotation above: “When I looked at the clock it was a quarter past five. I had been sitting there like that for two hours” (81).

The idea of female inertia, so recurrent in Rhys’s interwar novels, is recapitulated by the autodiegetic narrator as the heroine meets Walter after the breakup: “It was like letting go and falling back into water and seeing yourself grinning up through the water, your face like a mask, and seeing the bubbles coming up as if you were trying to speak from under the water. And how do you know what it’s like to try to speak from under water when you’re drowned” (84). Such a rumination retakes the impossibility to produce an audible sound under water, thus expanding on the powerlessness highlighted in her Caribbean fantasy. It is interesting to note that Anna’s cogitation is in many ways similar to Marya’s feeling of impotence, as if she were walking under water (*Quartet* 96). Indeed, this idea is conjured up in the mind of the Heidlers’ *protégée* when, after feeling utterly ridiculed and emotionally deserted, she leaves the studio in the Avenue de l’Observatoire, allegedly to avoid further humiliation. In the case of Anna, she also awakes from her lethargy—analogue to Rhys’s voluntary lockdown after being left by Lancelot—and eventually ventures to leave her cramped abode. However, it is far-fetched to argue that she displays an incipient agency, as Anne Cunningham has noted: “The narrative

does not describe a cohesive, self-knowing liberal subject capable of direct action (or activism). Rather, Anna reacts to her conditions by failing and foundering” (382).

Unlike Julia Martin after her relationship with Mr Mackenzie comes to an end, Anna is barely willing to heal her wounds through direct action. Instead, Anna lets herself go since, as Karen Atherton puts it, “reliance on men to bring her security in life means that Anna is unable to direct her ‘voyage through life’” (157). There is, hence, little likelihood that she evolves from passivity into fruitful motion, and this sense of pervasive inertia is significantly enhanced by the fact that she is chauffeured to the hotel where she will meet Walter:

Then the taxi came; and the houses on either side of the street were small and dark and then they were big and dark but all exactly alike. And I saw that all my life I had known that this was going to happen, and that I’d been afraid for a long time, I’d been afraid for a long time. There’s fear, of course, with everybody. But now it had grown, it had grown gigantic; it filled me and it filled the whole world. (*Voyage* 82).

The dimness underscored in her contemplation of the streets seems closely related to the metaphorical drowning she thinks of, and both ideas may be said to point to this novel’s central concern: the heroine’s inevitable drift into a pit of darkness from which she is unlikely to emerge.

Anna’s awareness that she is bound to a destructive destiny is suggested by the sense of predestination to which the narrator attests and, notably, by the anaphoric rhythm of the passage quoted above. The question of circularity, key to interpreting Rhys’s texts from a thematic and formal perspective, should be readdressed at this point to underline that, after being left by her benefactor, she has little option but to follow a similar path to eke out her existence. Although Walter has set his sights on arranging that she should “be provided for and not have to worry about money” (80), running short of funds is still one of her main preoccupations: “I had fifteen

pounds left after I had paid Mrs Dawes” (86). The narrator’s emphasis on her budget may reveal a financial anxiety that partly accounts for her ethos from this moment on. It seems that Anna grows indifferent to any emotional wound she may be inflicted, as the only means that may grant her an ephemeral but pleasurable comfort is money. In the events that lead up to the denouement of her narrative, there are virtually no instances of sentimental wreckage, and her ensuing interactions with men are clinical and geared towards one single goal: to cater for her economic needs. As the narrator makes it clear at the end of Part One, her wonderings have no destination: “Anywhere will do, so long as it’s somewhere that nobody knows” (86). Both the dispassionate tone of this statement and her yearning that her whereabouts remain undisclosed may hint at the outcome of her descent into darkness: her slippage into the world of prostitution.

A good number of Rhysian critics have explicitly tackled Anna’s fall into what they have called ‘amateur’ prostitution (e.g., Frost 198; Mullholland 101; Thomas, *Modernist Bearings* 148), semi-prostitution (Harrison 99), or “pseudo-prostitution” (Kingsley 297). In the novel, prostitution is addressed in a roundabout way or, as Le Gallez puts it, “through suggestion rather than direct reference” (83). One such insinuation is the intertextual link to Émile Zola’s *Nana* early in the novel: “I was lying on the sofa, reading *Nana*” (*Voyage* 9). Zola’s narrative revolves around the story of Anne Copeau, an early adult actress and prostitute that consumes and is consumed by a myriad of affluent men until she contracts smallpox and dies. It has been noted that the bond between the two *déclassée* characters is reinforced by the fact that Anna’s name is an anagram of ‘Nana’ (Lonsdale 56; Maurel 92). Besides being namesake, the heroines share a similar evolution in their commodification voyage, from being stage women scrutinised by the male gaze to becoming a sexual object for consumption in exchange of money. In addition to this example of foreshadowing through intertextuality, Rhys resorts to ellipsis to avoid the depiction of Anna’s sexual encounters with Carl: “I think anything could have happened that day and I wouldn’t have been really surprised. ‘It’s always on foggy days,’ I

thought” (132). It is interesting to note that the allusion to fog may play a role in reinforcing the hesitancy created by both Rhys and the autodiegetic narrator as for the frequency of the sexual barter between Carl and Anna, which are left to the reader’s interpretation: “If I brought Carl back to the flat after dinner she [Ethel] was usually out of her bedroom. . . . It’s a nice flat to bring anybody to. It makes people think something of you when you bring them back to a place like this” (134).

The only manifest example of a female character in the novel that in a way acknowledges her prostitution is Laurie, a companion of Anna’s during her touring days that, in Thomas’s view, can be regarded “as a monitory image for Anna and her life as a metonym of the material underpinnings of the circulation of amateur prostitutes around London” (*Modernist Bearings* 82). This mentoring figure blatantly takes pride in her promiscuity, which incites her to indulge in sex while capitalising on her male lovers at her will: “I get along with men. I can do what I like with them. Sometimes I’m surprised myself. I expect it’s because they feel I really like it and no kidding” (*Voyage* 99). For Anna’s part, her toddle into the world of the ‘amateur’ is obliquely represented, and the reasons behind such an evasive depiction might be found in the life of her flesh-and-bone artificer. Rhys’s biographies fall short of providing details on the aftermath of her rupture with Lancelot, and the possibility of her having become a lady of the evening is not even conjectured.³⁴ The lack of certainty on whether the heroine’s first steps as an ‘amateur’ are modelled after the author’s real-life experience is evidence of how Rhys plays with the limit of factual accuracy. In this novel, she sneaks into the world of prostitution to

³⁴ In *Smile Please*, Rhys overlooks, perhaps deliberately, the lapse between the day when Lancelot told her that he was leaving for New York on business and, in her words, “what was then called an illegal operation” (118). Angier quotes from an unidentified statement by Rhys where she confesses having been “picked up, sometimes in the street, sometimes in a park” (75), but the only explanation of her relationship with these random male strangers is that she would allow them to speak to her provided that they reminded her of Lancelot. No mention is made of whether she had any lovers before her abortion in 1913 or who impregnated her. The only male friend whose full name is recorded in Rhys’s biographical studies is Arthur Fox Strangways, a retired teacher and music critic to whom Seymour devotes half a page in her work, explaining that this gentleman is unlikely to have become her lover, but was simply “a cultured and unthreatening friendship” (58).

illustrate the degradation of the interwar *déclassée* due to her vulnerable position in society from an economic and emotional standpoint. The question of amateur prostitution hence enables her to go over recurrent issues in both her biography and her fiction such as abandonment, social anxiety and the heroine's utter detachment from physical and emotional experience, all these topics opening the way for a plunge into the autobiographical subject's shattered self.

As hinted at above, there is little direct evidence in Anna's testimony that suggests a correlation between the habit of sleeping with different men and a worsening of her post-traumatic stress. The only tangible symptom of trauma-related angst is succinctly tackled by the narrative voice as she reminisces about how Joe approached her bed before trying to kiss her: "Two black eyes were staring at me. I stared back at them. Then I had to blink and the whole business began all over again" (109). Anna's unwillingness to drop her gaze may point to a relative resistance amid the disturbing presence of the observer, all the more so as she reacts to the unwelcome kiss by uttering an empathic "No, don't" (109). However, the atmosphere of the American friends' room, which makes her feel both "very cold" (106) and as if the mattress "sank under [her]" (106), indicates that she is by no means at ease. As a matter of fact, shortly after dodging Joe's kiss she cries: "Something came out from my heart into my throat and then into my eyes" (109). The main reason why she bursts into tears is not so much her alertness at the possibility of being sexually exploited as her fear of being derided. Indeed, Joe is a Vincent-like figure whose horseplay behaviour betrays a degree of contempt manifested in his question, "Why do you go around with Laurie? Don't you know she's a tart?" (109). Later in the novel, she is insulted—"Bitch" (138)—by a bandaged man with whom she has agreed to dance in her room but who nevertheless shows his intentions when, upon her dizziness caused by pregnancy, he will not let go of her. In both cases, she does not seem to be hurt by sexist language, which makes us wonder whether she is still paralysed following

Walter's desertion or whether she has internalised that this is an ordeal she must endure to get through, both economically and emotionally.

As Lucy Wilson has remarked, Anna is not dispirited by her interlocutor's implication that it could be hazardous for her to make friends with a *demi-monde* (79), but replies that being a 'tart' is for her "just as good as anything else" (*Voyage* 109). It should be stressed that not only does this observation evince Anna's empathy for the underprivileged, to be explored in Chapter 4; it suggests that prostitution can sometimes be seen in a less negative light, namely as a means for economic survival that complements her menial job as a manicurist at Ethel's. Not surprisingly, Anna recollects in her narrative how Carl leaves "five quid" (133) after they spend their first night together and "fifteen quid" (136) on their last date. Mullholland's view that the role that Anna-as-amateur plays is "as much of a performance as any other" (133) is particularly apt for the examination of Anna's noteworthy indifference after becoming a girl to be "picked up" (*Voyage* 134). Unlike her shattering relationship with Walter, her sporadic encounters with Carl or the bruised stranger reveal an emotional detachment that is enunciated in the narrative as clinical coldness. After taking Anna's hand in his, the American man notices: "'Cold,' he said, 'cold' (Cold—cold as truth, cold as life. No, nothing can be as cold as life.) (131). Indeed, though punctually daydreaming about being taken by Carl on his departure from London (134), she seems unaffected when he acknowledges being married (135). At the same time, the mask of apathy she compels herself to wear may also be interpreted as a mechanism of the mind aimed at protecting her against further devastation, be it an isolated event or an insidious form of trauma. Being an ill-fated woman, she is highly aware that, at any moment, she is bound to face a noxious stimulus that will put her integrity at stake. As implied by her comment "I think the same thing all the time gets damned monotonous" (135), she is trapped in repetitive cycles of degradation at the end of which she attains nothing but weariness. Indeed,

by the end of her experience as an amateur prostitute, her inertia is confirmed in the shape of an abortion.

Anna's unexpected pregnancy is presented in the novel as a phenomenon that debilitates as much as dumbfounds her. The penetrating force of disorientation is brought forth in the text through an insistence on a ceaseless dizziness: "Like seasickness, only worse, and everything heaving up and down. And vomiting. And thinking, 'It can't be that, it can't be that. Oh, it can't be that. Pull yourself together; it can't be that'" (138). This iterative passage is intimately linked to a dream where, precisely at sea, she is struggling to get out of a bumpy ship: "I was powerless and very tired, but I had to go on. And the dream rose into a climax of meaninglessness, fatigue and powerlessness, and the deck was heaving up and down, and when I woke up everything was still heaving up and down" (141). Her failure to fully grasp what is happening both when sick and as she assesses her vision is akin to the collapse of understanding inherent to the experience of trauma. There is a striking gap of meaning in the use of the pronouns 'it' and 'that' to refer to a pregnancy whose unnameability might suggest that it is both overwhelming and potentially traumatic. Interestingly, along similar lines Thomas argues that "the language of objectification marks a terror of inhabiting the subjectivity of a pregnant woman" (*Modernist Bearings* 85), to which should be added that it is against her will to bear a child.

Anna's unwillingness to pin down her stressor in her narrative might be read alongside a key figment in her dream. The protagonist of the fantasy catches sight of a child lying in his coffin. His name is never mentioned, though he is referred to by a sailor as "the boy bishop" (140). It should be highlighted this cryptic child, apparently deceased, eventually awakens and rolls his eyes "in a narrow, cruel face" (141). The sense of abhorrence stemming from the sight of the boy's visage is recaptured in Anna's rumination on her baby, where her conception of the foetus as a monster and the initial allusion to circles can be read against the fantasy of the 'boy bishop': "And all the time thinking round and round in a circle that it is there inside me,

and about all the things I had taken so that if I had it, it would be a monster” (143). The hypothesis in the second half of the quotation hints at the possibility that she will not have the baby. An association can be traced, then, between a ‘boy bishop’ doomed to lie in a coffin and Anna’s offspring. In this respect, the churchly child may be read as a harbinger of death or, put it another way, a projection of Anna’s distress at the prospect that her baby will never be born. It could be concluded, therefore, that such a parallel contributes to casting light on why Anna uses the it pronoun when referring to her gestation and the child who will remain in utter darkness. Both are the aftereffect of a cumulative experience of trauma engendered by her status as a penniless and forsaken interwar *déclassée*, a position which seems unalterable.

The failure to make sense of the traumatic experience as it occurs is what lies at the core of Anna’s account of her abortion. The patient’s deceptive reasoning, accounted for her being anaesthetised both chemically and emotionally, gives way to a dazzling denouement that casts further doubt on whether her metaphoric voyage will bring about a brighter future or whether she will lead an empty existence for good. The epistemic collapse of the narrative in its ending lines is strengthened by the chiaroscuro effect attained through the juxtaposition of antagonistic situations: the positive implications of “being new and fresh” (159) contrast with the sense of annihilation entailed by that “last thrust of remembering before everything is blotted out” (159), thus hinting at what Simpson has identified as a “condensation of life and death” (28). Such an interplay between vitality and inertia is what seems to have defined Rhys’s existence following her backstreet abortion, at least considering what she recalls in *Smile Please*. After leaving out any account of the operation, she acknowledges: “I didn’t suffer from remorse or guilt. I didn’t think at all like women are supposed to think, my predominant feeling was one of *intense relief*” (118; my emphasis). Though not being elaborated on, this sense of alleviation might be crucial for the understanding of how Rhys both identified with and represented the pain of the interwar *déclassée*. She distances herself from women in general by contravening how, according to

her, other female figures would have reacted in the aftermath of abortion. Rhys's idiosyncrasy, however, should not be judged as an indicator of post-abortion insensitiveness, but potentially as a result of her socioeconomic status. Her position, like Anna's, is that of a down-and-out woman who might have felt allayed for not having to cope with childbearing in an environment of economic scarcity. Not coincidentally, two pages after admitting to her relief she explicitly tackles her concern about money: "When I paid the first week's rent I was surprised to see how little money I had left" (120).

Economic deprivation functions as a poignant reminder for both Rhys and Anna that they are not entitled to permanent solace and that the chances of starting afresh are virtually inexistent. Remarkably, Rhys comments on her misleading period of peace: "I never dreamed. I slept as if dead" (120). Anna has indeed had several dreams before and during the abortion, but as soon as she regains consciousness after reliving the masquerade she is confronted with a limbo-like situation whose outcome is still unpredictable, but which shows signs of further subservience to men. The novel ends with the patient lying on her bed and under the effect of sedatives, in a state of paralysis similar to that of Marya and Julia. In terms of agency, the protagonist returns to square one, in which the alienated heroine felt as if she had been born again (7). However, her process of rebirth after surviving the botched operation does not seem to begin under good auspices, at least as far as her relation to men is concerned. While the end of her 'voyage in the dark' has taken the shape of an intervention facilitated by the economic support of Vincent—or Julian in the case of Rhys (Angier 76; Pizzichini 111)—, at the onset of the new journey Anna is again reminded that she cannot untangle herself from male authority. Her fate has been left at the hands of a surgeon whose command is enhanced by characterisation: "His hands looked enormous in rubber gloves. He began to ask questions" (158–159).

The doctor's description appears to suggest that he is what Virginia Woolf denominates a "priest of science" (*Mrs Dalloway* 70).³⁵ During his brief appearance in the final section, he is the only character that speaks and the one that is given the last word before the autodiegetic narrator closes her narrative. In his last utterance, he acrimoniously tells Laurie and Anna that they are "too naïve to live" (159). Even if both women have for some time undergone insidious degradation, they are perceived by biased male figures such as the doctor as inexperienced or infantile. What is worse, his statement might imply that *déclassée* characters like Anna and her friend are condemned to lead a barren life, whether they are young or not. This presumption is corroborated by the ensuing analysis of the last Rhysian heroine examined in this chapter. Well past her twenties, Sasha Jansen is a lifeless character for whom the promising endeavour to "start all over again" has proved fruitless. As stated in the previous chapter, the testimony of this middle-aged woman living in the dying moments of the interwar years focuses more on the aftermath of her shattering rather than on the traumatic events per se. This contributes to stressing that Anna's doctor, whose words have been identified by Harrison as a conjuration of "the dreamlike world of automata" (104), somehow presages that what will dawn on the 'Rhys' woman is no more than an irrevocable fall into lethargy that is represented by Sasha.

3.4. Midnight as Surrender: The Lethargy of the Undesirable Woman in *Good Morning, Midnight*

The heroine that closes this literary cycle of bohemian interwar *déclassées* is beyond all doubt the most seasoned of all Rhysian heroines. Like Julia after bumping into Mackenzie at the end of Rhys's second novel, Sasha has left behind the naivety and impressionability of both Anna

³⁵ Through the juxtaposed phrases "the ghostly helper, the priest of science" (*Mrs Dalloway* 70), Woolf critically comments on the role of Sir William Bradshaw, a dogmatic doctor whose method of 'rest cure' proves ineffective for a character, Septimus Warren Smith, affected by a form of post-traumatic stress disorder known at that time as 'shell shock'.

and Marya. Due to an untold number of calamities, she has become an insensitive, machine-like figure, as the autodiegetic narrator confesses from the outset: “When you’ve been made very cold and very sane you’ve also been made very passive” (*Good Morning* 11). Sasha’s abiding inertia appears to be the sediment of cumulative traumatic experiences, and yet at the same time by enduring such happenings she has gained an acknowledged sanity that translates into self-control. Hence, she is hardly ever led astray by daydreaming, as evinced by some scattered instances of interior monologue: “But careful, careful! Don’t get excited. You know what happens when you get excited and exalted, don’t you? . . .” (14); or “People talk about the happy life, but that’s happy life when you don’t care any longer if you live or die. You only get there after a long time and many misfortunes” (76). The appeal to common sense and the unwilling acceptance of a grim fate are not merely a by-product of trauma-informed passivity. Interestingly enough, they might be read as a subversive strategy that grants Sasha—and Rhys as the flesh-and-bone artificer on whom her heroine is patterned—what Le Gallez has identified as “firm control of her narrative” (114).

What sparks the protagonist-narrator’s sense of dominance of both her narrative and her mood is a self-awareness of her deficiencies, which she has long embraced. In one of her initial mental immersions into her past, Sasha revisits the moment when her friend Sidonie offered to lend her some money so that she could travel to Paris: “I lie awake, thinking about it, and about the money Sidonie lent me and the way she said: ‘I can’t bear to see you like this’. Half-shutting her eyes and smiling the smile which means: ‘She’s getting to look old. She drinks’” (*Good Morning* 11).³⁶ After taking dead-end jobs as a receptionist in a fashion boutique, a guide, a

³⁶ Sidonie has been identified as a characterisation of Germaine Richelot (Angier 366; Seymour 173). Madame Richelot was an affluent French spinster whose family Rhys worked for in 1919, while she was expecting a male baby that passed away after being born. By the end of the 1930s, she was one of the few female friends Rhys still had, so it is all the more striking to note that Sidonie is the only person that has not disposed of Sasha before she sets out to Paris. Yet, it appears that, sometime on the eve of the Second World War, Rhys and the woman who Pizzichini identifies as “her first and last real friend” (149) went their separate ways, probably following a quarrel over money (Angier 366). Such an incident may have left a trace of rancour on the Caribbean expatriate, now

mannequin, and even a private teacher of English, Sasha has been thrown back into economic vulnerability. Indeed, her getaway for a pleasant idleness would have probably not taken place but for the support of Sidonie. Yet, the analepsis also reveals that the *déclassée* protagonist is highly concerned about her outward appearance. Throughout the narrative, she brings to centre stage her fear of ageing, which points to a correlation between growing old and undesirability.

On the one hand, Sasha's dread of growing old and neglected often translates into a sense of hyperarousal symptomatic of her fear of rejection—as in her interpretation of the English women's question as “What the devil . . . is she doing here, that old woman?” (46)—and also of an anguish deriving from the fact that, no matter how much she invests in improving her demeanour, she will be further devalued as days go by (Port 150). Being a middle-aged woman with no prospect of gaining recognition or visibility, Sasha is led to what Elaine Showalter has denominated “a bittersweet resignation to woman's lot of unhappiness and insecurity” (299). On the other hand, the decline of Sasha's appeal conduces her to a lower-level exposure to male predation. No man in the pre-WWII Paris of the novel seems to be interested in chasing after a declining woman, and Sasha in turn seeks nothing from men in general. Unlike the other Rhys's interwar heroines, she does not interact with well-off men and, during her recess in Paris, shows no need to be catered for. After a long period of scarcity—foregrounded in the central analepsis comprising Part Three—, she has relinquished any drive or hope to rely on men for emotional and economic support, and such a withdrawal is in keeping with what Rhys expressed in a 1963 letter to Selma Vaz Dias: “For years I have given up hope of being protected” (*Letters* 228). Both Rhys and Sasha seem too emotionally drained to thoroughly portray in their testimonies the question of submitting to the male benefactor at the cost of female integrity, and yet the novel tackles two circumstances that underscore the position of

lacking supportive figures except for her husband Leslie, that may account for Sasha's bittersweet recollection of money in the midst of a city where she has no friends.

Sasha as a representative of the interwar *déclassée*: her dependence on a disquieted husband that eventually abandons her and the death of her baby five weeks after his birth. Both are largely based on Rhys's experience in the early 1920s and, as potentially shattering issues, are crucial in two ways: firstly, they answer for an emotional paralysis that can be interpreted as a reverberation of trauma; secondly, Rhys resorts to factual accuracy to articulate on the written page some recurrent concerns to do with trauma, such as unexpected loss, abandonment, and isolation.

Part Three in the novel gives a glimpse of the itinerant life led by Sasha and her husband Enno some twenty years before the time of narration. The central concern in this extended and highly befuddling analepsis is the anxiety provoked by instability. The unpredictability that governs the life of this married couple is greatly accounted for by their shoestring budget. As is the case with the main storyline, it is underscored in the first pages that they are economically destitute: "I haven't any money. He hasn't any either. We both thought the other had money" (*Good Morning* 96). Modelled on the flickering stability of Rhys and Lenglet before trying to find an abode in the City of Light, the existence of Sasha and Enno echoes that of Marya and Stephan in *Quartet*, with the exception that in Rhys's last interwar novel the affective bond between these underdog characters is shakier than in the first one.

Like Rhys upon leaving London in 1919,³⁷ Sasha is hopeful about an impending life of plenty which might apparently be fulfilled as soon as she settles in Paris. The guesswork "when we get to Paris" is repeated like a mantra (96, 98, 101), but her conjecture is little more than the deception of a buoyant and yet naïve woman living at the onset of the roaring twenties. As

³⁷ At the end of the section "Leaving England", Rhys recalls how she ran away from England with Lenglet, ignoring the advice given by Lancelot, to whom she refers as "the man who had been supporting me for so long" (*Smile Please* 139). It appears that she renounced the cheque that Lancelot had been sending her through his lawyer, presumably taking it for granted that her prospective marriage to Lenglet would give her both peace of mind and a relative financial stability. Such biographical evidence answers for Sasha's wrong belief that Enno had money.

time goes by, she realises that her welfare depends on a household income that, given the few favourable employment opportunities offered to women at that time, must almost entirely be earned by Enno. The analepsis aptly reflects the changing mood of Sasha, setting side by side moments of elation and despondency. The borderline between euphoria and discouragement is set by the supply and the shortage of money respectively. When Enno gets funding from several acquaintances, Sasha asserts: “I’ve never been so happy in my life. I’m alive, eating ravioli and drinking wine” (104). By contrast, when the couple are still stuck in Brussels, Enno announces that they only have thirty pounds left, and as Sasha is waiting for him, she shows a high level of agitation: “Sitting on the bed, waiting. Walking up and down the room, waiting. I can’t stand it, this waiting” (99). The iterations of this passage contribute to underscoring the anxiety of a woman who is distressed not simply because she is running out of money, but also because she has been temporarily left alone in her room. This preliminary insight into the young Sasha’s restlessness is significant in that it hints at her fear of destitution, which encompasses both economic vulnerability and lack of emotional security. Not coincidentally, the repetitions that haunt this novel throughout—for example, when hotel rooms are described (29, 120)—can be interpreted as an indicator of the protagonist’s acting out, therefore evincing trauma.

What awaits Sasha as she meanders around her room is the experience of trauma. It comes like a bolt from the blue that she must pay a visit to a Mr Lawson. Little information is given of this figure, who does not recognise his guest until she reminds him that he once took her to dinner back in London and that they happened to meet on the boat to Holland (100). It is highlighted how this minor character calls Sasha “Little Miss” (100), a somewhat patronising appellation that, alongside the narrator’s observation on “how glassy his eyes were” (99), might suggest that he is both scrutinising and lording it over a woman who, as if she were reading his mind, swiftly points out that she and Enno are “not exactly stranded” (100). Knowing that her visit stems from a need to be provided with money, Mr Lawson gives her a hundred francs but

eventually goes as far as to give her a kiss in exchange. The narrative does not go on to depict whether the kiss gives way to a sexual encounter, but it grows evident as Sasha looks back on the aftermath of this meeting that this incident caused a traumatic injury on her.

In the brief description of the kiss scene, the protagonist's paralysis is evoked through an acknowledgement of her disengagement: "I feel my mouth go soft under his, and my arms go limp" (100). Later, as Enno demands an explanation of who she managed to borrow the money from, she gives vent to a feeling of dirtiness that stands for shame: "It's my dress. I feel so awful. I feel so dirty. I want to have a bath. I want another dress. I want clean underclothes. I feel so awful. I feel so dirty" (101). The protagonist's broken language evinces traumatic fragmentation, a state intensified by an instance of anaphora that, as argued above, may reflect the victim's acting out as she remembers the event. The harrowing feeling of shame overpowers Sasha, who wants to remove a stain that not only reflects humiliation; according to Jack Dawson, beneath this blemish there is an indelible "knowingness that one is essentially defective, grubby, unlovable" (72). The heroine's acute awareness that she is a neglectable and increasingly devalued member of the wretched ones is analogous to the dread of female ageing as inherently linked to becoming undesirable. These are symptoms of the interwar *déclassée*, and Rhys has wittingly resorted to a traumatic happening that is absent from her biography to test the limit of verisimilitude for a significant aim: to set the ground for the articulation of a trauma testimony representative of other destitute women of the time.

The emotional wound generated by Mr Lawson's kiss is aggravated by Enno's distancing from his wife. It can be observed from the moment when he inquires about the donor of the hundred francs that the emotional bond between the couple is gradually weakening. When she cries while hiding the truth from him, Enno urges not to do so: "Don't cry. If you cry I shall go mad" (101). Enno means no harm, as ratified by his decision to buy a dress for her when they get to Paris, and yet his careless words and his recourse to the mantra that Paris will bring them

prosperity trigger an ambivalent reaction on the part of Sasha that entails hesitancy: “I am happy, forgetting everything, happy and cool, not caring if I live or die” (101). It seems as if her disengagement were a mechanism of defence against the damage to which she is exposed as a penniless *déclassée* and, as becomes apparent later, an unprotected wife. She is reluctant to come to terms with the frustration of her hopes for a carefree life with a knight in shining armour, and so their lack of success places a heavy burden on the shocked protagonist: “I hadn’t bargained for this. I didn’t think it would be like this—shabby clothes, worn-out shoes, circles under your eyes, your hair getting straight and lanky, the way people look at you. . . . I didn’t think it would be like this” (102). At the same time, the discomfiture at the couple’s economic vulnerability greatly accounts for Enno’s unpredictable mood, and hence his annoyance after Sasha’s weeping should not be deemed an example of the Rhysian male lover’s disregard for his partner’s suffering.

Enno’s turmoil is a product of his exasperation at the impossibility to make ends meet despite his efforts. It is interesting to note that his agitation is aggravated when reminded of his destituteness: “I wouldn’t let my wife work for another man” (106), his well-off friend Alfred tells him, and at this remark he leaves the room slamming the door. It is at this point where his disquietude evolves into irritation that his relationship with Sasha starts swiftly declining. An ellipsis connects his abrupt farewell with a vignette starting with an uncouth reprimand and yet another leaving: “You don’t know how to make love. . . . You’re too passive, you’re lazy, you bore me. I’ve had enough of this. Goodbye” (107). Enno’s outburst contributes to building up the air of unpredictability haunting Sasha’s analepsis. He leaves his fit of temper unjustified, which makes it vague whether he is chafed at her apathy as for finding a job, or arguably at the possibility of her having a low sexual drive, which might stem from anxiety, the traumatic legacy of her visit to Mr Lawson, or her pregnancy. Enno’s first important absence, which lasts for three days, is so shocking for Sasha that she cannot fully fathom it. Accordingly, the

autodiegetic narrator fails to provide a thorough portrayal of how she felt after being forsaken, except for a hasty reference to a sense of withdrawnness that hints at self-abandonment: “I think: ‘What’s going to happen?’ After all, I don’t much care what happens. And just as I am thinking this Enno walks in with a bottle of wine under his arm” (107).

It grows evident as the narrative unfolds that Sasha has been distressed by her husband’s absence, as suggested by his observation, “But your hands are so cold. . . . My girl” (108). Enno’s manifestation of thoughtfulness strengthens the idea that he is not neglectful of Sasha’s misery, and yet the narrator draws attention to his rapid changes in behaviour,³⁸ probably to anticipate the inexorable deterioration of their relationship: “[H]e knew exactly when to be cruel, so exactly when to be kind” (108). Interestingly enough, afterwards she remembers how much she loved him, to the point of devotion:

When I saw him looking up like that I knew that I loved him. It was as if my heart turned over, and I knew that it was for always. It’s a strange feeling—when you know quite certainly in yourself that something is for always. It’s like what death must be. All the insouciance, all the gaiety is a bluff. Because I wanted to escape from London I fastened myself on him, and I am dragging him down. All the gaiety is going and now he is thin and anxious. . . . (108–109)

In this meditation, the idea of being emotionally linked to Enno is problematic as it points to her dependence on a person under whose spell she has fallen (Hemmerechts 308). She seems to have taken for granted that her future is mainly at the hands of her protector, and thus she

³⁸ The section “Paris Again”, the last one of Rhys’s autobiographical account in *Smile Please*, begins with an explanation of how Lenglet’s mood was linked to the couple’s financial hardship: “When my husband left the Commission we landed up in Paris again without much money. Jean [Lenglet] was very depressed, but I persisted in being hopeful” (153). Such a confession lays bare that the two Rhysian characters based on Lenglet—Stephan Zelli in *Quartet* and Enno Jansen in *Good Morning, Midnight*—are representative of the underdog, though this question is much more evident in Rhys’s first novel, as shown in this dissertation’s last chapter.

has adopted a passive attitude that is suggested both by his reproach while in bed and by the slang term ‘bluff’.

By renouncing agency, Sasha is left in an even more helpless position. Indeed, not only is she likely to trivialise any reaction by Enno that might hurt her, on account of her self-condemnation for his distress; her commitment to her husband will make her find herself at a loss if he eventually abandons her. This is precisely what dawns on her sometime after her baby’s death. Enno’s second leaving is nowhere near as brusque as the first one: at the train station, he promises Sasha that he will try to send some money, but as she waves him goodbye she is perfectly aware that the fugitive will not return: “It’s only for a time. We’ll be together again when things go better. Knowing in myself that it was finished. . . .” (119). This is a striking deviation from factual accuracy, as the circumstance that brought Rhys’s first marriage to an end was the ‘affaire Ford’, some eight years after the Lenglets’ son died in Paris. By straying from the autobiographical demand for verisimilitude, Rhys revisits the hard-to-grasp issue of abandonment, much in line with Lancelot’s retreat, and the ensuing apathy of the shocked victim. The heroine’s paralysis is exacerbated by this final blow, as implied in a suggestive introspection that attests to her emotional wound: “I stayed there, looking down at the red, dirty carpet and seeing a dark wall in the hot sun—the wall so hot it burned your hand when you touched it—and the red and yellow flowers and the time of day when every thing stands still” (117). This passage associates Sasha’s burning pain—itsself a symptom of post-traumatic stress—with the searing heat of the wall, while evoking her particular shrinkage from a sporadic warmth to a cold standstill that points to her apathy. The redness of the carpet should be foregrounded as well, since it leads us to the second traumatic event to be explored in this section. As noted by Rademacher, colour red alludes to the blood spilling from Sasha’s body while delivering her son (137). The loss of the newly born child is another reminder of her

loneliness, even more so as the departure of Enno—whose name has been read as an anagram for ‘none’ (Gardiner, “Good Morning” 250)—has left her with no one to lean on.

The first occasion when Sasha brings to the fore her deceased baby in her testimony takes the form of a three-page analepsis. This narrative insight corresponds to her act of remembering on the day before she dyes her hair, which is the starting point of her endeavour to leave behind a painful past: “It’s all right. Tomorrow I’ll be pretty again, tomorrow I’ll be happy again, tomorrow, tomorrow. . . .” (*Good Morning* 48). In addition to the abortion in *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys had previously addressed the loss of a child in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, though in a far more cursory way. It is emphasised long-windedly that the baby is condemned on the grounds that his family is economically vulnerable: “But the thought that they will crush him because we have no money—that is torture” (50), Sasha ponders. Significantly, the expectant mother realises that she is not entitled to chloroform because, as she puts it, “[t]his is a place for poor people” (50). It is revealed in the course of the recollection that Sasha undergoes post-partum anxiety, but what mostly informs her torment is her self-consciousness as a *déclassée* mother: “Afterwards I couldn’t sleep. I would sleep for an hour or two, and then wake up and think about money, money, for my son; money, money. . . .” (50).

The rumble that resounds in the mother’s mind sharply contrasts with the quietness of the baby. He remains silent all along his stay at the hospital, and such an absence of cry might be read as an indicator of his fate. He must accept that, no matter how loud he cries against injustice, he will remain bound to his ill fate, and this is suggested in the paragraph where his passing is made known: “And there he is, lying with a ticket tied round his wrist because he died in a hospital. And there I am looking down at him, without one line, without one wrinkle, without one crease. . . .” (52). At first sight, the immaculateness of Sasha’s body, lacking any visible marks of stress, might bespeak that the penniless mother is somewhat relieved for not having to strive to nurture a baby whose future is marked by disgrace. Indeed, a sense of solace

on the part of Rhys is insinuated by her editor Diana Athill when commenting on the death of the three-week-old William Owen Lenglet in January 1919: “She didn’t want her child to die. . . . When they wrote to tell her he had died she saw that life was as cruel as she had always believed. *But it did become less difficult*” (Stet 183; my emphasis). However, Rhys was also possessed by guilt, which became palpable in her decision to keep the receipt of William’s burial (Angier 113; Pizzichini 153). As Emery explains, “circumstances threaten to frame Sasha [and Rhys], making her appear guilty at a time when the precarious communities of Paris and Europe seem to annihilate themselves once again” (*World’s End* 156). The heavy influence that the social context of interwar Europe had on underdog figures like Rhys and Sasha is useful for the understanding of the autobiographical subject as representative of the interwar *déclassée*, and this central concern in the limit-case testimony is tackled in the analepsis.

As argued above, Sasha is affected by an insidious experience of economic vulnerability that, interestingly enough, enables her to side with the experience of other women admitted to the charity hospital. This is reflected in an example of interior monologue that depicts the inner life of a disturbed mother who cannot repose: “She [the midwife] probably knows why I can’t sleep. I bet some of the others here can’t either. Worrying about the same thing. (This is not *a* child; this is *my* child. Money, money)” (50). The shortage of money seems to condemn her fellow mothers, who cannot afford the cost of other nursing homes, to be permanently worried about the welfare of both their offspring and themselves. Sasha’s understanding of inpatients of whom she has not even caught sight evinces to what extent the testimony of this *déclassée* ties in with the experience of other interwar underprivileged women. Interestingly, the passage echoes another instance of empathetic identification that takes place as she flicks through the menu of a restaurant in London: “The back of the menu is covered with sketches of little women and ‘Send more money, send more money’ is written over and over again” (38). Being no more than small-scale drawings, these women’s size may point to their marginal role in interwar

metropolitan society, and yet their replicability on the page hints at a sense of commonality that gives strength to their message. Besides being reproduced several times, their plea is repeated, and this strategy might serve Rhys to request the restaurant's customers—in a way representative of capitalist society—that they pay attention to the vulnerability of an often neglected group. Tortured by the insidiousness of economic deprivation, they are seeking at least empathetic listening amid a system where, as Andrea Zengulys has observed, “a woman without personal resources must either beg or sell” (31). Sasha is aware that the lack of money heightens women's danger, as she has received the unwelcome kiss of a well-off male provider. She writes a message on the menu that lays bare her empathetic understanding of these *déclassées*: “As-tu compris? Si, j'ai compris. I hope you got that. Yes, I got it” (*Good Morning* 38).

Going back to Sasha's identification with the charity hospital's mothers, it should also be highlighted that the contrast between the personal pronoun 'my' and the indefinite article—“This is not *a* child; this is *my* child” (50)—enhances Sasha's affect towards a baby that is not an object to be indifferently disposed of, but a person who deserves care. This is not only an instance of empathy towards the underdog, but also evidence of Sasha's unspoken—yet convincing—criticism of the system. In the words of Carr, both Rhys and her baby are victims of a “machine world” (77) or, to put it differently, “a system based on divisions of class, race, money and gender, a system whose underlying cruelty and inhumanity her fiction [Rhys's] lays bare” (Carr 79). The implacable coldness with which *déclassé* individuals are doomed is recapitulated in the second recollection of the child's death, which precedes Enno's similarly icy leaving: “He has a ticket round his wrist because he died. Lying so cold and still with a ticket round his wrist because he died” (*Good Morning* 116). The traumatic happening is remembered in conjunction with the husband's desertion, potentially to underscore the

helplessness of a neglected woman who has begun to “go to pieces” (119) and for whose abandonment the society and the political system of that time was partly to blame.

The concatenation of the two circumstances tackled above answers for the lethargy Sasha displays during most of the story, and yet despite her crumbling there are some hints of resilience and a faint confrontation of the status quo. Significantly, Rhys seems to empower the protagonist-narrator by suggesting how her narrative agency may entail resistance against a system grounded in patriarchy. Considering the subversive power of storytelling, she avails herself of the rupture of chronology. By wavering between different temporalities almost in a violent way, Rhys provides a framework for accurately representing trauma—in line with Edkins’ ‘trauma time’—while challenging the order with which the system is associated. In the same direction, Cynthia Port contends that Sasha’s narrative is “an attempt to hold in contemporaneous stasis the various stages of time in order to resist the loss of value socially dictated for women as they age” (152). As is explored in the paragraphs that follow, there are more elements—such as Sasha’s transformation process and her *flânerie*—that point to a more or less willing escape from her structural oppression as a *déclassée* who has long internalised that she no longer has a role to play in society. However, it should not be forgotten that Sasha, like the other Rhysian heroines, is bound to a fate that offers no prospect of a new beginning: “[E]ven though Sasha may want to escape from the narrative of the society she lives in (‘always wanting to be different from the other people’), there is no way out” (De la Parra Fernández 227).

As a middle-aged tourist with little to lose, Sasha takes advantage of her respite in Paris to try a temporary move away from her resignation on account of her growing worthlessness. From the very beginning, the idea of transformation is underscored as the main benefit she can attain from her layover in the City of Light, judging by Sidonie’s belief that her automaton-like friend needs a change (*Good Morning* 11). As Sasha grows alarmed by her distress at being

rejected and categorised as *'la vieille'*—according to her interpretation of the English women's question at Theodore's—, her readiness to perform what she calls “a transformation act” (53) becomes her main drive. The anguish triggered by her dread of devaluation notably aggravates her haggardness, “[t]here are hollows under my eyes” (48), and her helplessness: “Today I must be very careful, today I have left my armour at home” (42). In order to counteract both markers of vulnerability, she sets her sights on dying her hair and buying new clothes respectively. It seems reasonable for her to work on the improvement of her outward appearance. In so doing, she is emulating what the midwife did to her after giving birth to the ill-fated child. Just as the process of wrapping her in swathes of bandages leaves her with no wrinkles (52), she wants to get over or conceal any signs of ageing because they remind her of her undesirability. Considering the link between growing old and devaluation, it can be said that hers is a project geared towards gaining respectability (Port 150), and yet her endeavour to confront her insignificance in a male-based, capitalist society brings about more disquietude than success.

Sasha's response to her self-transformation is for the most part ambivalent. The prospect of buying an attire seems exciting to her, as it might give her a sense of respectability that she seems to have long lost. This is suggested by her ruminations as she looks at a black dress that she is shown in Mr Blank's store: “It is my dress. If I had been wearing it I should never have stammered or been stupid” (25). Her coveted dress can be said to stand for the life of dignity she has long desired (Gammel and Mullhallen 203), and still the legacy of trauma seems to be at the core of the heroine's frequent hesitancy while completing her particular “ritual” (*Good Morning* 59). When she buys the hat, the dread of repudiation invades her as she struggles to trust the female shopkeeper: “I pay for the hat. I put it on. I have a great desire to ask her to come and dine with me, but I daren't do it. All my spontaneity has gone. (Did I ever have any? Yes, I think sometimes I had—in flashes. Anyway, it's gone now. If I asked her to dine with me, it would only be a failure)” (59). Far from revelling in the pleasure of starting anew, she is

haunted by a traumatic anxiety to such an extent that, as happened to Rhys (e.g., *Letters* 33), she feels compelled to gratify others rather than please her: “I go to a restaurant nearby [the hat shop] and eat a large meal, at the same time carefully watching the effect of the hat on the other people in the room, *comme ça*” (*Good Morning* 60).

A key performance that goes hand in hand with Sasha’s restyling is her *flânerie*. In line with the pervasive ambivalence in Rhysian texts, the middle-aged heroine’s wanderings are a double-edge sword. Well before narrating her move towards change, she remarks that, “for the poor devil without any friends and without any money”, there are “no hospitable doors, no lit windows, just frowning darkness” (28). Her assertion is proof of the testimonial dimension of this narrative, as the heroine is using her sharp awareness of the world surrounding her to relate her plights— isolation, destituteness, displacement and no hope for improvement—to those of an easily recognisable wretched subject that stands for the underdog. In this context, it is not surprising to find that Sasha’s roaming inevitably triggers mixed feelings in her. While the streets grant her anonymity, they nevertheless expose to public scrutiny a woman who, despite her efforts to become respectable, is unlikely to erase the trace of deprivation.

The insidious burden of being subject to the looks of others drains Sasha, who longs for a temporary exile from reality before bursting into tears at the Russians’ studio: “I have an irresistible longing for a long, strong drink to make me forget that once again I have given damnable human beings the right to pity me and laugh at me” (78). On the other hand, her *flânerie* proves particularly disruptive in two senses. Firstly, it represents a preliminary move from leaving the safety of both the lavabo and the hotel room towards an agency that culminates in her act of narration, an “expressionist revolt” that transforms itself into a “distorting mirror of the deformed (personal, social, political) conventions of a neurotic culture on the edge of disintegration” (Rodrigues Flora 274). Much in tune with Bowlby’s conception of the *flâneuse*, Sasha is not merely observed, but also becomes an observer whose representation of the pre-

WWII life may express criticism of an oppressive system that pushes such devalued women as herself to further neglect and to the reliving of insidious trauma.

In keeping with the disruptive potential of *flânerie*, Sasha capitalises on her penchant for parading to insinuate a subversion of gender roles. Having reached a point where she no longer needs patronage, her public exposure leads to interactions that bear witness to a transformation in the Rhysian heroine's position in relation to men. Such an evolution seems to be in consonance with her struggle towards revaluation, and this is significantly hinted at when she makes the acquaintance of the gigolo René, her most important companion during her Parisian getaway: "Do I really look like a wealthy dame trotting round Montparnasse in the hope of— ? After all the trouble I've gone to, is that what I look like? I suppose I do?" (61). Sasha's ambivalent reflection points to the immediate effect that her reshaping has presumably had on this male onlooker. It seems to her that this stranger, who has watched her pay at the Dôme, has approached her since she looks affluent, and her conjecture comes true when, after saying that she has no money, he reacts: "The corners of his mouth go down. They all say that" (63). It is the protection of the Rhysian *déclassée* that is now sought, in this case by underprivileged men interested in manoeuvring some money out of a woman, as is the case with René or with the Russians, whose status and relationship with Sasha are more closely examined in the next chapter.

The tables are turned for the heroine, who is now conferred the power to toy with her pursuers: "[P]erhaps I should manage to hurt him a little in return for all the many times I've been hurt" (62), she ponders when René expresses his belief that she will not betray him. However, she steers away from hurting her male acquaintances in Paris, plausibly for one key reason: they are fellow underdogs and, judging by the hesitancy at the core of the mediation quoted above, she is aware that she is as destitute as they are. Despite having put the mask of affluence, she is not guaranteed that passersby in interwar Paris will esteem her, as Vike Plock

remarks in her study on modernist women writers: “At the beginning of the twentieth century, an increased instability of formerly clear social structures meant that someone’s clothes could no longer be seen as a definite index of affluence or status” (83). Underneath the disguise of prosperity, Sasha conceals a pressing need to attain respectability, a drive informed by her cumulative trauma of female destitution. The protagonist dwells on this issue as she notices that René is looking at her ring: “A little pride, a little dignity at the end, in the name of God. . . I will not grimace and posture before these people any longer” (128). Her anguished tone is suggestive of her distress at finding that she has no control over her process of dignification. Even if she has done her utmost to leave behind her defeatism, she has realised towards the end of the novel that she must accept what the future may bring, which is far from the hope of revaluation.

By the end of the narrative, Sasha seems to have returned to her long-standing attitude of apathy and capitulation to her unalterable status as an interwar *déclassée*. Significantly enough, the story comes to a highly disturbing end with the unsolicited slippage of a man known as the ‘commis voyageur’ into her hotel room. This minor character appears only intermittently in the novel, and his emergence always takes place when Sasha is inside her temporary lodging. This enigmatic man, whose name is never revealed, occupies the room next door to hers and appears to be constantly killing time by roaming around the hotel hallways. It is interesting to note that readers are introduced to this mysterious male figure after Sasha, under the effect of luminal, dissociates herself from reality and imagines that she is parading about a corridor of a tube station. In this hallucination, her wandering is sterile as she is unable to find a way out in a passage that seems to be crushing her: “This Way to the Exhibition, This Way to the Exhibition. But I don’t way the way to the exhibition—I want the way out” (12). The drifting of the suitably dubbed ‘commis voyageur’ around the restrained space of the landing is similarly barren, and his countenance—“thin as a skeleton” and having a “bird-like face and sunken, dark eyes” (13)

— resembles that of Sasha, who is intimidated by him to the point of disturbance. He is described as “the ghost of the landing” (13), which is enhanced by his wearing a dressing-gown, sometimes a blue one and more often “the famous white one” (13). The phantasmagorical quality of the traveller is alluded to again on the occasion when he knocks at her door and stands at her doorway grinning, after which she is so uneasy that she opts for shooining him away: “It’s like pushing a paper man, a ghost, something that doesn’t exist” (31).

Both the intrusiveness of Sasha’s neighbour and the evolution in her gaze—from laying bare a “cringing” expression (13) and a “silly smile” (30) to scowling (34)—turn his shrouded existence into a sinister presence that threatens to haunt her in the same way as he hangs around the hallway. After the unwelcome guest is ejected, Sasha attests to a growing fear that reveals how affected she is by the pervasiveness of this uncanny male figure: “And there I am in this dim room . . . , thinking of that white dressing-gown, like a priest’s robes. Frightened as hell. A nightmare feeling” (31). While the first encounter with the *commis* shows no signs of distress except for her acknowledged dislike, the shocking visit of the cryptic salesman leads to the rekindling of a paralysing fear that points to trauma. It is not inconsequential, therefore, that Sasha links the aftermath of his coming to a frightening hallucination, as he has previously been presented in relation to a vision that could well be dissociative. The analogy between the *commis* and trauma can also be supported by the circumstance that she is alarmed by the return of a ghost-like figure that relights her terror and also her perplexity, as she cannot fathom either the expression or the intentions of an elusive figure that is suitably unnamed. She feels “ill and giddy” (31) in the nearby presence of a debilitating stimulus that has been brought back to the surface, and so she sets her sights on finding a new room to protect herself from it.

Sasha’s resoluteness to find new accommodation after the incident with the *commis* may reveal that, seasoned as she is, she is aware that the cryptic salesman might be harming for her. The eery “ghost of the landing” threatens to invade her privacy just as characters like Heidler

or Walter Jeffries do in such an apparently safe environment as the hotel room, and so it is not far-fetched to contend that the uncanny character of the last novel in Rhys's cycle of modernist novels stands for the cumulative traumatic legacy of her *déclassée* autobiographical subject, as regards the relation of these women to pernicious lovers. It is the reliving of events such as the kiss by Mr Lawson that seems to await Sasha, who is so baffled that she thinks for a moment that she might blissfully alter her fate: "Who says you can't escape from your fate? I'll escape from mine, into room 219" (32). However, just as she regains composure she hastily withdraws from her search and accepts her fortune: "A room is a place where you hide from the wolves outside and that's all any room is. Why should I worry about changing my room?" (33). As she finally chooses to keep her room, it can be foreseen that she will resign herself to preserving an illusory protection from further damage and humiliation, while at the same time one of these alleged malefactors is at close quarters. The *commis* is, as Barbara Freeman argues along similar lines, "another embodiment of the wolf who 'walks by her side'" (96), a harbinger of annihilation that subtly unveils a drive to deride her and bring her to heel. It is not surprising, therefore, that when at the end of the novel he steps through the unfastened door of Sasha's room, he remarkably appears to gaze at her with disdain: "He stands there, looking down at me. Not sure of himself, his mean eyes flickering" (*Good Morning* 159).

Even though the *commis* seems to be scrutinising his prey before seizing her, it can be noted that, in consonance with this character's puzzling demeanour throughout, the description of his countenance as he sneaks into Sasha's shelter is ambivalent. While at first his position as dominant observer may entail perpetration, both the unsteadiness of his gaze and his speechlessness—"Thank God, he doesn't say anything" (159), Sasha ponders—makes room for a slightly different reading of this character. It is true that, insecure though he may be, for Sasha he is still a spectral reminder of the unremitting return of trauma. This is hinted at by her impression that, while looking at the *commis*, she is pierced by a feeling of hatred, in yet another

remark that points to this novel's status as a testimonial narrative: "I look straight into his eyes and despise another poor devil of a human being for the last time" (159). However, Simpson draws on the meaning of the shorthand noun 'the *commis*'—the entrusted—to suggest that Sasha decides of her own accord to give her trust to a man whom she nevertheless knows nothing of (98). The *commis* is, then, left at an ambivalent position that casts hesitancy as for his prospective role: is he a trustworthy benefactor or a disguised villain?

The fuzziness of the scene is also noted by Moran, who contends the following regarding a final encounter that she deems "masochistic": "[Sasha] greets her new lover, midnight, itself a liminal marker between day and night, a witching hour when ghosts are believed to reanimate and walk" (*Virginia Woolf* 146). She takes the initiative to entrust this enigmatic figure and sleep with him—"Then I put my arms round him and pull him down on to the bed" (*Good Morning* 159), and yet within the liminal halo surrounding this scene she is closer to death than to life. The inchoate working through suggested by her brave look and by her impending narration is overridden by a pervasive acting out epitomised by her submission to another man. She has left any hope for a restorative renewal, as she has realised that she will perpetually lead the life of the interwar *déclassée*, and this appears to lay bare that her final affirmation is more likely to imply an unwilling acceptance of a midnight rather than a heartfelt wish for a morning.

Concluding Remarks

Rhys's plunge into the dreary existence of her heroines discloses that their subordinate position in patriarchy is part and parcel of their suffering, and that these women's ensuing vulnerability is sharpened by their lack of money. The compulsion to overcome their destituteness permeates the ruminations of Rhysian *déclassées*, for whom the insidious oppression of living in a system neglectful of non-affluent women means further alienation and anxiety. Except for the menial

jobs as chorus girls, mannequins or receptionists which they never hold down, the protagonists of Rhys's modernist novels are left at the mercy of well-off benefactors bent on offering them patronage. Yet, under the guise of altruistic care there lies a tendency to take advantage of these women's helplessness and turn their generosity into a barter which is regarded by some of the male characters as a 'game', but which gradually evolves into microaggressions that lie at the core of the heroines' traumas, whether being sex-related or having to do with the fear of being abandoned.

On some occasions, the encounters of these needy women with their alleged knights in shining armour are deliberately sought, as is the case with Julia's stalking of Mr Mackenzie and young Sasha's visit to Mr Lawson. The agency they display as they look for their male benefactors, which often takes the shape of streetwalking, is more hazardous than helpful, as it initiates or resumes a cycle of dependency that enhances their submissiveness at the same time as it makes their psychological state prone to further devastation. At other times, their initial contact with their alleged protectors is fortuitous, as happens when Anna comes across Walter at Southsea or else in the opening scene of *Quartet*, where Marya runs into the female painter—Miss De Solla—who would later introduce her to Mr Heidler. Accidental though they may seem, the latter encounters are perfectly consistent with the Rhysian women's fate, which condemns her to rely on these symbolic ports in the daily storm of economic scarcity and displacement. As laid bare in the analysis of the novels, the bond they seek to forge with their benefactors is not merely based on money matters, but also takes on an affective dimension as the *déclassées* cling on to their male acquaintances for emotional shelter: they are expected to protect these solitary wanderers from a judgemental urban society that constantly threatens to condemn them as insignificant, infantile, undesirable, or even a *grue*.

The desperate hunt for emotional security leads Rhysian protagonists to feel genuine love for their partners. Nevertheless, such a feeling proves ultimately unrequited, even if sometimes

the male benefactor shows tenderness towards them or even goes as far as to express his love for his *protégée*, as happens with Mr Heidler. In point of fact, except for certain characters—notably the ex-lovers Mackenzie and Neil Jones—who mechanically satisfy the protagonists' demands without further contributing to their humiliation, the majority of these male lovers manipulate their mistresses until they dispose of them, thus relocating the victim in an alienating environment. This appears to be the case with noxious relations such as Marya's affair with Heidler, the one between Anna and Walter and, to a lesser extent, Sasha's life with Enno and Julia's distorted romance with Mackenzie. Both the course of these liaisons and their outcome comprise a number of threatening events—whether cumulative or stand-alone—that lead up to or magnify the heroines' gender-related traumas. Most of them are microaggressions that go in consonance with the insidious experiences of derision, neglect and humiliation discussed in the chapter on metropolitan alienation. Among these growingly debilitating happenings, attention has been drawn to the succession of sexual encounters that seem to heighten the debasement of a *déclassée* who has been turned into a commodity, namely Heidler's visits to Marya's hotel room, Walter's abrupt approaches to the inexperienced Anna or the Creole's dates with Carl. In other cases, the testimonies tackle abrupt and overwhelming events that, as such, produce a deep chasm in the victim's psyche. Most of these shattering experiences are sudden desertions such as Walter's and Enno's, and yet there is a single event whose devastating effect far exceeds that of these abandonments, which is Anna's abortion after slipping into the world of amateur prostitution, itself a result of being forsaken in an unsafe atmosphere for a disoriented interwar *déclassée*.

Rhys's modernist novels depict with varying degrees of thoroughness the fragmentation of her *déclassée* protagonists' psyche, and such an illuminating insight is enhanced by the array of instances in which their internal focalisation filters essential information about their mental state and by the narrative agency granted to Anna and Sasha. The visibility given to their post-

traumatic state can be said to counterbalance their lovers' general neglect of their suffering, which is in keeping with the depreciation of their liminal identities underscored in the previous chapter. It appears that Rhysian women may only be attended to whenever their male companions feel like benefiting from them. In so doing, these representatives of the patriarchal Western system perform their narcissistic exertion of power while obliterating any sign of agency or hope on the part of their disposable mistresses, who accordingly grow listless and defeated. By the end of a journey of degradation that threatens to be repeated all over again, all four heroines showcase some type of paralysis, be it the motionlessness of Marya and the lying position of Anna in the clinic in the dark or their ambiguous position at the crossroads between an incipient activity and the iteration of inertia. Potentially to urge a way out of such persistent resignation, Rhys gives vent to a poignant representation of gender-based trauma that is greatly based on her experience as a destitute and often forsaken woman in unwelcoming urban spaces during the interwar period. Her revisitation of vicissitudes such as her love relationship with Lancelot and the 'affaire Ford' enables her to both understand and confront events that were by nature ungraspable as they occurred. The endeavour to turn these disturbing circumstances into a tangible testimony is, as contended throughout this study, not only a token of resilience in the aftermath of trauma; it is also an attempt to give both agency and visibility to voices that had been muffled by the neglectful patriarchal society of the time, and ultimately hint at the collective dimension of the *déclassée* autobiographical subject's ordeal.

One of the key factors that allow Rhys to make her testimony representative is, in line with Gilmore's postulates, her devising of a framework that allows for an apt representation of trauma and its impenetrable facet. The apparently fictional nature of crucial scenes such as the initial meetings of Marya and Anna with their malefactors or the incident at Mr Lawson's—as well as the heroines' visions and dissociations after being suddenly kissed for the first time or amid an abortion—lays bare that Rhys is playing with the autobiographical limit of truthfulness

for that purpose. As she revisits trauma-related topics that bind all four heroines together, not only does the author get a good grasp of previously inscrutable concerns, but gives them a significance that goes beyond an individual, event-based experience of trauma. The pain of the Rhysian *déclassée* to which Rhys's limit-cases attest can be read alongside the little stories of debased women whom the keen gaze of the protagonists-as-eyewitnesses brings to the fore. Moreover, as they recurrently tackle questions such as the fear of rejection or the physical and emotional numbness in the face of the belittling oppressor, the testimonies of women perused in this chapter can be read alongside the trials of displacement, uprooting and insidious marginalisation of the unbelonging heroine shaped by Rhys's cultural identity. The dialogue between these relatable experiences of trauma rests on the empathetic understanding between helpless individuals and social groups, and such a driving force is the cornerstone of this dissertation's next and final chapter.

The culminating section of this study of Rhys's modernist novels as limit-case narratives addresses the question of the 'underdog', a broad category that encompasses both of the open-to-redefinition communities explored in Chapters 2 and 3 and other defenceless and to a great degree uncared-for subjects whose life triggers the empathetic response of both the author and her heroines. It is in these characters—some of them more prominent and others simply sketched as an undefined mass of helpless people—where the focus of this chapter falls. As the analysis below sets out to enhance, Rhys's representation and often explicit discussion of the underdog is crucial for these limit-cases' effective move from the unrepresentability of trauma to the representativeness of testimony, thus proving crucial for a redefinition of Rhys's autobiographical writing that brings to centre stage its intersubjective and ethical implications.

4. THE CASE OF THE UNDERDOG: RELATABILITY AND REPRESENTATIVENESS IN RHYS'S MODERNIST LIMIT-CASES

This dissertation's final chapter deals with Rhys's depiction of what Ford Madox Ford denominated "the case of the underdog" (24) in his introduction to *The Left Bank*. Ford's critical acknowledgement of her penchant for bringing to centre stage the collective ordeal of social outcasts seems to focus on the potential emotive response of her readers in the light of this topic. Indeed, he speaks of the Anglo-Caribbean writer's "passion" (24) for making heard the case of these social outcasts in her work. While the centrality of the noun *passion* might convey Ford's judgement of her sociological survey as excessive (Thomas, *Modernist Bearings* 6), Rhys's attention to the underdog responds to an urgency to position them as deeply-layered human beings. Such a heartfelt dedication contrasts with the stance of mainstream society, to which Ford belonged, who would offhandedly classify this mass of negligible people using vague labels such as that of the 'underdog'. Along similar lines as Rhys, this chapter sets out to do justice to the complexity of this constellation of social outcasts by stressing their pivotal role in her project to integrate her traumatic experience while making it both palpable and representative. Before explaining the process whereby Rhys forged her empathetic understanding of the plight of this substantial set of people, it seems necessary to briefly unpack the label of the 'underdog' to better understand what specific type of characters are perused in what follows.

Critical studies on Rhys generally fail to give a satisfactory definition of the 'underdog', and this is not surprising given that underdogs do not conform a distinct social group. What gives a sense of unity to this conglomerate of people is that they are pushed to the margins of society, hence remaining virtually invisible to the body of metropolitan society. In the socio-historical context that Rhys's modernist novels address, such figures could be tentatively

conceptualised drawing on Octavio González’s statement on Rhys’s women as an example of the underdog: “[They] are marginalized by intersecting strata of national, racial, economic, and gender hierarchies governing the social world of early twentieth-century London, Paris, and other cosmopolitan metropolises” (125). For most of her life, Rhys identified with these unbelonging people who were insidiously crushed by an interwar society with a clearly defined hierarchical order. As Shari Benstock puts it, she lived “outside the bounds of society” (448), and it is allegedly due to her peripheral position and her exposition to mockery—both as an adult and as a child—that she took a dim view of groups. In a 1958 letter to her daughter Maryvonne Moerman, she alluded to her dislike of groups as she reacted to the news that her granddaughter had made some friends in England:³⁹ “Yes I think groups of children can be horrible. So can all groups. I hate them and fear them like I hated termites [sic] nests at home” (*Letters* 155). It appears that the only assemblage of people for whom she felt some sympathy was one that, by nature, was loosely grouped, namely the collective ‘underdog’.

In this dissertation, the indeterminate category of the ‘underdog’ retains its broad scope as well as its liminality, therefore referring to those individuals and communities—especially the ones living in metropolitan centres—that endure a miserable existence characterised by economic and emotional helplessness. They are people who, but for the attentiveness and compassion of critical observers such as Rhys, would remain invisible and unwanted for life. They are usually loners whose regular disengagement from society betrays a deep alienation that, as is the case with the two social groups analysed before in the dissertation, points to trauma. The discussion in this chapter is both an extension and a culmination of the dialogue between individual and collective experiences of trauma initiated in the previous chapters. The specific underdog characters foregrounded in what follows may or may not fall into the flexible

³⁹ As Christopher GoGwilt explains in his chapter “Rhys and Indonesia”, the Moermans were advised to leave Indonesia in 1957 due to the political instability of the country and, significantly, because of a confidential report written by Maryvonne’s husband on the corruption of the shipping company he had worked for (89).

social groups reviewed so far, but this chapter grants them a space where they are singled out as individuals. This approach is significantly different from what has been done earlier in the study, where the representativeness of the testimony has been identified in relation to epiphany-like passages where the heroine realises that her ordeal is analogous to that of ill-defined groups of outcasts who are not given a name or a story. In this case, the insight into the experience of the underdog focuses on fleshed-out characters—most of whom are well recognised by Rhys’s protagonists—comprising women on a shoestring budget that do not feel the compulsion to go and seek a male companion, neighbours whose decadence reflects the apex of their degradation, or non-Caribbean immigrant men that scrape a living by selling their artworks or kindly asking Rhysian women for money. The representation of their adversity evinces both the author’s and her protagonists’ empathy for these figures, which manifests the collective outreach of Rhys’s limit-cases.

Rhys’s solidarity with underprivileged social strata dates as far back as her contact with the black community in Dominica (Staley 5). As a child, she knew little of the hardships former Dominican slaves had undergone, and still she was vexed at the lack of opportunities they had in comparison with the privileged white population of the island. In his 1984 memoir *Difficult Women*, David Plante reproduces the words of Rhys when recalling her inceptive social injustice consciousness as a child: “When I was a little girl I was always saying, ‘That’s not fair, that’s not fair’, and I was known as socialist Gwen. I was on the side of the Negroes, the workers” (50). The nickname her family coined for her was more derisive than encouraging, and apparently this circumstance further kindled a spirit of rebellion that gave rise to an empathy for the outcasts which would accompany her for life. In *The Blue Hour*, Lilian Pizzichini speculates on the far-reaching extent of little Ella Gwendoline Rees’s appraisal of inequality: “She was possessed with a tremendous feeling of injustice that would leave her with a bitter mistrust of the world and was uncannily sensitive to the subtleties of social distinctions”

(31). Rhys's concern about the precarity of those people pushed to the margins of society on the basis of gender, class or health was refined by her daily confrontation with the uncouth metropole. It is interesting to compare her in-depth examination of the angst of the underprivileged as a more mature writer and *déclassée* living in Europe with the genuine though somewhat hasty annoyance of 'socialist Gwen'. By way of illustration, in a passage from "Down Along", an unpublished autobiographical sketch of her childhood in the West Indies, she runs into a needy woman:

Once, when I was riding along that road, a woman with yaws stopped me and begged for money. Her legs were swollen and spotted with hideous white spots. Her nose and mouth were eaten away; it seemed as if she were laughing at me. I was frightened but I was pitiless, like all children. I took no notice of her, and when I passed over the bridge and saw cool, clear running water, I forgot her. But now, years afterwards, there she is. . . .

(2)

Her inattention appears to emerge from a lack of experience that contrasts with the cognisance of the grown-up writer, whose standpoint can be discerned at the end of the paragraph. The spectre of that neglected woman heaves into sight as if she were a ghost reminding her of the precarity and abandonment which she has long been going through.

Rhys's first-hand experience of exclusion, so intimately linked to that of many of her characters, both leading and minor, seems to have played a central role in her development of what Judith Kegan Gardiner deems her main theme and organising principle: the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and how the literary endeavour to make a case for the social inclusion of the underdog may lead to moral empathy (*The Politics* 19). Though being highly mistrustful of people in general, Rhys did confess to her sensitivity towards the plight of the miserable. It can be noted in *Smile Please*—and, more concretely, in the section entitled "Black/White"—

that her approach to her empathetic bond with the unfortunate is both cursory and cautious, presumably influenced by her mixed feelings about Dominican blacks and by the naïve and daydreaming nature of a child from whose perspective she is reconstructing her life in the West Indies. Nevertheless, as she grew seasoned and battered, the adult Rhys adopted a more aloof yet straight-to-the-fact voice that openly expressed concern about the daily hardship of social groups whose suffering was largely ignored, and this can be seen in a segment of her unfinished autobiography that, as Elaine Savory explains, was added by editor Diana Athill in the 1979 edition (*Jean Rhys* 115).

The appended section “From a Diary: At the Ropemaker’s Arms” contains a fragment from a diary that she wrote in the 1940s, while she was living above a pub in Maidstone. After an initial paragraph where she makes it clear that the text will be written ceaselessly and with no revision, Rhys imagines her own trial. Embedded within the fragmented diary, “The Trial of Jean Rhys” is a meditative piece where she goes over a series of questions and answers that touch on both her relationship to humankind and her writing process. At the beginning of the proceeding, she replies that she believes in human love, but not in humanity (*Smile Please* 161). The explanation she provides can be deemed unsatisfactory: she justifies her belief in human love by saying that “sometimes human beings can be more than themselves”, but she is unable to elaborate on this argument (161). As a matter of fact, she acknowledges: “I do not know ‘everyone’. I only know myself” (161). Later in the “The Trial of Jean Rhys”, however, the implications that her writing is self-centred are dismantled:

DEFENCE. *Did you in your youth have a great love and pity for others?*

Yes, I think so.

Especially for the poor and the unfortunate?

Yes.

Were you able to show this?

I think I could not always. I was very clumsy. No one told me. (162)

The italicised questions of the fictional interrogator trigger Rhys's admission of solidarity with others, which rests on affective empathy. Still, in her day-to-day interactions she was unable to express such a feeling without stuttering. The failure to convey her emotions in public ties in with her anxiety at desperately trying to potentially please her derisive addressees, and in this sense it can be read as a product of her cumulative exposure to rejection, as Francis Wyndham notes in his introduction to her letters: "Jean, who was a loving and generous person, made up her mind to be selfish and cold. But of course this willed transformation was never complete. . . . The generosity and the capacity for love remained, but were denied complete freedom of expression" (11).

Given her uneasiness when it came to plainly showing solidarity, Rhys found in literature a suitable medium for that enterprise. As the brooding defendant affirms towards the end of the trial, she has a compulsion to make her feelings substantial, which has remarkably been stressed by Erica Johnson and Patricia Moran in their introduction to the edited volume *Jean Rhys: Twenty-First Century Approaches*: "Uniquely affective, her work evokes powerful feelings, gripping moods, emotions that are difficult to sort out, classify, account for" (8). In "The Trial", Rhys eventually reveals that it is through writing that she will quench her crave to express her emotions:

The trouble is I have plenty to say. Not only that but I am bound to say it.

Bound?

I must.

Why? Why? Why?

I must write. If I stop writing my life will have been an abject failure. It is that already to other people. But it could be an abject failure to myself. I will not have earned death.

(Smile Please 163)

These significant lines lay bare that Rhys's ceaseless endeavour to write responded not only to the drive to understand some past traumas and potentially work them through, but also to a call for a personal redemption that might be achieved by rescuing from oblivion underprivileged people that were routinely being overlooked. The juxtaposition of the naked portrayal of human wretchedness and the passion for advocating empathy for the underdog is, according to Helen Carr, one of the triumphs of Rhys's work (74), to which should be added that this opposition between a crude representation of reality and the encouragement of moral empathy is evidence that her literature successfully destabilises any limits that might set apart apparently opposing concerns, both thematically and formally.

Having underscored its potential to test boundaries, Rhys's survey of the underdog's life seems particularly useful for the analysis of her modernist novels through the limit-case focus. Just as the author's daily debasement in the interwar metropole honed her understanding of her peers' plight, so her heroines develop a keenness to critically observe and identify with people who seem to endure comparable hardships. Whether they are close acquaintances or strangers, these outcasts' suffering gives both Rhys and her women a deeper awareness of their personal traumas, which are in the process of being retrieved and gradually articulated as a testimony. In this context, it is out of place to gauge the degree of verisimilitude that the underdog's stories present: they are subjected to the distortion of a focaliser who just knows a smattering of their plight and, on the few occasions when these characters fleetingly adopt the role of storytellers, the information they provide is shaped by their subjectivity. Moreover, it goes without saying that, in line with the heroines' experiences analysed in the previous chapter, not all the helpless people whom the Rhysian protagonists run into or reminisce about are based on flesh-and-bone

individuals. What seems more pertinent is to explore how the autobiographical writer addressed the so-called ‘case of the underdog’ to better understand some past traumas—more remarkably those of an insidious nature—and, once she managed to make them representable, to establish her narratives as testimonies that go far beyond the individual experience of trauma.

Considering the dialogic nature of Rhys’s modernist testimonies of underdog experience, it should be foregrounded that, oftentimes, the heroines’ perception of other characters’ anguish intensifies their self-awareness. This correspondence is notably conspicuous in *Quartet*, where its protagonist’s visits to the prison in which her husband serves his sentence remind her of her vulnerability while having a beneficial effect on her sensitivity toward the underprivileged at large. The ensuing analysis of this novel is therefore inductive, starting with the assessment of Stephan’s status and his degradation as a prisoner and followed by the conclusions that Marya draws as regards the understanding of both other peers and herself. Such a procedure will also be followed in the discussion of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, in which Julia’s attachment to Mr Horsfield is nevertheless nowhere nearly as edifying as that of the previous leading character, as she has already adopted an indifferent attitude that seems to curtail a strong bond with other people’s suffering. As for the last two novels, its analysis will reverse the procedure adopted in the former sections, since the quantity and variety of underdog individuals brought to centre stage by their autodiegetic narrators is far wider than in the two previous narratives. Thus, an introductory discussion of the two heroines’ self-awareness will precede the lengthier examination of the dialogue between their traumas and those of the figures to whom they give salience in their testimonies.

4.1. The Marriage of Metaphorical and Literal Incarceration: The Prison as the Microcosm of Underdog Life in *Quartet*

One year after the publication of *The Left Bank*, Rhys's debut as a novelist enhanced the ghastly nature of her depiction of underdog life. In a crude *roman à clef* that soon gained a reputation for being bleak and unattractive (Dell'Amico 97), she exposed to public scrutiny the precarity defining the last period of her marriage to Jean Lenglet. In this version of the 'affaire Ford', it is the exhausting condition of living on the edge that contributed to the husband's imprisonment and eventually leads up to Marya Zelli's degrading love triangle with the Heidlers. It appears out of the question to speculate on whether the romance between Rhys and her literary patron would have blossomed if Lenglet had not been arrested and jailed in December 1924, as she had made the acquaintance of Ford three months before and, as Miranda Seymour observes, it is plausible that by the end of autumn their relationship was more than simply spiritual (100). Such artful experimentation with the limit of truthfulness in autobiography, nevertheless, is crucial for her purpose to divulge the vicissitudes of an excruciating life that condemns the underdog to insidious abasement. By foregrounding Stephan's arrest as the event that precipitates Marya's yielding to Mr Heidler's game, Rhys warns about the pitfalls of an unfair system that buttresses the helplessness of the underdog. At the same time, the deviations from the novel's focal point—namely the extramarital affair—serve Rhys to cast light on not merely the emotional attachment between the Zellis; she brings to the fore the aggravation of Stephan's psychological turmoil and the reasons behind his post-traumatic stress, which leads to a better understanding of the less thoroughly characterised Enno in *Good Morning, Midnight*.

In addition to the relationship with Ford Madox Ford and Stella Bowen, *Quartet* revisits the question of living with a spouse on whom the other member of the couple has placed their trust to lead a happy existence, only to be eventually dragged down as the other person sinks into despair. The commitment of one's energies to an underdog partner is what defines the

bond between Stephan and Marya, both of whom direly attempt to care for each other in different ways. The jobless wife sets her heart on demonstrating tenderness for a husband who, despite his surging emotional drainage, had always been, in the narrator's words, "a very gentle and expert lover" (*Quartet* 20). The breadwinner, for his part, seems to earn his life as a go-between that helps foreign collectors to communicate with the French-speaking sellers, and goes as far as to disappear for days to get enough money for the couple to stay afloat. Yet, it is suggested by his tendency to lie and keep secrets that he is involved in confidential affairs, thus putting himself on the line for the sake of survival. Stephan's heedlessness is in consonance with that of Lenglet, an unorthodox man of whom all of Rhys's acquaintances disapproved, except for a Belgian refugee called Camille, a fellow underdog whom she considered her first real friend during the interval between her breakup with Lancelot and her departure to The Hague (Angier 97). What drew Rhys to Lenglet was, as Pizzichini puts it, that "[h]is life hitherto had been a more successful, though equally reckless, version of hers" (143). He was the absent-minded and troublemaking son of a family he fled at seventeen, when he ran away to Paris and went headfirst into the adversities of living by his wits, far from the warmth of home (Angier 103–104). In a similar way, in the section where Stephan's frame of mind is fleshed out, it is disclosed through Marya's focalisation that she "told herself that this stranger and alien was probably a bad lot", and yet "[s]he felt strangely peaceful when she was with him, as if life were not such an extraordinary muddle after all" (*Quartet* 16).

The metropolitan experiences of Rhys and Lenglet were by no means leisurely, and such a parallel is taken as the starting point of the depiction of Marya's sensitivity towards Stephan. In the first relatively lengthy account of the marriage's dynamics, the narrator explains why Marya does not enquire after her husband's business: "For she was reckless, lazy, a vagabond by nature, and for the first time in her life she was very near to be happy" (14). It seems patent that Stephan is the cornerstone of her emotional stability, even more so as he is one of the few

people that can understand her, and vice versa. Excluded as they are from the social circles of the Left Bank, they have no one but themselves to offer comfort when they get to their grey, unassuming abode: “She mounted five flights of steep, uncarpeted stairs, felt her way along an unlighted passage, flung her bedroom open and embraced her husband violently. He looked so thin after the well-fed Heidlars” (13–14). While it has been observed that it is not until Chapter Two that Stephan’s disposition is elaborated on (Le Gallez 38), this preliminary description is key to introducing a sense of unrest that will eventually evolve into trauma. Besides exposing the poor conditions of a dwelling suitable for the underdog, the textual evidence underlines his sluggish appearance. Not only does he look thin because he is not as privileged as the affluent Heidlars, but his countenance might show preoccupation, since the narrative has previously unveiled that he is “extremely inconsistent” (*Quartet* 10). His lack of composure, alongside a proneness to mendacity described as lying “impatiently and *absent-mindedly*” (14, my emphasis), suggests that his distress is the product of a lifestyle which is forcing him to live on the edge of what the narrator through Marya’s eyes refers to as “catastrophe” (20).

The presaged catastrophe comes true when Stephan is arrested, which certainly does not come like a bolt from the blue for Marya: “Something in her brain was shrieking triumphantly: ‘There you are! I knew it! I told you so!’” (22). Her shriek is as unmuffled as the questions she has long ceased to ask her reticent husband on a business that has turned out to be selling stolen pictures. As for Rhys’s conceivable reaction to this event, she must have foreseen that Lenglet was likely to be found and taken into custody sooner or later, as she was aware of his dishonest behaviour. By way of illustration, in October 1921, they had to leave Vienna in a haste since he had lost some money of the Interallied Commission, for whom he had worked as a secretary (Angier 114, 120; Pizzichini 160). It is due to his illegitimate transactions, which amounted to 23,421 francs (Angier 138), that he was sentenced to eight months in prison. It is also necessary to point out that he was charged with illegal entry into France, as he lacked a valid passport

(Seymour 76). The administrative obstacles encountered by Lenglet, a Dutch by birth, portend that Stephan's nationality may be a delicate issue despite having lived in Paris for more than a decade. Already on the opening pages of the novel, Marya corrects Miss De Solla when she takes it for granted that her husband is French. After being informed by her wandering acquaintance that Stephan is Polish, De Solla ponders: "Is she really married to the Zelli man, I wonder? She's a decorative little person—decorative but strangely pathetic" (*Quartet* 8). Her conclusions after knowing that her interlocutor is married to Mr Zelli are by no means hopeful. By using the adjective *decorative*, she might be implying that Marya is an insignificant woman who has little to offer. Far from inciting progress, her marriage is bound to do nothing but strengthen a marked pity which catches her observer's attention.

While Stephan is not disdained on the basis of ethnicity either here or in the rest of the story, his cultural identity seems to push him further out of the safe environment of mainstream society. When Marya pays him a visit at the Santé prison, shortly before he is moved to Fresnes, he gives an offhanded account of his trial that nevertheless hints at how his multilingualism casts suspicion on his alleged misconduct rather than uphold his innocence: "My lawyer didn't know his *métier*. Instead of defending me he told the court that I knew six languages. A stupid affair in Brussels was referred to. This did me in quite. . . ." (38). Read against Rhys's biography, the incident in Belgium has to do with the bridegroom's plan to have the funds for both his wife and him to reach Paris.⁴⁰ It appears that the affair would not have been broached if the solicitor had not mentioned a polyglotism that, far from being an indicator of a fruitful contact between cultures, becomes incriminatory evidence (Artt 91). He is misunderstood on account of his many-sided identity, and in that respect his situation bears resemblance to Marya's when her nationality is held to be suspicious by H.J. Heidler, himself a representative

⁴⁰ Angier recounts that, in the months following their marriage, Rhys and Lenglet stayed in Amsterdam and Brussels to raise money before heading for Paris, and that Jean lacked a passport to move freely around post-WWI Europe (106).

of those expatriates who are well-established into mainstream society because they are not underdog people. Contrary to the Heidlrs, the Zellis are characterised, as Carol Dell'Amico posits, as “national/ethnic hybrids, characters most notable for their lack of identity as such . . . , and (under) classed as a unit” (98). Having been crushed by the upper echelons of society, the Pole with “no friends and very few acquaintances” (*Quartet* 18) will have no option but to seek help from people who are likewise nameless and deprived. Significantly, this grows discernible when, upon being released from the Fresnes prison and urged to leave France,⁴¹ he considers resorting to a man described as “a Jew, a friend of his father’s” (106) that may help him in Amsterdam. While no further information is given about this associate, the reference to his identity might be read as evocative of the Wandering Jew. Stephan is in many ways related to this mythical figure, as he is an ill-fated man that, on being expelled, is condemned to leading a peripatetic life and never claiming to a feeling of home. The insidious tribulation of Stephan, which entails a pain of displacement, suggests an intricate link to the trauma of alienation undergone by Rhys and her heroines, and the connection is thereby evidence of how her representation of underdog life reveals the representativeness of her limit-cases.

Stephan’s experience of trauma grows palpable as of his incarceration. The intermittent vignettes depicting Marya’s visits to the prisons of La Santé and Fresnes show that his everyday ordeal as a prisoner sears into his psyche, which is accordingly affected by an insidious form of trauma. The snapshot of his brief stay in the former jail cell registers without sentimentality the after-effect of his being sentenced: “He was unshaven and collarless. He sat huddled up on the wooden seat, staring at her with sunken, reddened eyes. ‘I’m not going to be able to stand it,’ he said in a small voice—a little boy’s voice. ‘I can’t. I can’t’” (36). The crude description of what Marya sees when entering the cubicle succeeds in bringing to light the sense of shock

⁴¹ In his biographical study *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, Max Saunders notes that, by the time Lenglet was freed, he literally “would have been told to leave the country at once” (297). Similarly, Miranda Seymour explains that, on 16 September 1926, “Lenglet was released only when he promised to leave France for ever” (111).

and confusion inherent to the immediate reaction to trauma. He seems to have been crying and his voice has turned into a wobbly mumble. However, what gains prominence as an indicator of the first stages of post-traumatic stress is his marked disavowal at the end of the passage, which is a natural concomitant of his exposure to an event that lies beyond his understanding. Unable to dwell on what has just dawned on him, Stephan seems to hug himself to avoid further damage. In a way, he temporarily detaches himself from the harmful present by melancholically thinking about his visiting wife: “I have such a cafard when I think of you, Mado” (36). The affective bond between the two seems as strong as ever, since Marya feels “desperate with the longing to comfort him” and manifests twice that she loves him (37), but at the same time she feels remote from a listless man that, though being a victim as she is, finds himself at the apex of helplessness: “But hopelessly, for she felt that he was withdrawn from her, enclosed in the circle of his own pain, unreachable” (37).

The combination of pain and love that Marya feels when witnessing the affliction of her husband is retaken the second time he calls on Stephan, now held at Fresnes: “Stephan appeared with a piece of coarse sacking over his head. He was like some bright-eyed animal, staring at her, and she sat in an embarrassed silence, wondering how she could ever have thought that he would be able to talk things over with her or give her advice” (45). The use of animal imagery to represent both the oppression endured by Rhysian underdogs and their emotional distress is, as Savory expounds, “the first linked chain of signifiers to be used in a major Rhys text” (*Jean Rhys* 53). The analogy between the prisoner and the instinctual creature strengthens his link to Marya, who is often described as a caged and lost animal when she broods on her metaphorical imprisonment as a doomed woman. In the next and last sketch of Marya’s visits to Fresnes, Stephan’s hardened face has given way to a quickly deteriorating guise that exposes the impact of insidious trauma: “The prison was familiar, but it seemed to her that Stephan was a stranger: dark-bearded, shaven-headed, very thin, very bright-eyed” (*Quartet* 85). The cumulative effect

of being stranded for months instigates a sense of uncanniness that troubles Marya, all the more so as she lets him know that her stay at the Heidlers' studio has come to an end. He bursts into anger thereafter and his anxiety is enhanced in the narrative through the concatenation of questions that, due to the Zellis' fate as underdogs, are unlikely to be successfully answered: "*Mais, tu es folle, Mado*. What do you want to be free for? Have you got a job? What are you going to do now? Really you must be mad to do a thing like that" (85, emphasis in the original). Stephan's anger stems from his awareness of the household's economic vulnerability, as he acknowledges later on in a passage whose fragmented syntax evokes his post-traumatic stress: "I've no money. I'll have to leave France. You have friends and you lose them. You're not clever. But I don't mean to quarrel. I'm going off my head here. You're not vexed?" (85).

While in prison, Marya manages to hide from Stephan her displeasure with the Heidlers' game, but, after being released, the bottled-up worries of both are gradually disclosed, in a move towards bluntness that culminates in the novel's excessive denouement. Stephan's countenance on his return to Montparnasse is no different from his notably paltry aspect in jail, and matches Lenglet's appearance as what Seymour designates "a ghost of his former charming self" (106). What Marya finds as she enters the hotel room where he is waiting for her is a quivering man looking "like a frail and shrunken apostle" (103). As Savory notes, Stephan's characterisation as an apostle may point at his wife's idealisation of him (*Cambridge Introduction* 36). Marya's ennoblement of Stephan may hint at her compassion for him after his imprisonment, which is perceived as an experience that "had broken him up" (*Quartet* 106) and that has completely changed him: "I'm not myself any more" (132). His affirmation that this traumatic experience has transformed him ties in with Marya's aforementioned perception of the prisoner as an unfamiliar figure. By the same token, the husband notices that she has gone through a change for the worse: "You don't look well, Mado. You look—I don't know; you're changed" (104). The empathy between these representative underdog characters is still

strong, and Marya is possessed by “an irrational feeling of security and happiness” (104) when by Stephan’s side. However, she is dismayed at being unable to appease her husband’s angst and, at the same time, by the cluster of traumas with which she is simultaneously coming to terms: from alienation as an underdog woman to humiliation at being played with and being treated like a commodity by Mr Heidler.

When Stephan is reunited with Marya, she tells him about the affair. Her helplessness is enhanced by her statement before revealing the secret: “I wanted to beg you to be good to me, to be kind to me. Because I’m so unhappy that I think I’m going to die of it. My heart is broken. Something in me is broken. I feel . . . I don’t know . . . Help me!” (141). More than a proof of her traumatic disorientation, Marya’s words are a cry for help from the only person who might understand her, and this is further evidence of the empathy-based link between these underdog characters. On knowing about the affair, however, Stephan is invaded by a frenzy that points to humiliation and that manifests itself in his threat to hurt and even kill H.J. Heidler, together with a motivation to demean Marya: “You poor thing! You have no blood, you. You were born to be made a fool of” (142). His curt declaration that she is, drawing on De Solla’s ruminations, a ‘decorative’ and negligible woman is a proof of his abashment at having been betrayed by a fellow underdog for whom he had risked his integrity, eventually to be arrested and put behind bars. No biographical evidence can be found to contrast Stephan’s reaction with that of Lenglet, though it is pointed out that the latter’s knowledge of the infidelity fuelled his hatred of Ford, whom he blamed for having ruined his marriage (Seymour 116), and led to his unwillingness to forgive Rhys (Angier 171). In the ending of the novel, Rhys reimagines the response of the fooled husband and revisits some current themes inherent to underdog experience, such as abandonment, deceit, or the fall into despair after being shamed. It seems plausible that Stephan goes berserk since, as Angier observes in relation to Lenglet, he needed the care of his

unconditional partner, and she eventually played the role as a doomed wife and failed him (172).

Stephan shakes Marya so violently that she falls on the ground and hits her head. As she falls unconscious, the aggressor hastily leaves the room and eventually comes across Mademoiselle Chardin, a female friend of one of his fellow inmates at the Santé prison, Monsieur Bernadet. Earlier in the novel, Stephan makes it clear during a conversation with Marya that Chardin is a *déclassée* whom Bernadet met at the Moulin Rouge and who had “nowhere to go, nowhere to sleep” (134). In the heat of the moment, as he bumps into his female acquaintance in the street, his judgement seems tainted with the legacy of Marya’s infidelity: “*Encore une grue*” (*Quartet* 144), the Pole ponders after Chardin begs him to take her with him and talk things over in a hotel she knows. Both Stephan’s inference that she is a prostitute and the reported feeling that “women seemed to him loathsome, horrible” (144) stem from the disorientation provoked by Marya’s shocking revelation, which adds to his cumulative trauma as an underdog and as an ex-prisoner. Significantly, it could also be argued that such an insinuation reveals his fear that he may restart the experience of putting his heart and soul into helping a needy woman who is bound to eventually forsake him. In this regard, Alissa Karl contends that, as the couple are on their way to the hotel, Stephan is being driven to the starting point of another “cycle of desire” that follows a sequence analogous to that of his marriage to Marya, namely a lapse into illegal money-making, betrayal, and violence (38). His fate, like that of Marya and the rest of Rhys’s interwar heroines, seems to be sealed as he unwillingly complies with the craving of a woman whose surname, as Sylvie Maurel points out, is symbolically borrowed from Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin, an eighteenth-century exponent of still-life painting (25).

By the end of the novel, Stephan’s impetuous activity proves unprofitable, since he is set figurately motionless by sitting next to a woman connected with paralysis. As he does so, there

is a revealing moment when the acceptance of his doom seems to be suggested before the action comes to an end. Side by side with his trauma-informed misogyny, there exists a drive to clutch onto his female companion and seek reassurance: “At the same time he longed to lay his head on Mademoiselle Chardin’s shoulder and weep his life away” (144). This final insight into his thoughts corroborates that he is a representative of the underdog. It also highlights an urgency to rely on a similarly helpless person that is to play the role of the sympathetic listener and that simultaneously looks for assistance. The narrative’s open *denouement*, therefore, lays bare the centrality of the ‘case of the underdog’ in Rhys’s debut novel and, importantly enough, how she pays heed to the suffering of not merely the autobiographical subject, but also to that of people outside the heroines’ limited family and social circles.

The glimpse into the helplessness of Mademoiselle Chardin is the exception to the rule, as it is filtered through the perspective of Stephan in the absence of a leading internal focaliser that has lost consciousness after being struck. As evinced by her keen observation of her husband’s deprivation, it is mainly through Marya’s perception that readers can get a deep understanding of the underdog at large. It should not be overlooked, however, that what seems to have whetted her sensitivity is a self-awareness that the narrative’s recurrent immersions in her train of thought manifest. From the acknowledgement that she expected Stephan’s arrest (22) to her fear of being abandoned while she struggles with her husband in the last instance of agency before she loses consciousness (143), she is appreciative of the fact that she occupies the inescapable position of the unfortunate. At the same time, an approach to this novel as a limit-case must acknowledge that her self-recognition as an underdog is refined by the experience of being in close contact with other helpless figures and, more importantly, by the attention that she draws to their suffering. Through Marya’s focalisation, Rhys explores how the interrelation of the particular and the collective appears to bring about a sense of

commonality that hints at the representativeness of the autobiographical subject's testimony and, by the same token, at the author's engagement with the hapless.

The ethical dialogue between the particular and the collective as regards the question of the underdog is encapsulated in Marya's conjugal visits at Fresnes, which make plain that her attentiveness to the miserable ones goes well beyond a narrow focus on her intimate bond with Stephan. As well as being reminded of her vulnerability by the sight of her husband, she is struck by the collective torment that is assumedly undergone by Stephan's inmates. She never gets to see this mass of unnamed barred people, and yet her long-term exposure to the misery of underdog life enables her to fathom their dismal subsistence as she walks along the aisle. Simultaneously, as anticipated above, Marya's apprehension of such dreariness via her keen observation contributes to strengthening her awareness that she too forms part of that dreadful existence. In the account of these weekly journeys, the convergence of her self-consciousness and her compassion towards the underdog takes the form of epiphanic excerpts that precede her admission to Stephan's cubicle. The first of these passages reads as follows:

Then she crossed a cobblestoned courtyard and a dark, dank corridor like the open mouth of a monster swallowed her up. At the extreme end of this corridor a queue of people, mostly women, stood waiting, and as she took her place in the queue she felt a sudden, devastating realization of the essential craziness of existence. She thought again: people are very rum. With all their little arrangements, prisons and drains and things, tucked away where nobody can see. (44)

Though not being explicit about trauma, such textual evidence points to some trauma-related questions that Rhys revisits once and again in her literature, such as alienation, invisibility, or the underprivileged subjects' inability to find meaning in a life characterised by senselessness. In line with the craziness of underdog life, the passage stresses the absurdity defining the female

visitors' symbolic stillness as they mechanically wait to come face to face with an incarcerated loved one who will remind them of their social position, one which metaphorically imprisons them as well.

Marya's revelation as she stands at the end of the queue, surrounded by both other women and a décor that intensify her negative view of life, is a projection of the author's well-informed knowledge of the implications of being an underdog. In "Jean Rhys: A Remembrance", David Plante reproduces her response to his query on the central motivating aims of her life: "I want to go away, I want to do something really wild, really really [sic] wild. What shall I do? I'm a prisoner" (270). The suicidal ideation to which she attests is elaborated on as she explains that she once cut her wrists (271), and yet it seems that, due to its final position in the sentence, the central statement is her acknowledgement that she is a prisoner. This idea is inextricably linked in the quotation to the futility of life, as the old lady sitting on her couch finds no solution but to continue being inactive, in a posture that Plante wittingly describes as "more hunched and twisted than ever, and *locked* in that position" (271, my emphasis). The apathy to which the remembering Rhys resigns herself at the end of the scene, after displaying some signs of acting out, is analogous to that of Marya. Remarkably, when she firstly confesses to H.J. Heidler that she is unwilling to play their particular game anymore, she internally convinces herself that she is "impotent" (*Quartet* 70), and such a feeling is prompted by H.J.'s ruthless assertion that she has lived an "awful life" (70).

The tribulations of underdog life are not alien to Marya, who from the beginning is aware that her sojourn in the metropolis is not a bed of roses. Still, it can be noted that her response to remembering the misery of her existence greatly varies according to who qualifies it. When it is the villainous Heidlers that categorise her life, as can be seen in H.J.'s remark quoted above, she feels belittled because his use of adjectivisation implies contempt, hence reminding her of the insidious trauma to which she is subject as a female outsider. A similar reaction can

be seen when Lois asks her to make her up for a ball and points out that H.J. is an “autocrat” (52). Even though Lois has not blatantly alluded to the precarity of Marya’s life, she somehow hints at the difference in terms of power between the commanding patrons and the helpless *protégée* who must always abide by their requests. Consequently, immediately after, Marya takes her time to muse as she walks along the streets and deliberately turns her attention to a group of strayed cats: “It was a beautiful street. The street of homeless cats, she often thought. She never came into it without seeing several of them, prowling, thin vagabonds, furtive, aloof, but strangely proud. Sympathetic creatures, after all” (52). It is conveyed that she identifies with the cats in that they are as well unwanted streetwalkers that cannot claim to a sense of belonging, lead a bleak existence, and seem to have fallen into apathy. As happens when the heroines brood over their inability to escape their metaphorical imprisonment, Rhys uses animal imagery to highlight the autobiographical subject’s self-identification as an underdog. In this case, however, the image of the cats also takes on a remarkably positive meaning that is informative of the protagonist’s self-awareness. Amid their prevailing apathy, these cats are proud and sympathetic. If they are taken as extensions of Marya, these cats have grown satisfied as they have learnt to accept their existence without condemning it. She may have realised that what brings her closer to them is that she is also an understanding being that may come to terms with her underdog position provided that she assesses it using her own parameters, not those of people at the top of society.

On her second visit to the Fresnes prison, Marya-as-focaliser again scrutinises elements that are well-known for readers, from the suffocating corridor to the queue of women. As with the first visit, such details are narrativised in a paragraph that concludes as follows: “That day it was all arm-in-arm as it were. The drably life of the under-dog” (85). Significantly enough, this key passage ends with a homologous sentence on the type of life evoked by the facilities, which in this case Rhys describes explicitly using the term ‘underdog’ for the first time in her

interwar novels. The excerpt's coda is outstanding for its underlining that Fresnes is a microcosm of underdog life, reminding them of the insidious threat to which they are exposed just for being underprivileged. On a similar note, Gardiner unpacks the symbolism of the prison in connection with the ordeal of the dispossessed by explaining that it represents "the specific repressions with which the top class and sex punish those below them" ("Rhys Recalls Ford" 73). In this regard, the spelling "under-dog" is highly telling as the hyphen contributes to further bridging the gap between the upper classes and those way below them. The "under-dog", of whom both Marya and Rhys are representative members, are positioned radically opposite people like H.J. Heidler, who is cleverly described in his last meeting with Marya as a "top dog" (*Quartet* 137). Once again, animal imagery is used to critically comment on the class-based inequalities that contribute to the underdog's vulnerability and invisibility. Still, it should be noted that there is a contrast between the use of the singular to refer to Mr Heidler and the sense of collectiveness suggested by the phrase "arm-in-arm". This expression is highly telling as it may hint at the mutual support among the underdog inmates, this being an idea that Rhys frequently tackles in her representations of this social group and that enhances their solidity as human beings.

Marya's evaluation of the life that binds her to Stephan or the street cats is, as observed here and throughout the analysis, by no means optimistic. Still, such an exploration can be read in a slightly more favourable light when unmediated by the disavowal of characters such as the Heidlers. In the example analysed in the previous paragraph, her epiphany on the life the prison represents is complemented by two acknowledgements that Fresnes has become familiar to her. Firstly, such familiarity is blurred by an anxiety suggested by the modifier "dreadful" (85), in line with the description of her angst during her first visit: "She waited with cold hands and a beating heart, full of an unreasoning shame at being there at all" (44–45). After the second quoted epiphany, however, her relation to the prison is simply described as "familiar" (85), as

though she had pragmatically accepted what Fresnes represents as part and parcel of being an underdog. Notably, on the last occasion when this setting is mentioned, there is no insight into her interactions with Stephan or her survey of the facilities. Rather, what is foregrounded is the aftereffect of dropping by Fresnes, from where she returns “soothed, comforted, and, because she [Marya] reacted physically so quickly, once more desirable” (97).

The noteworthy relief that Marya feels when returning from the last visit to Fresnes is a deciding moment in the evolution of her self-awareness as an underdog. Her comfort contrasts with both the PTSD symptoms she displayed during her first contact with jail and a shame potentially related to insidious trauma. Her emotional paralysis, very much in keeping with acting out, has given way to an understanding of her existence that is as strong as her concern for the underprivileged. As hinted at above, it is presumably her constant exposure to the reality of underdog life that has granted her a certain resilience and a deeper cognisance of her trauma as a social outcast. The same might apply to Rhys, whose visits to Lenglet at Fresnes are absent from her biographies except for Pizzichini’s, where a revealing comment is made on such a circumstance: “But now, when she visited him she felt compassion for him and all the other prisoners, their wives, their girlfriends and their *grues*—the struggling street prostitutes, the strung-out housewives, the banged-to-rights underdogs” (183). It can be argued, therefore, that the writer’s first-hand experience is the pivotal factor in making heard a story by an underdog and on the underdog that gives these subjects a sharpened awareness of their condition. Although in the case of Marya such cognisance seems to bring her solace, the next heroine to be pored over adopts a more detached stance towards her existence. Julia is slightly older than Marya and, allegedly, more experienced as regards being socially forsaken. This is one of the reasons why she has long assumed an indifference that greatly affects her relations to people, and even to her fellow underdogs.

4.2. Beyond Caricatures and Trauma-Induced Indifference: The Solidity of Underdog Human Beings in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*

The main axis of underdog life in Rhys's second novel is the connection between Julia and Mr Horsfield. As with *Quartet*, Rhys explores the intricacies of the relationship between the female protagonist and a man who does not adhere to the traits of the Rhysian male seducer. Mr Horsfield is neither an affluent benefactor nor a down-and-out streetwalker ready to barge in on Julia. He is, on the contrary, an introspective loner who initially appears to be drawn to Julia out of curiosity. He is impressed by the slap she delivers to Mr Mackenzie, but what significantly astounds him is her expression while hitting her former lover. The emphasis on his focalisation at this point is highly telling, as it foreshadows how his understanding of Julia's feelings evolves into a rapport that strengthens their connection as underdogs. His refined awareness leads him to discard any possibility of her slap being a prank (*After Leaving* 28), and such an observation reflects that he is not part of that audience that could potentially mock the female performer, in this case Julia as she strikes Mr Mackenzie. Horsfield is not a derisive scrutiniser that may aggravate Julia's alienation. Indeed, the narrator clarifies: "He had not stared at them, but he had seen the young woman slapping the man's face" (28). Significantly, the element that allows him to see the scene is the restaurant's mirror. The function of this prop is twofold: firstly, it gives back an image of the characters that is pictured by the narrator as "distorted" (28), and this may point to their psychological turmoil; secondly, as noted by Dell'Amico, it is a "reduplicating" (77) surface, so Rhys might be highlighting it in the course of Horsfield's focalisation to hint at his recognition that Julia is in many ways similar to him.

In the preliminary scene at the restaurant, the looking glass anticipates that the synergies between Mr Horsfield and Julia are central to this testimony of underdog life. Throughout the section entitled "Mr Horsfield", his characterisation stresses some traits and practices that link him to this Rhysian woman. What mainly captivates him about Julia is her loneliness and, more

remarkably, that she is representative of a loosely associated group of solitary people he regards as “a mere caricature of his own” (29). So far, no explicit allusion to the term ‘underdog’ is made, and yet Horsfield’s recognition that Julia is as “lonely” (*After Leaving* 31) as he is points to a commonality of experience informed by alienation and helplessness. Both the sight of his female acquaintance and solitary people in general remind him, as the narrator points out, “too painfully of certain aspects of himself” (31), and the acknowledgement of pain is suggestive of trauma. Interestingly enough, no insight is given into the sources of his metropolitan alienation, the account of his origins being hazy. The ambivalent quality of his story, in keeping with that of Julia, can be read as an effect of the insidious shattering inflicted by life in Paris and London. It is these metropolitan centres that are rendering them burlesque types while the complexity of their stories is similarly eroded.

Horsfield’s story comprises the narrator’s account in the first paragraph of the section and some intrusive thoughts he does not dare to give voice to. The metropolis-induced haziness of this chronicle thwarts a disclosure of his cultural identity or the reasons for his destituteness. Horsfield is merely described as a “dark young man” based in London (27). While it remains unclear whether his darkness has anything to do with ethnicity, it is more convincing to read it as evidence of his status as a “dark horse” (Connors 579) constructed in opposition to the well-off Mackenzie (Frickey 151). Whereas Mackenzie perfectly fits the organised society of which he is representative (*After Leaving* 17), Horsfield, like Julia, is clinging on to self-detachment: “The habit of wanting to be alone had grown upon him rather alarmingly” (27). The only way out of his self-inflicting remoteness is the act of parading. It is highlighted that he has spent an unidentified legacy on travelling around Spain and France (27–28), and such an itinerant life is revealed to have a restorative power that reminds us of a type of agency that is central to Rhys’s modernist cycle: the heroines’ flânerie. In the case of Horsfield, his wanderings are, as explained by the narrator, meant to “cure all his ills and . . . develop the love of life and

humanity” (28) he had run out of, allegedly as a consequence of a cumulative trauma that is not directly tackled in the narrative. His sustained exposure to trauma has turned him into an undecided man that reminds us of the anti-hero of modernist fiction: though being drawn to Julia’s misery, he feels that he is “the injured party” (34) because her sorrows are preventing him from relishing the evening. This concoction of feelings is also suggested in the above-mentioned reflection on the life of lonely people: even if he has approached an alienated person like Julia, he tries to stay clear of these people (31), presumably since they remind him of his status as “a decaying hop” (31) or, in other words, an underdog.

Horsfield’s hesitant nature seems to hinder the creation of a strong empathic bond between the two underdog characters in their first encounter. After agreeing to accompany her to the cinema, he dwells on the advisability of not meeting her again on the following grounds: “Once you started letting the instinct of pity degenerate from the general to the particular, life became completely impossible” (34). His position as an underdog character may suggest that such intrusive thoughts derive from a hypothetical fear to be dragged down. Along similar lines as Marya in relation to Stephan, he may also be wary of the possibility of being forsaken after getting emotionally involved in Julia’s suffering. Both the likelihood of being rejected and his emotional turmoil appear to render him, according to Emery, somewhat uncommitted (*World’s End* 137). Still, his company allows Julia to gradually break down the wall that she has built to protect herself from the world outside. Unlike Horsfield, she gives vent to both her feelings and her particular story. At the beginning, her acknowledgement that her attire is threadbare and that she hates people is, as the narrator puts it, “passionate and incoherent” (*After Leaving* 32), and this points to the difficulty of articulating traumatic issues such as her economic vulnerability and her social anxiety. However, as the narrative unfolds, her language gains both clarity and meaningfulness, even if she is under the influence of alcohol. The story of her life is different from the narrative that Anna tells Walter. Rather than aiming at unsettling an

indifferent listener, Julia's tidier account is the product of being listened by Horsfield. Being constantly torn by doubt, his response oscillates between wanting her to continue her story to irritation when she cannot vividly recall her life in Ostend (37–39). Still, his attentiveness leads Julia to persevere with her storytelling, and at the end of it Horsfield is, in the narrator's words, "filled with a glow of warm humanity" (42). This feeling may respond to his being moved by the emotions conveyed by the storyteller as she shares her testimony. This suggests that Julia's trauma narrative has a profound significance that lies in its relatability. In other words, her testimony is meaningful insofar as it elicits identification, and this enhances a representativeness that coheres with that of limit-cases.

Despite his wavering mindset, Horsfield triggers a positive change in terms of how Julia copes with her traumas. By the end of her storytelling, her listener seems to have evolved from lack of commitment into the love of humanity he is attempting to rekindle. As his response verges on empathy, Julia feels temporarily safe. For the first time in many years, she has been offered some space to share her story without fear of being derided. Moreover, Horsfield's understanding has contributed to Julia's gaining confidence to such an extent that, as has been discussed in Chapter 2, she ventures on returning to London to confront her anxieties caused by alienation. Whether it stems from pity or from his self-awareness as an underdog, Horsfield's concern makes him one of the few men Julia can rely on. His caring nature is all the more evident when, upon noticing that she is "stuck for money" (36), he gives her more than half the money he has in his pocket book and, tellingly, "shuts her fingers on them [the notes] *gently*" (36; my emphasis). This gesture might seem as ambivalent as Horsfield's sensation as he shares his money with her: "When he had done this he felt powerful and dominant. Happy" (36). Considering gender roles, especially at that time in history, it seems plausible to hypothesise that his sense of control may tie in with his privileged position as a man. Still, the sentence's coda implies that it is his bliss that overrides this initial sovereignty.

In this sense, it seems safe to say that what makes him feel refuelled is that he has been able to overcome the emotional paralysis provoked by the unnamed “ills” quoted above. Remarkably, in the London interlude, he confesses to Julia: “You’ve given me back my youth” (117). In a way, the rekindling of his love for others means to Horsfield a temporary triumph that might symbolise the possibility of leaving behind the legacy of trauma. Indeed, his gradual transition towards empathy is the only feat that this underdog character may aspire to amid the threat that alienation may take over again.

The sense of imminent danger that persistently intimidates Rhys’s underdogs looms large in the epilogue of Julia’s stay in England. It is precisely in the climax of their journey towards trauma healing that uncertainty and apprehension resurface to paralyse Julia and Horsfield. As grows palpable in the pages devoted to their meetings in London, both envisage that they will sooner or later dispose of each other, hence returning to square one in their cycle of loneliness. This is more evident in the case of the heroine, whose confidence after feeling empowered at the chapel gives way to the dread of staying unaccompanied in the boarding house’s dark room when Horsfield notifies her that he must cancel their dinner (102). Even if he finally makes it to his appointment, Julia is still torn by doubt, as she dispassionately lets him know that she is glad that she will not spend the evening alone (104). In this context, not only does her statement corroborate that she is afraid of being forsaken; it lays bare that her previous experience with men leads her to mistrust him, and this is enhanced by the *verbatim* quotation of her thoughts: “You’d simply make some excuse to go off and leave me if I told you what was really the matter” (104). Considering Horsfield’s mixed feelings about her suffering pointed out above, her suspicion is not unfounded: as Patricia Moran explains, “his ability to empathise with her only sporadically overcomes his more conventional inclinations to flee from her shamed and shaming company” (“Chronic Shame” 199).

Unlike their meeting in Paris, the taxi ride does not put an ending to the soiree in London. What keeps Julia attached to Horsfield is, as hinted at above, her fear of spending the night alone. The reappearance of anxiety, illustrated by her insistence that he must not leave her (108), points to her being subjected to an insidious trauma. Such a circumstance makes her triumph only temporary, and the same goes for her partner. Once again, Horsfield is possessed by joy as he accepts to remain by her side: “He put his hand on her arm, and felt that she was shivering. This added to his sensation of excitement and triumph” (109). As with his response during and after Julia’s storytelling, this passage illustrates his ambivalent countenance to the degree that it remains unclear whether he is implicitly patronising her or whether there are good intentions behind his eagerness. The latter seems to be a more reasonable interpretation, taking into account both his disposition and his refusal to take advantage of her throughout the novel.

Still, Horsfield’s arousal is more than a product of his being able to help others. Judging by his thoughts as he mounts the boarding house’s steps, it can be read as a defence mechanism, more concretely the suppression of his fear of being forsaken:

They mounted silently, like people in a dream. And as in a dream he knew that the whole house was solid, with huge rooms—dark, square rooms, crammed with unwieldy furniture covered with chintz; darkish curtains would hang over the long windows. He knew even the look of the street outside when the curtains were drawn apart—a grey street, with high, dark houses opposite. (109)

While Horsfield does not seem to be dissociating, this excerpt’s dream-like quality hints at an underlying trauma of displacement that haunts him as he goes upstairs. He is setting in opposition two antagonistic realities: the familiarity conveyed by the house contrasts with the sense of threat and gloom suggested by the facing buildings, which may be interpreted as a metonymy for the outside world. The analogy between the house and the dream is revealing of

Horsfield's awareness of his social position: as soon as he leaves Julia's abode, he will abandon the temporary solace that the underdog zone offers him. As he awakens, he will go headfirst into the crude reality of being a helpless subject living through metropolitan alienation. Thus, he is to benefit from his fleeting stay in the presumably welcoming microcosm of the boarding house: this is a suitable place to make heard his particular trauma narrative.

Horsfield's struggle to share his story is an attempt to strength his affective bond with his underdog female partner. Both the setting where he tries to perform his storytelling and Julia's understanding of how people are bound to "crack up" (111) point to the commonality of their experience. As for the former, this temporary lodging, whose inhabitants remain both ignorant of and ignored by metropolitan society, is an example of Augé's 'non-places'. Significantly, the title of the section on the events happening in Julia's accommodation is entitled "It Might Have Been Anywhere", and this contributes to underlining the facelessness of these characters and, likewise, their unbelonging. When it comes to articulating his story, however, Horsfield cannot help suffusing it with vagueness. He restricts himself to summarising his story in two sentences before he stops: "[P]erhaps I know something about cracking up too. I went through the war, you know" (111). His offhanded remark touches on one of the central traumatic events that informed the collective stasis of first-world societies during the interwar period, and yet he is unable to move his story forward after Julia replies: "I was twenty when the war started, . . . I rather liked the air raids" (111). Her feedback seems to bespeak a certain reluctance to engage in the empathetic listening of his trauma narrative. Instead of encouraging him to elaborate on his plot, she makes a disconnected remark that substantiates his gut feeling that she is not inclined to fully understand his ordeal: "But the worst of it is . . . that one can never know what the woman is really feeling" (111).

Julia's yielding to the overwhelming influence of her traumas numbs her to such a degree that she cannot fathom that the man standing beside her is a trauma victim. Rather than being

perceptive of his status as a peer underdog, she is merely appreciative of his emotional support, as she lets him know through statements that are as mechanical as his strokes: “You’re awfully good to me” (111); or “No, you’re good and kind and dear to me” (111). Similarly, she remains speechless when he asserts that he is on her side (120) and that, owing to his trauma, he cannot avoid hating even more heartlessly than she does: “You hate hotly like a child because you’ve been hurt. But I hate coldly, and that’s worse” (121). When she informs him that she is returning to Paris, she takes no notice of his offer to help her find accommodation in the French metropole and collect money for her (123). She gazes at him “with a heavy, dead indifference” (123), and eventually feels a surge of anger that gives a clue on why she has decided to remove him from her life: “Hell to all of you! Hell to the lot of you . . .” (126). Julia’s acting-out behaviour goes hand in hand with a disorientation induced by trauma that does not let her perceive that Horsfield is a fellow underdog. Her set of traumas paralyse her to such an extent that, when they return to Julia’s room, she is alarmed by the touch of Horsfield, who cannot guide himself up the unlit flight of steps (119). Her judgement being blurred by trauma, she unconsciously equates him with previous male benefactors like Mr James or Mr Mackenzie, the difference being that his level of income cannot satisfy her economic needs.

As Horsfield had covertly presaged, Julia coldly forsakes him, thus returning him to his perpetual state of loneliness. Along similar lines as what has been maintained in the paragraphs above, Moran remarks: “This final encounter between Horsfield and Julia spells the end of the possibility of their finding a way to a relationship based on their shared sense of emotional pain” (“Chronic Shame” 200). Whereas Julia clings on to Mackenzie to appease her economic anxiety, Horsfield turns to himself. In a symbolic passage, he goes back home to be greeted by his cat, “as a dog might have done” (*After Leaving* 122). This simile brings to mind some devices used in *Quartet* to subtly draw our attention to the collective explored in this chapter, namely Marya’s identification with the cats or the hyphenated spelling ‘under-dog’. As

happens throughout her modernist cycle of novels, Rhys resorts to animal imagery to hint at her misfit characters' underdog position. Moreover, Horsfield's affective bond with his cat suggests that his return to solitude does not lead to the annihilation of his empathy. Rather, he dwells on his impressions of his *déclassée* acquaintance to conclude that she is more than a mere representative of lonely people. Significantly, he is determined to acknowledge her value as a human being: "Suddenly he saw Julia not as a representative of the insulted and injured, but as a solid human being" (122). This key statement encapsulates some of the central ideas in this chapter: firstly, the focaliser's insistence on regarding Julia as inherently linked to a debased social group enhances this limit-case's representativeness; secondly, the emphasis laid on Julia's being a fully-fledged person is in keeping with Rhys's intention of giving a thorough portrayal of "the case of the underdog" that defies oversimplified readings such as that of the colonial discourse. At the time when she wrote this novel, therefore, Rhys was not oblivious to the ordeal of those whose miserable life reminded her of her own existence. The anxieties that run through Julia's mind, alongside the heroine's inattention to Horsfield's traumas, seem to be a projection of Rhys's turbulent mind in the closing stages of the 1920s.

Julia's impotence when it comes to responding to Horsfield's care in a similar way bears a resemblance to Rhys's frequent negligence of her second husband, Leslie Tilden Smith. Her literary agent and selfless husband is, unlike Lenglet or her lovers during the 1910s and 1920s, seldom acknowledged in her autobiographical sketches or in her collected letters. Angier even extrapolates such carelessness to her interwar novels, with Leslie remaining "at the edge" of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* under the guise of Horsfield (224). A closer look at the married couple's lifestyle during those years, however, calls into question Rhys's apparent unconcern. When she moved with Leslie in 1928, Rhys was in the process of healing the wounds of her affair with Ford and her subsequent divorce from Lenglet. Likewise, her husband-to-be was drained after being left by his first wife, writer Kathleen Millard, and the instability of his career

certainly added to his affliction (Angier 232). Both were helpless people that needed each other to stay afloat, at least emotionally. So, judging by Rhys's description of their relationship as a "fifty-fifty affair" (Plante, "A Remembrance" 264), they were apparently linked from the outset by caring bonds stronger than those between Julia and Horsfield.

If Rhys's second marriage was supposed to rest on mutual care, her tenuous appreciation of Leslie's altruism is, like Julia's indifference toward Horsfield, a bone of contention. Quoting from Angier, this remains "one of the unhappy mysteries of Jean's life" (224), and yet the study of her second novel from the limit-case perspective partly casts some light on this conundrum. It is highlighted by Angier that the "real story" of Rhys's life in the late 1920s was her urge for self-introspection so as to fight her distress (224). Her compulsion to extensively write during the 1930s entailed, hence, the effort to go over her traumas and reimagine them as ruminations of the characters or story situations so as to better understand them. This explains why, going back to her statement in Elizabeth Vreeland's interview, her main concern was to write about herself (237). In contrast to the character of Horsfield, she needed firstly to make sense of her suffering, even if this necessarily entailed blurring the boundary between facts and imagination, before perusing the existence of other traumatised individuals. Accordingly, it could be postulated that the autobiographical subject's apparent selfishness in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* reflects the need for both Julia and Rhys to understand themselves.

As is the case with *Quartet*, the process of self-reflection endorsed by both Rhys and her heroine translates into a deep understanding of Julia's social status. It is stressed from the first paragraphs that this is a novel on underdog life, as evinced by the instance of direct speech that reproduces the landlady's impressions on Julia: "Always alone in her bedroom. But it's the life of a dog" (*After Leaving* 9; my emphasis). Likewise, some paragraphs later, the narrator goes on to corroborate both her dreamy nature and her crystal-clear vulnerability (11). As for Julia's outlook, her self-recognition as an underdog is sporadically hinted at when, in the middle of a

given street of London or Paris, she stops walking to define herself in relation to the metropole. As for the former metropolitan centre, a passage that brings to mind Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) depicts how, when the clock chimes the hour, she is overwhelmed by the feeling that she is predestined to lead a still life that contrasts with the dynamism inherent in other people's (48). In the case of Paris, her observation of the unlit cafés in the novel's last lines is smoothly linked to the remark on the dichotomy between dog and wolf. Remarkably, this final sentence is complemented by the comment tag "as they say" (138), which might suggest that the French expression "the hour between dog and wolf" is reverberating in the protagonist's mind. Hence, Julia may be retrieving this sentence while identifying that she is one of those under-dogs that will never belong to the wolf pack that metaphorically stands for the metropole. She is bound to remain anchored to the position of the underdog, and this coheres with an awareness of being stuck in a rut that is explored in the analysis of *Voyage in the Dark*.

As mentioned above, the self-concerned autobiographical subject is not oblivious to the suffering of other helpless characters. As with Marya, Julia's ongoing self-awareness correlates with her identification of peer misfits, whether she knows them or not. At the beginning of the novel, she partially identifies with the grey-haired woman living on the floor above, whom the narrator metaphorically describes as "a shadow, kept alive by a flame of hatred for somebody who had long ago forgotten all about her" (11–12). Julia's deliberate attention to this underdog figure stems from her realisation that this unnamed character is also an abandoned woman that has grown undesirable. This situation enhances the empathic bond between the unkempt woman and the recently forsaken Julia, so much so that it is speculated that failing to make up would mean for her "the first step on the road that ended in looking like that woman on the floor above" (11). Once again, it appears that the protagonist's apprehension is filtered through the voice of the narrator, in a way that permits a more thorough understanding of her trauma while prolonging the sense of uncertainty defining underdog life. What the leap into this little

story points to is the shareability and representativeness of Julia's limit-case testimony. The minor character whose narrative interacts with Julia's experience is also a *déclassée* who has become a shadowy figure due to a forsaking "somebody", probably a man. It is through the combined effort of Rhys and the focalising heroine that these invisible people's suffering is rescued from inattention, hence providing the larger trauma narrative with a dialogic quality that goes beyond individual experience.

As with the neighbour tackled above, the novel punctually pays heed to helpless individuals who, like the Rhysian heroine, remain imperceptible to passersby or audiences. For example, as she leaves Uncle Griffiths' house, Julia notices a singer standing near the entrance to a public bar. Her auditory perception is highlighted as the narrator describes the artist's vocal performance. The emphasis on the brokenness and quaver in his voice hints at the underlying trauma of yet another unnamed minor character attempting to articulate a message that emerges as an animal's bellow (61). Julia's attention to this figure, whose physiognomy or identity are never revealed, is aroused by the longing to escape an unbearable situation that keeps the subject prisoner. Indeed, animal imagery reappears in a Rhysian text to point not only to the underdog position of both singer and listener, but also to the impossibility of changing their situation, no matter how powerful their cry is. The heroine is, then, linked to the singer on the basis of a common experience suggestive of trauma. Both have become faceless figures whose howls mean no more than a whisper for streetwalkers. Indeed, as the singer starts the tune for a second time, the focaliser's perspective changes to the bus she must take. Being no longer within Julia's view, the artist finds himself, like Rhys's women, condemned to endlessly repeat the cycle of social invisibility.

Julia's sharp awareness of the underdog, informed by Rhys's love and pity for them, translates into a depiction of their anguish that compels us to meditate on both their suffering and the traumatic stressors contributing to their drably existence. The two little narratives

examined in the last paragraphs are proof of the author's endeavour to make prominent the life of the underdog and, accordingly, depict them as solid, resilient human beings that stand out for their ability to empathise with their peers. These snapshots of underdog life, suggestive of the representative dimension of Rhys's limit-case testimonies of trauma, are used more often and in a more refined way in the two remaining novels to be explored. The protagonist tackled in the next section, Anna Morgan, undergoes a maturation process that involves gaining proficiency in recognising other underdogs and their suffering. Such a development is facilitated by her relationship with three female characters that will be examined after discussing how Anna generally copes with her awareness of being an underdog.

4.3. Mirrors and the Journey to Experience: The Formation of Underdog Consciousness in *Voyage in the Dark*

In the metropole, Anna's sea change entails adapting to an unknown reality that, like the curtain separating the first and second acts of her tragedy, threatens to annihilate everything related to her previous life. As the opening lines evince, her encounter with England also leads to a radical shift in terms of how she perceives reality, and this certainly includes her understanding of life. As she drifts into self-destruction, she grows cognisant of her position in metropolitan society. The evolution of her underdog awareness is, unlike her shocking displacement upon her arrival, a slow process in line with the insidiousness of her trauma. Her attentiveness to every detail of daily life, from the prices of the clothes she fancies to the sites of leisure she frequents, founds an acute consciousness of how her social status condemns her to monotony and lack of progression. At the same time, the formation of her self-consciousness is greatly stimulated by her contact, whether direct or indirect, with more seasoned peer outcasts. Her attention to these individuals' fully developed underdog mindset enables her to better understand that she is one

of these people whose dreary existence initially appals her. The narrator credits the role played by these characters in her maturation process by juxtaposing their experience with hers. As the ensuing analysis shows, in this novel Rhys hones the use of snapshots to reflect both the dreary existence of certain underdog individuals and the parallels between their case and the heroine's. The narrative combines intrusive mini-paragraphs about strangers who have an impactful effect on Anna and longer passages on some of her acquaintances, all of them pointing to a commonly shared angst to do with their low ranking in metropolitan society.

The first overt allusion to Anna's self-awareness as an underdog takes place after her first meeting with Walter. As she gets into bed, she slowly regains consciousness amid the traumatic disorientation provoked by both her arrival in England and Walter's approach. It is at this point that she grows alarmed at the realisation that she might become one of those people whose lack of resources—both funds and social relations—condemns them to lead an ominous existence: “The ones without any money, the ones with beastly lives. Perhaps I'm going to be one of the ones with beastly lives” (*Voyage* 23). Repetition may be said to enhance the importance given by Rhys to the case of the underdog in her modernist cycle of novels. Moreover, in agreement with limit-cases, this iterative passage highlights her anxiety at the likelihood of being dragged to their world, in a way that reminds us of acting-out. The temporary sense of relief that her room might give her is immediately halted by her concern with its price, and, in turn, this feeling enhances her distress at lacking fine clothes: “People laugh at girls who are badly dressed. Jaw, jaw, jaw” (22). The question of the room rate is reconsidered when, while chitchatting with Maudie, she recalls the man who stayed in her room before her. She laughs when pointing out that he was banished because he could not pay his rent (41), and yet her apparent nonchalance does not enshroud that the conversation's topic is people who detest London. Hence, her allusion to this nameless man is not a casual remark: it might bespeak her partial identification with his unspoken trauma. Indeed, her guffaw is the response she foresees

when dwelling on the figurative reaction of shop windows, a metonymy for the metropolis, at the sight of underdog people: “But no, it’s jaw, jaw and sneer, sneer all the time. And the shop-windows sneering and smiling in your face” (22).

The despair of Rhys’s underdog characters, as illustrated by Anna’s representative panic-stricken demeanour, not only stems from their hypervigilance to the insidious threat of public shaming. This novel makes explicitly known one feature of their existence that contributes to depleting their hope: their cognisance of being stuck in a rut. This idea, which appears to haunt Anna’s mind as she thinks about starting again in the clinic, is especially prominent in Part I and might be said to be related to acting-out. Indeed, the cognisance of how monotonous her existence is produces distress in the thinking subject, who often conjures up this idea in relation to passivity and sluggishness. For example, Anna thinks that she is climbing a never-ending ladder that turns “like a wheel” (29) as she goes through influenza. The narrative voice comes to a similar conclusion when she reminisces about the funeral of a doctor in Dominica, but in this case she extrapolates this idea to society at large: “The poor do this and the rich do that, the world is so-so and nothing can change it. For ever and ever turning and nothing, nothing can change it” (37). Significantly, Judith Raiskin interprets this meditation as evidence of Anna’s awareness of her imprisonment within the confines of the colonial system (167). Indeed, it is both the power structures and the inequality inherent in the system that make the underdog a listless, stone-like effigy knowing, as Anna notes, what awaits them every day (*Voyage* 64). Not surprisingly, Walter, a representative of sovereign power, condescendingly asks Anna not to turn into a stone that is bound to fall at the end of its journey uphill. Still, there is mockery underneath his apparently heartfelt request, since, judging by his “sneering” smile (44), he knows that, as an underdog, she cannot move away from the dullness characterising her life.

Constrained by routine, Rhys's underdog become aimless people whose unextraordinary lives go unnoticed in metropolitan society. Anna focuses on her feeling after moving into her new room in Adelaide Road: "There wasn't anything much to do all day" (34). Remarkably, the paragraph immediately after expands on this idea of boredom by extrapolating it to other underdog characters. Rhys deftly associates the protagonist's tedium with the routine of the street musicians Anna notices as she gazes out of her window: "There was always some old man trailing along singing hymns" (34). The sense of iteration evoked in the quotation is, once again, suggestive of these people's monotonous life. Their entrapment in a lifestyle which compels them to mechanically repeat their performances so as to subsist evinces their systemic oppression. As with the busker in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, their repertoire is limited, and so they are bound to repeat the same songs amid a mass of indifferent passersby. As the narrator remarks, these anonymous buskers are "invisible men" (35) for them, just like Rhys's female characters. It is solely concerned observers that have gone through similar trials, such as Rhys and Anna, who acknowledge these people's existence. What is more, they set their sights on penetrating into these characters' minds to understand not only the traumas of the focalised underdogs, but also their own psychological wounds.

The autobiographical subject's drive to grasp the anxieties of her peers is exemplified by Anna's concern for a preacher she overhears as she and Maudie are walking through Hyde Park. Both his physiognomy and his mood somehow point to his being an underdog struck by trauma. His haggard look, suggested by Anna's description of him as "thin" and "cold" (42), attunes to his agitated countenance, enhanced by his "bawling" (41) and his fury when Maudie laughs at him. Maudie downplays his anger taking for granted that it stems from the fact that these female streetwalkers are not accompanied by a man (42). By contrast, Anna is drawn to his irritation: "But I wanted to go back and talk to him and find out what he was really thinking of, because his eyes had a blind look, like a dog's when it sniffs something" (42). Her survey

of this man's apprehension may be said to respond to an urge to empathise with his plight. Indeed, it can be inferred from his characterisation that he is linked to Anna in many ways, from his foreboding when it comes to sharing his message to a "blind look" that, as Steve Pinkerton contends, hints that he is "both unseeing and unseen" (107). The final analogy corroborates that Anna's longing to know the story of the preacher arises from her realisation that they suffer from a common pain: the misery of the underdog.

The increasingly apathetic Anna ultimately fails to interact with the hapless strangers she runs into the streets of London, even more so as Walter's desertion breaks her to pieces. During the period at Ethel's to be discussed later, she experiences an epiphany that is suggestive of the evolution in her underdog consciousness. As Anna dances with a man whose arm is bandaged, she is distressed by her perception that she is being both observed and laughed at by a dog in a painting: "We started to dance and while we were dancing the dog in the picture over the bed stared down at us smugly" (*Voyage* 137). This is another example of how Rhys plays with the meaning of *underdog* to refer to the group of social outcasts to whom she gives pride of place. The dog portrayed in Ethel's picture, however, implies a different type of relationship between Anna and her underdog awareness. In the first appearance of this picture, it is hinted that both its title and the attitude of its central figure are related to the empathy on which the heroine's bond with the underdog is based: "The white furniture, and over the bed the picture of the dog sitting up begging—*Loyal Heart*" (127; emphasis in the original). However, by the time Anna starts realising that she is pregnant, her impressions of the dog have changed: from being a figure she might relate to, it has evolved into an interloper that reminds us of those photos of men that distress Marya after being abandoned by Stephan, yet another misfit. Her changed perception of the dog may point to her despair at realising that not only her fear of leading a "bestly" life has come true; besides becoming an underdog herself, her status has prompted her fall into an ongoing misery culminating in a pregnancy from an unidentified man. This

situation, provoked by a trauma linked to her social position, has further crushed her, and this is mirrored by Anna's shattering of the glass covering the picture (137).

Nearing the end of the novel, Anna's lifestyle has drained her to such an extent that, as implied by her destruction of the glass over the picture, she finds herself deeply at odds with her status. Some Rhys scholars have observed that this protective glass could be interpreted as a mirror that painfully reminds Anna of what she has become (Le Gallez 111; Sternlicht 86). In a way, it is her self-image that she destroys, not so much her bond with the underdog. Indeed, in a letter that Ethel sends Anna's friend, Laurie, the landlady mentions that one of her pictures has been left "without a glass" (*Voyage* 142), thus hinting that the portrait of the dog has been undamaged. Anna's symbolic attack emerges from both her shame and her despair over her inability to escape from the grip of trauma. Thus, it can be read as a response based on trauma denial and that ultimately leads to acting-out. As evinced by her disapproval, "I can't stand that damned dog any longer" (137), the protagonist is overwhelmed by her awareness of both her ranking in society and the vulnerability common to all the hapless people she has known.

Though picturing the possibility of starting again at the end of the novel, the vagueness of such a prospect is partly accounted for by her realisation that her underdog acquaintances, more experienced than she is, are still susceptible to the insidious threat of being further devastated. The following paragraphs explore the snapshots on these mirror-like characters, namely Maudie, Laurie, and Ethel, and the order in which they are discussed coheres with the novel's section where they are fleshed out: Maudie appears more prominently in Part I, Laurie's mentoring role starts being developed in Part II, and Ethel's turbulent inner experience is hinted at in Part III. What follows is an analysis of the textual cues that call attention to their helpless position, which in many ways runs parallel to that of Rhys, Anna, and the rest of her heroines. In line with the dynamics of the limit-case, the empathic attestation of these characters' pain by both Rhys and the protagonist-narrator allows them to have an increased awareness of their

own misery as underdogs. Moreover, this strategy reinforces the idea that both Rhys's and Anna's larger testimonies are in dialogue with these characters' stories, thus constituting a network of underdog trauma stories that lays bare the representativeness of this interwar novel.

Though being less than thirty years old, Maudie is presented from the outset as a seasoned woman. By way of illustration, the first lines devoted to Anna's flatmate do not revolve around her rapport with the protagonist or address her characterisation; they lay the stress on her ability to sound "as ladylike as possible" (8) to talk their landlady into admitting them to the Southsea rooms. Judging by the plentiful advice she gives Anna and her ability to adapt her behaviour, it seems that her experience in life has honed her survival skills. In line with the other modernist novels by Rhys, the emotional wounds of this touring chorus girl are only hinted at. Little information is given about her experiences on stage except for the fact that "all sorts of things had happened to her" (9). This textual cue might point to an unspeakable past that, as such, is infested with the presence of trauma. Indeed, immediately after this narratorial remark, metalepsis is used so as to focus on the result of these events: Maudie's indication that Anna should "swank" in life to be "all right" (9). For Maudie, swanking is not so much a performance aimed at challenging the system as a way to protect herself against any of the threats she faces as a destitute woman. She is the reflection of all the hardened workmates Rhys came to know when joining Albert Prance's touring company, at the age of twenty.

As Angier notes, the self-sufficiency shown by Rhys's fellow chorus girls does not annul their vulnerability as penniless and exploited employees (59). On account of their position in terms of class and gender roles, it comes as no surprise that they were vigilant of any element of ordinary life that might constitute a threat to their integrity. As previously explained in this dissertation, the poor working environment of these amateur artists went with the jeering attitude of a crowd, mostly composed of men. Whether they took notice of such mockery or not, on their touring days Rhys and her co-workers were likely to be considered by affluent

men a prey to be easily sexually exploited, as Elaine Savoury observes (“White Creole” 23). Maudie is well aware of the dangers of walking unchaperoned, as shown by the warning she gives Anna as the two roam around Southsea: “Don’t look round. . . . Two men are following us. I think they’re trying to get off with us” (*Voyage* 10). Though not clearly evincing fear, this utterance hints at an alertness stemming from Maudie’s awareness of the female streetwalkers’ vulnerability. It is interesting to note that the “we-they” dichotomy reappears shortly after, in Maudie’s ironic complaint about being mistreated: “What I’d like to know is this: why they [sic] think they’ve got the right to insult you for nothing at all?” (14). Even though it is unclear whether its referent is the landlady or Walter and Vincent, the personal pronoun *they* encompasses those well-established dwellers of the metropole who take it for granted that they may demean those failing to reach their standards. The contrast between “they” and “I”, representative of the underdog’s silenced voice, highlights the two women’s displacement and their social position.

Besides casting light on Maudie’s status as an underdog, the text peeps into her affective bond with this group. In line with Anna’s fluctuating sense of belonging to this group, Maudie’s rapport with the helpless is highly ambivalent. As regards her relationship with her flatmate, the foundations of their affinity are solid due to the manifold parallels between them: not only are they destitute, unmarried women working and living in similar environments, but they are the only people whom they may trust. There is a genuine friendship in which, considering the difference of these women in terms of age and experience, Maudie plays the role of the selfless mentor. By instructing Anna on how to swank, she is intent on shielding her from any harmful stimulus to be faced in the metropole. Yet, the deep-rooted vulnerability characterising both of them makes any attempt to protect one another ultimately futile. This sense of pointlessness is metaphorically suggested by Rhys’s attention to sensory details in her description of the coat Maudie gives her friend when she is shivering: “The coat had a warm animal smell and a cheap

scent smell” (14). Even if temporarily protected, this clothing item will remind both them and nearby observers that its wearers are on a meagre budget. Significantly, the emphasis on the animal smell might indicate their underdog status, bearing in mind one of the central meanings of animal imagery in Rhys’s fiction.

Another allusion to the case of the underdog through animal imagery can be found before the roommates’ encounter with the preacher. In this case, Maudie discloses to Anna that, some days before, an unidentified man told her that a woman’s attire is more precious than the person inside it (40). Maudie’s reconstruction of his words captures the reasons the male speaker gives to support his argument:

‘ . . . You can get a very nice girl for five pounds, a very nice girl indeed; you can even get a very nice girl for nothing if you know how to go about it. But you can’t get a very nice costume for her for five pounds. To say nothing of the underclothes, shoes, etcetera and so on’. And then I had to laugh, because after all it’s true, isn’t it? People are much cheaper than things. *And look here! Some dogs are more expensive than people, aren’t they?* (40; my emphasis)

In an epiphany-like manner, Maudie’s revelation is made discernible in the last part of her little story, immediately after the ending of the stranger’s stance. The deictic adverb “here” enhances both the significance of her discovery and the fact that the people this hypothesis applies to are themselves. The implication of this passage is that not all the people are metaphorically cheaper than clothes; it is those whose value is lower than that of dogs, that is, the *under-dog*, who are deemed valueless by metropolitan society at large. Bearing this hint at this collective in mind, Anna’s reaction when feeling scrutinised by the portrait at Ethel’s should not be merely deemed impulsive. It remains open to interpretation whether she might be vexed at being reminded that dogs are placed over her, such realisation deteriorating her self-consciousness.

It should be observed that, as with the remark on the man who could not pay his rent, this group has been brought to the fore while Anna and Maudie are indulging in small talk. The fellow women's nonchalance does not particularly befit the issue they are dealing with, and yet their apparent lack of seriousness betrays a bitterly unwilling acceptance of their status, at least in the case of Maudie. This idea seems to spring as the two female friends approach the preacher at Hyde Park. When Maudie pays attention to his rumble on God's wrath, she guffaws, but her intentions are not revealed. Her laughter could bespeak a degree of distress stemming from the epiphany explained above, which may be heightened by her encounter with an underdog figure. Another possible interpretation is that she might be mocking the utmost gravity implied by the preacher's speech. Such menace does not affect her, as she knows that she is already fated and that the only threat she must remain watchful of is the reappearance of her trauma in any of its forms.

The insidiousness defining Maudie's trauma is obliquely tackled in the few allusions the narrative makes to a previous lover of hers, named Vivian Roberts. Maudie mentions this man for the first time when she gives Anna her coat. Anna summarises her interlocutor's storytelling, pointing out that she used to meet him in London between tours and that she started developing an infatuation for him (15). Before mentioning the stranger who triggers her realisation on people's value, Maudie makes another remark on Vivian, disclosing that they were about to marry (39). Yet, it is highlighted in the former reference that this man, wealthier than she is, put an end to their relationship: "She said she was sure he was breaking it off, but doing it gradually because he was cautious and he did everything gradually" (15). A stronger bond between Maudie and the more mature Anna is forged on the basis of their being forsaken by men they were in love with. This is one of the manifold experiences that, as stated at the beginning of the narrative, Maudie has gone through and that point to trauma. Vivian's rupture is not as abrupt as Walter's, and yet it brings to mind an insidiousness that both relates to and

partly originates the ongoing threats perceived by Maudie, from vulnerability in the face of men to destituteness.

It is Maudie's economic vulnerability that is foregrounded in her last appearance in the novel. After she disappears from the narrative following the incident with the preacher, Anna runs into her after getting to know that Carl and Joe are married. This brief encounter, preceding the vignette on her dance with the bandaged man and the breaking of the glass, expands on the misery inherent in her underdog existence, and also in that of Anna. Both the trust underpinning their friendship and the commonality of their experience are underscored as Anna remembers how Maudie told her that she had met an electrical engineer and that she needed money to get him to marry her. Anna's awareness of the destituteness that binds the two women together is suggested in a remark where the voices of the protagonist and the narrator—together with the implied author—are successfully blended: "It's always like that with money. You never know where it goes to. You change a fiver and then it's gone" (137). This final reflection on how money slips through one's fingers holds even more true for underdog women like Anna and Maudie, whose possession of money is as ephemeral as their psychological wellbeing. In this matter, Maudie's dire need is fulfilled, and yet her status condemns her to face similar types of shortage in a near future. While the cash might enable her to improve her outward appearance for Fred, it is implied in Maudie's rewording of his stance that he is well aware that his partner is down-and-out: "He said to me the other day, 'If there's anything I notice about a girl it's her legs and shoes'. Well, my legs are right, but look at my shoes. He's always saying things like that and it makes me feel awful" (136). Fred's repetition of such remarks may suggest a degree of disapproval, and Maudie's distress is accordingly triggered. Indeed, they might be read as microaggressions to do with her insidious trauma, whereby she is reminded of her underdog position and her impossibility to grasp any sense of belonging.

If Maudie's self-assertive demeanour can be considered both a weapon and a mask in the face of her insidious trauma, the case of Laurie is pretty much the same. She is as well an older, light-hearted *déclassée* who gives guidance to Anna, in this case after Walter's betrayal. As is the case with Maudie, she befriended the Creole protagonist during one of their tours with the theatre company. As such, this character is likely to have been patterned on one or several of Rhys's fellow chorus girls. It is speculated in Angier's work that Laurie may be a fictionalised version of a former showgirl named Shirley, with whom Rhys apparently stayed at some point in 1912 or 1913 (72). It seems more convincing, though, to rely on the account Rhys gives in *Smile Please* of her touring stage. In the section "Chorus Girls", she alludes to a woman whom she calls "the company tart" (109, 111). Though not specifying her name or nickname, Rhys gives two crucial pieces of evidence that might hint that she drew on this performer to flesh out the character of Laurie. Firstly, she explains: "There was always the company tart but no one ever called her a tart. They just said, 'So-and-so has a lot of friends'" (109). In a similar fashion, the novel avoids an explicit discussion of Laurie's source of income after losing her job or the circumstances in which she met her American male companions. Secondly, Rhys declares that she found her workmate pleasant (*Smile Please* 111), and such fondness might have provided the basis for the affective bond between Laurie and her mentee, underscored from Part II of the narrative onwards.

Like Horsfield's encounter with Julia in the restaurant, the chance meeting between Anna and Laurie entails the protagonist's last resort amid trauma-induced numbness. As the narrator recalls, she felt "too much like a ghost" (*Voyage* 98), and the subsequent emphasis on Laurie's taking hold of her arm points to her concern for Anna. The following lines expand on her caring disposition by stressing her role as a listener of her friend's little narrative. It is underlined how she remains patient to appease Anna and how her follow-up questions allow her interlocutor to move her story forward. The interest Laurie shows in knowing more about the Creole's ordeal

not only evinces her empathetic drive; as with Horsfield, her attraction to Anna derives from a sense of relatability that, in her case, is suggested more subtly than in Rhys's previous interwar novel. Her inquiries into whether Anna is to have a baby or whether Walter gave her any money are not randomly uttered, but may emerge from her experience as a *déclassée*. As she declares after Anna finishes her story, her stance on Jeffries' departure is that men "always do it that way" (100). Far from being an unfounded generalisation, such an observation reflects that she, like Maudie, has long become aware of the inner workings of the misery of the underdog, more specifically that of interwar female underdogs.

Laurie's self-identification as a destitute woman conveys a degree of sarcasm that, as is the case with Maudie, functions as a counterpoint to these women's underlying angst. This has also been noted by Angier, who explains the following in relation to Rhys's fellow chorus girls: "Under their tough talk they were just as frightened as she [Rhys] was" (59). The juxtaposition of self-mockery and the Rhysian female underdog's awareness of her vulnerability can be seen in Laurie's self-description as an "old cow" (*Voyage* 17, 111). She uses this expression to refer to herself on two occasions: firstly, after Maudie asks her to leave Anna alone for giving her advice before her first date with Walter; secondly, when reassuring the Creole after having told her that she would never manage to successfully deal with people. The context where she describes herself as an "old cow" proves necessary for understanding what she implies: she is lecturing Anna so that she may prevent the possibility of being milked, that is, being continuously taking advantage of by male seducers. At the same time, it should be noted that Laurie's tone when uttering this expression is casual, and this might indicate that her mood is a strategy to show resilience amid an adverse situation: the world of the amateur prostitute, into which she has slipped due to her diminished social position. In this respect, her cognisance of the workings of underdog life has granted her a sense of self-control that her inexperienced peer lacks. Whereas Anna cannot help throwing a tantrum during the meeting with Laurie and

the Americans or smashing the glass covering Ethel's portrait out of despair, Laurie is carefree: not only does she accept that she has "good strong peasant blood" (103), but she goes as far as to say: "London's not 's so bad. It has a certain gloomy charm when you get used to it" (105).

Laurie's composure suggests that she has overcome the distress at finding that she cannot move beyond the status quo. Like Maudie's acerbity in terms of speech or the street musicians' aloofness, her laid-back attitude is one of the multiple facets that the autobiographical subject will take in the course of her life. Laurie's well-founded underdog awareness is, just as Rhys's self-consciousness as a more mature author, a product of a long-standing exposure to insidious forms of trauma. This is why, after Anna's abortion, Laurie laughs at the male doctor's opinion that both she and the young adult patient are too ignorant to live (159). As Alicia Borinsky hypothesises, she is amused by the physician's recognition of the type usually assigned to women like Anna: "Although he does not know her, he knows *who* she is and understands her future so well that the recognition of her type makes Laurie laugh" (199; emphasis in the original). While Borinsky's reading may imply that Laurie agrees with the doctor's conclusion that it is futile for these *déclassées* to envisage the likelihood of starting anew, her laughter has a more profound significance: it might be read as her scoffing at the doctor's inability to fathom the complexity of the underdog, whom he has reduced to a flat character. As an experienced underdog herself, Laurie knows that these misfits are more than a type, and this is illustrated by the last character to be explored in this section: Ethel Matthews. As discussed below, she is a psychologically complex person whose repertoire of feelings, from hopelessness to empathy, evinces Rhys's thorough exploration of the case of the underdog.

First of all, it should be remarked that Ethel is Rhys's reimagination of a woman she met amid similar circumstances as Anna's. It appears that, in the aftermath of Lancelot's forsaking, Ella read in the *Daily Telegraph* a job advertisement for a manicurist. As pointed out by some of Rhys's biographers (e.g., Angier 72; Pizzichini 109), the person requesting applicants was

Madame Faber. These biographical studies maintain that, after taking the position, Rhys might have spent some time working for her, and yet the lack of allusions to Madame Faber in *Smile Please* puts this piece of data's verisimilitude to the test. Both this figure's circumstances and her role in Rhys's life can, therefore, only be speculated following the representation of Ethel in *Voyage in the Dark*. What seems plausible is that the Caribbean writer loosely drew on some traits of Madame Faber to reflect upon an experience that both employer and employee shared: the life of the underdog. In this respect, the fleshing out of this real-life woman greatly stems from the author's attempt to understand her own traumas, in such a way that the narrative blurs the distinction between the respective circumstances of Rhys, Faber, and Ethel. In keeping with the pillars of limit-cases, the dialogic relationship between these stories not simply suggests that Rhys's fictionalisation of Faber befits her comprehension of her trauma and its subsequent depiction; these narratives, which intersect with that of Anna, evince the representativeness of Rhys's modernist novels as testimonies of underdog life.

Ethel is introduced at the beginning of Part II, as Anna is recovering from influenza. She is no stranger to the protagonist, as the lines following her knocking go as follows: "It was the woman who had the room on the floor above" (*Voyage* 91). From the outset, the exploration of this secondary character is puzzling. A sense of concern is implied by her decision to visit her neighbour on knowing that she is ill, and yet as she asks her about her health Anna perceives Ethel as "inquisitive" (92). Such noteworthy ambiguity can also be seen in her characterisation. She is described as a plump middle-aged woman who, in the narrator's words, "looked just like most other people, which is a big advantage" (*Voyage* 91). This remark is highly disturbing, in line with Ethel's frame of mind discussed below. In comparing her with society at large, the narrator may be suggesting that her outward appearance is an asset because it enables her to belong in the modern metropolis. Anna's reflection on the apparently privileged position of this character is not inconsequential since, as Raiskin argues, "fitting in, that is, hiding or killing

off their individuality or differences, becomes a means of survival” (133). Still, as the narrative unfolds, it grows evident that she is a misfit, like the buskers or the young adult woman living in the same boarding house. The narratorial remark quoted above is, therefore, an early textual cue hinting that Ethel goes largely unnoticed or, in other words, that she is an invisible woman.

Despite being older than the rest of helpless women in the novel, Ethel shows a reluctance to accept her social standing that is close to that of Anna. Her denial mechanisms are, however, different from those of the Creole. While she often falls into despair, Ethel takes advantage of her life experience to adopt a strategy aimed at survival: passing for someone that she is not. It is stressed from the outset that she has a proclivity for pretence: as she offers to remove Anna’s tray, she assures her that she is a nurse (*Voyage* 92), when she is actually a masseuse. Likewise, after going to the cinema with her younger neighbour, she censures the non-English leading actress of the film for displaying, in her words, “this soft, dirty way that foreign girls have” (94). It is also striking to notice her disapproval of what she calls “dirty foreigners” (95, 119). She uses this derogatory phrase to clarify that her business is superior to those of foreign masseuses, and such a misconception leads her to complain about receiving a work inspection when the job advertisement is published: “I was wild. Treating me as if I were a dirty foreigner” (119). A closer look at this character reveals, however, that her apparent xenophobia might be, like her lie regarding her training, a pose whereby she tries to gloss over her status. At first, such an instance of self-deceit produces an effect of disorientation much in line with the uncertainty as for Madame Faber’s identity. It is unclear whether she was English or French, and this is further problematised by two issues. Firstly, the toponyms that inform of her provenance in the job advert are French: “Mme Faber S. from Ostende and Nice” (*Angier* 72). Secondly, the fact that Faber soon started going by the name of Madame Hermine (*Angier* 72) casts doubt on whether Ethel Matthews is the real name of Anna’s acquaintance and whether she is English.

The rationale behind Ethel's posing is an urge to gain respectability. In this sense, it is similar to Sasha's pretence that she is a well-off woman on meeting René. Remarkably, as with the heroine of Rhys's late interwar novel, not only is Ethel undesirable, but she holds a similar view on men: "I hate men. . . . But of course I don't really care a damn about them. Why should I? I can earn my own living" (95). In line with the inconclusiveness of her statements on non-English people or her occupation, her stance on her relationship to men does not resolve the question of being a *déclassée*. Her acrimony towards men, like her dismissiveness of the two issues stressed above, evinces her distaste with some categories of power inherent in the imperialist British social system, namely class, gender, and cultural identity. As a matter of fact, Pizzichini writes regarding Faber and her literary counterpart: "It was a terrifying spectacle of utter destitution. . . . It was as though Madame Faber were apart from the rest of society" (110–111). She is, along similar lines as Raiskin's argument quoted above, putting on a mask so as to protect herself from an ongoing threat of (self-)destruction connected with insidious trauma. Such an effort notwithstanding, Ethel is bound to remain a helpless person, as some details of ordinary life remind her: the cinema that "smelt of poor people" (*Voyage* 93) or the picture of the dog that is begging, as she does when pleading with Anna to pay her rent in advance (114).

Ethel's moral dilemma between posing or accepting her defeat amid vulnerability greatly contributes to the volatility of her mindset. Her oscillation between instructing Anna in her job and inflicting a bad mood on her is the result of a troubled mind that is delineated from her first appearance in the novel. She is often portrayed as an irascible woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown. This can already be noted when she takes care of her convalescent neighbour and complains about the fact that the boarding house's owners will not collect the tray until late in the evening: "I'm a trained nurse and it goes on my nerves—all this sloppiness" (92). It can be inferred from her statement that her agitation may derive from her compulsion to have a sense

of control. Her commitment to hold the reins of her life leads to hyperarousal and, eventually, frustration, as she realises that there are circumstances beyond her control: her lack of privilege as a woman, her economic vulnerability, or her lack of success in social life.

When Ethel broods on the situations mentioned above, her anxiety increases and gives rise to behaviours that bring to mind the acting-out of trauma. By way of illustration, she uses derogatory language in an uncontrolled way, downplays Anna's similar feeling of weariness (121) and, significantly, undergoes episodes of impulsive anger. Her distress is heightened by the remembrance of the stressors that have been breaking her to pieces, and hence this catalogue of manifestations points to her vulnerability as a social outcast. She is subject to powerlessness, derision, and invisibility, and the cumulative impact of all three factors can be seen during her quarrel with Anna after the massage couch collapses. The Creole laughs at a situation she deems "damned funny" (123), and Ethel is so shocked by her companion's derision that she makes a scene. She insults Anna calling her a "half-potty bastard" (124), cries like Anna had never seen before (124–125) and dwells on her being "always alone, awful, awful" (125) or her angst at being unwanted and destitute: "If I can't get hold of some money in the next few years, what's going to become of me? Will you tell me that? You wait a bit and you'll see. It'll happen to you too. One day you'll see. You wait, you wait a bit" (125). This passage is highly telling as it reflects both this female character's trauma and the commonality of her experience. Regarding the former, the multiple iterations mirror the repetition-compulsion pattern characterising acting-out. Moreover, the questions enhance a hyperarousal that leads to emotional paralysis, as implied by her fragmented speech. As for the latter, Ethel's premonition that Anna will go through the same ordeal does not stem so much from her vexation as from her underdog awareness. The second half of the passage contributes to corroborating, then, that the experiences of Ethel and Anna are intertwined, thus enhancing the representative quality of both their individual stories and the larger trauma narrative.

Ethel's identification of the common pain linking her to Anna might entail that the bond between these *déclassées* goes beyond a professional relationship. While she is dismissive of Anna and even refers to her as "a sort of girl" (142, 143) in her letter to Laurie, Ethel is revealed to be drawn to her companion on the grounds of their social position and their trauma-induced shattering. In a poignant passage, it is suggested that Ethel needs Anna not merely to help her run her business; above all, she is terrified of being abandoned by one of the few people that, being a peer outcast, can understand her alienation: "Don't go, for God's sake. I can't stick it any longer. Please don't go. I beg you don't go. I can't stand being alone any longer. If you leave me I swear I'll turn the gas on" (125). What may seem emotional blackmail reveals itself as an acknowledgement of both her helplessness and the traumas that account for it. Significantly, Ethel's cry for an empathetic associate ties in with Anna's request when making the acquaintance of the masseuse, precisely in the aftermath of Walter's desertion: "Then I said, 'No, don't go. Please stay'. Because after all she was a human being" (92). The interplay between both passages hints that the link between these women rests on empathy, as is the case with the young heroine's rapport with other underdogs, whether acquaintances or strangers. What compels Anna—and Rhys—to pay attention to such people as Ethel or the chorus girls, inexperienced though she may be, is the fact that they are human beings. As such, the masseuse might not express her concern for Anna more openly because, as happens to Julia Martin, she is emotionally drained. Still, her depletion does not conceal her psychological complexity and her awareness of Anna's tribulation, and this is an element that dovetails with the attentiveness to other helpless people shown by Sasha Jansen in Rhys's last modernist novel.

4.4. Towards an Exhibition of Underdog Testimonies: Inter-Story Dialogues in *Good Morning, Midnight*

Sasha Jansen is one of those recognisable Rhys's misfits to whom the long-standing experience of being downtrodden seems to have turned insensitive. Having been left friendless and at the mercy of a system that aggravates her social ill-feeling, she recognises herself as an automaton. Still, as with other Rhysian underdogs nearing her age, her apparent indifference does not cover her concern for some unfortunate figures she meets during her layover in Paris. As postulated in this section, her keen attention to the misery of other helpless people gives rise to what might be considered the most heterogeneous depiction of underdog life in Rhys's cycle of modernist limit-cases. As Nagihan Haliloğlu remarks, Sasha resorts to her role as an autodiegetic narrator to create "a community of life-stories" (188). She does so by observing and often interacting with a series of people whose stories are similar to hers, these little testimonies constituting a network of embedded narratives of underdog life. It is this webwork of relatable snapshots that the analysis foregrounds so as to corroborate the novel's status as a limit-case. As such, *Good Morning, Midnight* enables Rhys to integrate her traumas and make her testimony representative. Before exploring these stories within the larger story, there is a discussion of Sasha's awareness of her underdog status that complements the analysis conducted in the previous chapters. Then, the embedded experiences of her underprivileged peers are tackled: from the account of those individuals she develops a stronger relationship with the sketches of those strangers whose misery she discerns in the blink of an eye. Finally, the analysis is closed by assessing how Rhys clings on to the power of *mise en abîme* to relate the larger trauma testimony to fictional stories mirroring the tribulations of both Sasha and herself.

As maintained in the readings of Sasha pursued in the preceding chapters, what defines her is an acceptance of her misery that may entail both self-defeat and resilience. It is the latter that is implied before her reflection on behaving like an automaton:

On the contrary, it's when I am quite sane like this, when I have had a couple of extra drinks and am quite sane, that I realize how lucky I am. Saved, rescued, fished-up, half-drowned, out of the deep, dark river, dry clothes, hair shampooed and set. Nobody would know I had ever been in it. Except, of course, that there always remains something. Yes, there always remains something. . . . Never mind, here I am, sane and dry, with my place to hide in. What more do I want? (*Good Morning* 10)

As she looks at her reflection in the mirror, her reaction is radically different from that of Anna when staring at the glass over the dog's picture. It can be inferred from the passage that Sasha's experience has let her come to terms with her status and look at the positive side of her life. In so doing, she is trying to make sense of her aimless existence, and this allows her, in the words of Staley, "to preserve some semblance of sanity" (85). At the same time, both her rhetorical question and her realisation that something is missing in her life point to her self-awareness as an underdog. The reflection on her luck betrays, therefore, a sense of pretence that coheres with some of her attitudes towards the main hapless characters to be explored below. It foreshadows, then, that Sasha's complex mindset presents a contrast between the apparent clear-mindedness enabled by her search for meaning and the distress provoked by the underlying traumas related to her social standing.

There are several moments in the novel exposing the intersection of Sasha's keenness for self-discovery and her distress at finding how her living conditions condemn her to barrenness. One such episode is the recollection of her period working in a Parisian boutique. After being belittled by her employer, the so-called Mr Blank, she is asked to deliver a letter to the cashier's office. Being unable to reach her destination, her line manager looks at her in a way described as follows: "He looks at me as if I were a dog which had presented him with a very, very old bone" (*Good Morning* 23). In line with other Rhys's texts, the analogy between the protagonist and the animal enhances her underdog position while suggesting a dog-master relationship that

reflects her abasement. This allusion to the old bone adds to Sasha's awareness of her position, as it might hint at both her inability to fit in society and her decay. Not coincidentally, ageing is one of the key issues that aggravates her trauma of unbelonging. In this sense, the use of the present tense in her narration might indicate that her past and present are so inextricably linked that her standing is hardly different from that of the younger employee.

The repetition of patterns of structural oppression and trauma-related listlessness is later overtly referred to by the heroine: she lists a series of settings, from streets to hotel rooms, where she has equally undergone esteem and repudiation. And yet, what Sasha-as-narrator accordingly denominates "a complicated affair" (40) does not mask that her life is "simple and monotonous" (40). It is important to remember, however, that her continuous exposure to such situations, among which the threat of being further alienated stands out, has also proved beneficial for her. Indeed, it seems to have granted her, as Deborah Parsons contends, "an instinctive knowledge of the marginal and in-between areas she inhabits" (145). In other words, through such an experience she has reached an understanding of the case of the underdog that allows her to make sense of both her suffering and that of her peers. This is suggested by yet another ambivalent passage on Sasha's social awareness and self-cognisance. In this case, the atemporal quality of Sasha's experience as a helpless person is again highlighted in the prelude to her birth-giving: "Has anybody ever had to do this before? Of course, lots of people—poor people. Oh, I see, of course, poor people. . . Still, it is a hard thing to do, walking around when you are like this" (*Good Morning* 49). As with the account of the experience in the boutique, the past and present merge in such a way that it is unclear whether the reflection on the hindrances posed to the poor is the young mother's or the narrator's. At any rate, it can be argued that this excerpt suggests how Sasha's ongoing ordeal is connected with that of many other vulnerable people. The lack of support Sasha finds as she kills time before being admitted strengthens, then, her rapport with the underdog at large.

Society's general disregard for Sasha—and by extension, for other peer misfits—can be seen in the last episode to be discussed before the analysis of the hapless characters she relates to. In the second analepses of Part II, she recalls an unnamed man from Lille that reads a letter to her. In this document, a female lover begs him to give her three hundred francs for a new pair of shoes, but the man shuns her plea on the grounds that she is “a liar” (74). Both Sasha and Rhys are linked to this woman in that they are misunderstood *déclassées*, thus being denied virtually any source of support. Significantly, the French man stays away from Sasha as soon as she tells him: “I’ve had nothing to eat for three weeks. (Exaggerating, as usual)” (75). Even if the narrator acknowledges that the protagonist is posing, she stresses the general indifference of privileged people to her case in order to cast light on the invisibility of the underdog. She is denied any possibility of telling her story, and this is highlighted in an enlightening closure to the analepsis that hints at how this novel brings to the fore little narratives of underdog life: “I expect that man thought Fate was conspiring against him—what with his girl’s shoes and me wanting food. But there you are, if you’re determined to get people on the cheap, you shouldn’t be surprised when they pitch you their own little story of misery sometimes” (75). Unlike this male character, both Sasha and Rhys are attentive enough to the ‘case of the underdog’ to flesh out both their stories and those of other characters with whom they identify, both female and male. In the following paragraphs, an analysis of these peers is conducted. Firstly, the characters that have a more central role are discussed, namely the Russians—especially Nicholas—and René. Then, there is an insight into some easily overlooked figures that are also an integral part of the Rhysian network of underdog stories.

Sasha’s first encounter with the Russians takes place as she is returning to her hotel room in Paris. As these male characters appear out of nowhere, the narrating Sasha attests to a sense of weariness that is no alien to her: “No, I am not sad, but by the time I get to the Boulevard St Michel I am feeling tired. I have walked along here so often, feeling tired” (39). The frequency

at which she has experienced exhaustion—most probably emotional—hints at the acting out of trauma, thus reflecting a repetition-compulsion pattern that characterises her displacement. It is evident, therefore, that the heroine does not feel at ease while roaming around the Boulevard St Michel, and the observant Russians take notice of such a distress to approach her. As evinced by the question of one of them, called Nicholas Delmar, what draws these men to her is her noticeable sadness. The narrator reproduces his inquiry, “Pourquoi êtes-vous si triste?” (39), and then goes on to remark that the common denominator in their scrutiny of Sasha is the appreciation of her despondency: “The shorter man, who it seems is a doctor, is willing to believe that I am happy but not that I am rich. . . . The other one is impressed by my fur coat, I can see. He is willing to believe that I am rich but he says again that he doesn’t think I am happy” (40). The former’s longing can be read as a form of self-deceit, as the evidence that Sasha might be happy is as misleading as the implication that he is a physician. As regards the latter—Delmar, it seems that he might be deluded by Sasha’s posing as regards her outward appearance; still, as for her emotional turmoil, he is alert enough to identify that her assertion that she is not sad (39) is a mask.

As is the case with Mr Horsfield in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, Delmar is attracted by Sasha’s sadness since it reminds him of his own. The narrator alludes to his “melancholy” (40, 54, 56) and, as suggested in his wish that Sasha might be wealthy, also to his destitution. Indeed, the narrator expands on this issue as the heroine’s perspective is verbalised: “He looks like a person who is living on a very small fixed income” (55). Such remarks are suggestive of her interest in this character, which stems from her awareness that his case bears resemblance to hers. Such a parallel between Delmar and Sasha gives rise to a sense of empathy that is reinforced in their second chance encounter. Being both a seasoned and an observant *déclassée*, she does not fail to recognise that Nicholas has probably been struck by a form of trauma emerging from his social status. In other words, she seems to have grown interested in his state

of mind because he is an underdog. In this sense, both characters are increasingly attached to one another due to a sense of mutual understanding deriving from a common experience. As regards his affairs, his case resembles that of Horsfield in the sense that he does not explain the events leading to his gloom, and the same goes for his female acquaintance: she merely mentions that she had lived in Paris five years earlier and that she eventually returned to England (56). Their lack of elaboration when speaking about their past might point to two hypotheses. Firstly, it seems that they are overlooking their traumatic past during their interaction because, as explained above, their emotional pain has to do with insidious, ongoing trauma rather than punctual events. Secondly, it can be argued that what strengthens the bond between them is not their storytelling, but rather the non-verbal language that points to their perception of each other's plight, such as their looks and their drive to stay by the other person's side. Indeed, Sasha ruminates on the positive impact this character is having on her during their date: "This young man is very comforting—almost as comforting as the hairdresser" (57).

It should be stressed, however, that Sasha's perception of Delmar is initially ambiguous. As the female character's inner life is revisited, it is exposed that she is bewildered by his "resigned melancholy", which she considers unnatural for a man of his age (56). Still, his moodiness is by no means an oddity in Rhys's literary world, as it is similar to the melancholy of other heroines who have not reached their forties. It is precisely the intersection of the Rhysian woman's mood and that of Nicholas that disorients Sasha. As Cathleen Maslen argues, the connotation of Sasha's uncertainty when judging him is "that Delmar is somehow 'echoing' the contents of Sasha's own psyche" (136). It might be argued that Sasha is astounded as she is interacting with a person sharing her concerns, to the point that she appears to show a certain wariness as for his honesty: "[H]e seems more the echo of a thing than the thing itself" (*Good Morning* 56). At the same time, his concern gradually awakens Sasha from her apathy, and this can be seen in her unspoken fondness for him: "One moment I feel this, and another I like him

very much, as if he were the brother I never had” (56). The sense of fraternity stressed in the quotation is further evidence of relatability of their experiences, which is a core aspect in Rhys’s depiction of the case of the underdog.

The bond between Sasha and Delmar is strengthened, in brief, by their recognition that they are fellow underdogs. In this respect, there is a key textual cue pointing to their alliance. When Delmar speaks about his idea of life, he talks Sasha into accepting life as it is, and he elaborates on his suggestion as follows: “When you aren’t rich or strong or powerful, you are not a guilty one” (55). Furthermore, it is underscored in his speech that he positions himself as one of the non-guilty people: “I prefer to be as I am. As things are now, I wouldn’t wish to be rich or strong or powerful” (55). In this passage, he is indirectly alluding to the insidious trauma that both undergo, as he is referring to those oppressor groups that are to blame for their misery. In so doing, he may be showing an attempt to go beyond reductive labels that do no justice to the underdogs’ complexity and that are even used by helpless characters themselves, as is the case with Anna Morgan’s use of the phrase “the ones with beastly lives” (*Voyage* 23). What is telling about Sasha’s response is that, as he is speaking, she has “the strange idea that perhaps it is like that” (*Good Morning* 55). Her thoughts point to a certain agreement with his ideas and, therefore, with the resilience implied by his stance. Yet, her understanding of his speech does not bring about the development of a sense of stamina as strong as his, judging by the adverb “perhaps”. Indeed, Sasha partially agrees with his statement as she has also adopted a mindset that might be read as resilience but that, unlike Delmar’s, overlaps with self-defeat. Furthermore, she also concurs with Delmar in that what might save her from hopelessness is to socialise more often. In this respect, she promises herself to follow this word of advice since, as Delmar remarks, it allowed him to overcome his alienation (56–57).

Sasha’s openness to interact with others and leave behind her dread of rejection is enabled by Delmar’s decision to introduce her to one of his friends, namely the Jewish painter Serge

Rubin. As explained below, this character's brief appearance in the novel lays bare a powerful influence on Sasha's welfare, and the reason for her happiness after this meeting is Serge's strong sense of consideration for her. Not coincidentally, Carr has identified him as "one of the most sympathetic male figures in Rhys' continental fiction" (57). It seems that Rhys's attention to his humane facet is accounted for by the significance of a fellow underdog she interacted with during her visit to Paris in 1937. Angier remarks that she paid a visit to a painter named Simon Segal who, like Serge, was a Russian Jewish migrant (365). Segal was a destitute exile who had landed in France in 1925 and who was to become one of Rhys's greatest friends before the outbreak of WWII. Seymour mentions that, as she was working on this novel in 1938, Segal wrote to her encouraging her not to lose hope (175). Hence, it is not farfetched to hypothesise that Rhys might have opted for fleshing out her Jewish friend in her upcoming narrative so as to explore in depth both her traumas and their relationship with those of Segal.

The representation of Serge stresses his position as an outsider. He is a solitary painter that, like Rhys's women, does not fully partake in the Bohemian circles of interwar European metropolises. The artworks that he displays in his concealed studio are, unlike the 1937 Exhibition that is alluded to in the novel, unknown to Parisian society. Besides their artificer, the only people that have seen them are Sasha and Delmar, two stranded individuals for whom any sense of belonging is illusory. Serge embodies, like these two outsiders, the paradoxes of having a multifarious identity in a context where, as maintained in this study, the official discourse relied on rigid, normative conceptions of cultural identity. He is presented as "a Jew of about forty" (*Good Morning* 76) and, though no insight is given into his story, the ensuing description of his gaze brings to the fore an ambivalence that partly has to do with his Jewishness: "He has that mocking look of the Jew, the look that can be so hateful, that can be so attractive, that can be so sad" (76). The impossibility of deciphering the meaning of his look might be read as a hint that Serge, like other multicultural individuals like Delmar or the author

herself, were misinterpreted by the indifferent society of the time. Moreover, his characterisation as a ‘Jew’ with a dejected and even contemptuous visage reinforces his status as a down-and-out character. Remarkably, this quasi-stereotypical description of Serge, which represents Sasha’s perspective as she sees him for the first time, is illustrative of the metaphoric alienation that, as Jess Issacharoff notes, tends to be ascribed to the Jews in modernist art: “In the modernist imagination Jewishness becomes equivalent to otherness, isolation, and exile” (119–120). As for his Russian origin, it does not directly aggravate his alienation since he has managed to befriend such a fellow countryman as Delmar. Still, his friend’s remark that Serge is “of the extreme Left” (*Good Morning* 86) might lead us to speculate on whether his sadness may have to do with the events happening in his birthplace in the date given by Rhys, namely “late October, 1937” (76). As Issacharoff explains, by 1937 Stalin’s purges had reached their summit (118). Being into politics, Serge was probably aware of this campaign of terror and, thus, his potential concern about this situation could have contributed to a sense of grief that bespeaks trauma.

Serge’s gloom may, in brief, hint at an emotional wound aggravated by a variety of daily, insidious circumstances ranging from economic vulnerability to neglect of his cultural many-sidedness. As regards the latter, Rhys wittingly points to a strategy he might be using to combat the erasure of both his cultural complexity and his open-mindedness in the face of metropolitan alienation: it is non-European cultural products that he gives pride of place during the meeting at the studio. For instance, he shows Sasha the Congo masks he has made (*Good Morning* 76), puts beguine tunes from Martinique (77) and talks about “negro music” (77). What is more, as Issacharoff ponders, this performative act contributes to the establishment of an emotional connection between Serge and Sasha (116). Indeed, as they discuss that “negro music”, Sasha undergoes an experience similar to the one she attests to at the onset of the narrative: “[T]here it is again—tears in my eyes, tears rolling down my face. (Saved, rescued, but not quite so good

as new. . . .)” (*Good Morning* 78). Sasha’s ambivalent reaction mirrors the complexity of both her traumas and her process of living with a fractured psyche. Her weeping seems closer to her awakening from apathy than to acting-out, and yet her acknowledgement that she is unable to feel refreshed might suggest that she is haunted by the threat of alienation. Not coincidentally, she is disturbed by allegedly having made the Russians feel sorry for her (78). Still, as evinced by Serge’s feedback, their pity is actually a feeling of empathy stemming from their status as underdogs: “‘But cry’, le peintre says. ‘Cry if you want to. Why shouldn’t you cry? You’re with friends’” (78). In this sense, Serge’s studio is, like Marya’s abode before Stephan is arrested or Julia’s room when Horsfield accompanies her in London, a microcosm of underdog life where all its occupants are safe and understood. Even if disorientated by trauma, Sasha has, therefore, enough reasons to feel saved and temporarily released from its grasp.

A remarkable aspect of Serge’s empathy that is foregrounded in this narrative vignette is his willingness to put Sasha’s urgency to be cared for before his economic needs. This is made prominent when she is charmed by the painting of a banjo player—discussed at the end of this section—but cannot afford to pay for it. What is revealing about the painter’s response is that he interrupts her explanation about her budget: he laughs and gives it to her “as a present” (83), without expecting to be reimbursed. Both his hearty laughter and his interruption emerge from his underdog awareness, which lets him understand the *déclassée*’s trials and identify with her suffering. Along similar lines, Dell’Amico argues that, rather than blindly adhering to a conception of art-as-business, he clings on to potential customers like Sasha, with whom he may establish an emotional connection (23). Indeed, before Sasha leaves the studio, he shakes her hand and calls her a friend—“Amis” (*Good Morning* 84)—, while she in turn attests to a feeling of renewal manifested through interior monologue: “The touch of the human hand. . . . I’d forgotten what it was like, the touch of the human hand” (84). Their relationship has, in a way, reinvigorated her in that she has realised that her particular story is relatable and that, as

she directly or indirectly shares it with others, she may attain self-recognition. This epiphany might be evoked by the focus on Serge's frames as Delmar tries to put the canvases into them: "The canvases resist. They curl up; they don't want to go into frames" (82). This passage seems to befit the approach taken in this study, as the frames can be read in connection with the limit of representativeness that Rhys's narratives—and particularly the 'case of the underdog'—aim to transcend. The paintings resist the strait-laced limits imposed by the frames because they are stories that go beyond individual experience, as unveiled by the analysis of the Russians and the following character to be discussed: the French-Canadian gigolo named René.

The meetings between Sasha and the gigolo, scattered across the narrative, give another fragmented yet exhaustive insight into the case of the underdog. As with Horsfield and Delmar, it is the underprivileged male character that approaches the Rhysian heroine as she is revelling in her solitude. In René's case, however, at first he is not so much interested in Sasha's suffering as in rousing her to notice him. Not surprisingly, Sasha observes that he is "exhibiting himself" (61), such a remark showing that she has identified his penchant for posing. Her conclusion is not unfounded, as it stems from her knowledge of how to put on different masks such as those of respectability and prosperity. Still, she is rather unsure about his intentions. On the one hand, she notices that, as a poser, René is different from those male intruders that have started by scrutinising her (61). Yet, she broods on the possibility that he has fixed his eyes on her because she might be looking like a well-to-do woman (61) or, as she puts it later, "a rich bitch" (64). Refined by her experience as an underdog, her awareness of this man's social status leads her to wonder whether their relationship might be defined by a reversal of the gender roles Rhys's heroines perform. Indeed, it is later explained that this man is a gigolo who, on asking her if he may come to her room, might be seeking economic shelter in return for his labour.

As with Rhys's female protagonists, René's insidious trauma is informed not only by his economic vulnerability, but also by his position as a cultural misfit. Besides being born outside

the metropolis, his identity is not well-defined. He affirms that he is a French-Canadian man who fled the Foreign Legion in Morocco. In line with the hypotheses on multicultural identity presented in Chapter 2, it could be argued that he is, like Rhys's women, misunderstood on the basis of a cultural identity that the Empire oversimplifies. Yet, his experience in the army, as well as Sasha's scepticism, in a way problematises the question of his nationality. As historian Christian Koller has remarked, volunteers could join the Legion under fake identities, and this circumstance fuelled the view that it was "a collection of criminals and runaways, but also adventurers and romantics" (92). René is both a deserter and a restless character, and, as such, he cannot claim to a sense of belonging. Indeed, he lacks a valid passport to travel from France to England (*Good Morning* 64), and his assertion that he knows a studio where Sasha may stay contradicts both his unfamiliarity with Paris (65) and his story about his past. His proclivity to lying heightens, thus, the fuzziness of his identity and, by the same token, affects his chances of establishing a trust-based connection with his underdog peer. In a way, Sasha laments the impossibility of grasping an accurate version of his story: "I expect he had a different one every day" (142). Nevertheless, her cognisance of his posing is suggestive of an understanding of his plight that is developed in the novel's last section. As the analysis of his suffering will show, his postures are a strategy whereby he attempts to outweigh the different traumas hinted at in his scattered appearances.

As the novel unfolds, it grows evident that René's main absence across his stage in Morocco and in Paris is not so much his lack of a stable identity as the need for supportive people. On the one hand, plenty of evidence is given on his longing to attract a well-to-do woman, which even leads him to presumably invent that he has met an American woman whom he hyperbolically describes as "very, very rich" (127). On the other hand, as the novel unfolds it grows evident that the "exhibition" whereby he displays his charms greatly responds to the urge to find an empathetic listener. This is foreshadowed by the opening sentence in his first

serious attempt to share his feelings with Sasha: “Have you ever felt like this—as if you can’t bear any more, as if you must speak to someone, as if you must tell someone everything or otherwise you’ll die?” (61). This compulsion to make heard a long-muffled story can be read as a need to share his feelings so as to give them a meaning. The sharing of his trauma, even if it occasionally implies deviating from reality, is a key trigger in strengthening the bond between him and Sasha, both of them being underdog trauma victims who attest to disliking human beings (65, 144). Their mutual understanding seems to transcend the limits imposed by Sasha’s initial reservations and, most importantly, by his pretence. Such a challenge to René’s distortion of factual accuracy coheres with the core tenets of limit-cases, and indeed it leads the autobiographical subject to a better understanding of her shattered mind. Not coincidentally, his acknowledgement that he has other “wounds” (145, 146) different from the scar across his throat and that nobody has felt mercy toward him (146) is conducive to her admission: “I have too” (146). What is more, Sasha temporarily moves away from her apathy and attempts to articulate why she is generally aloof: “One thing? It wasn’t one thing. It took years. It was a slow process” (146). Though fragmented, the protagonist’s statement is crucial for reinforcing the empathy-based link between her and the gigolo: it makes explicit reference to the workings of insidious trauma and, in a less overt way, to her wounds’ multidirectional nature. Such experiences, referred to as “things” due to their initial unspeakability, may not only be considered multidirectional because of their cumulative effect on her psyche; as hinted at by their belief that they are “start[ing] believing each other” (146), this network-like pattern may also point to the relatability of their experience or, in other words, the representativeness of their testimonies.

The mutual compassion between Sasha and René is presented in the closing pages of the novel as a potential way for both to gradually overcome their emotional numbness, especially in the case of the heroine. Still, such an option is only elusive, as she remains in the grip of

trauma and the gigolo is, once again, left alone. The scene depicted before the *commis* creeps into her room is vague, probably as Sasha's perspective is blurred due to her recourse to luminal. The transitions between her embrace of René as he goes up to her room (148), her dismissal of the gigolo (151) and their altercation on the bed (151) are abrupt,⁴² just as the temporal jumps of her "film-mind" (147). Sasha's shifting mood is, like the pervasiveness of her past, a legacy of her trauma. While René is in the room, at some point she goes through episodes of dissociation: "I am uneasy, half of myself somewhere else" (148); "Don't listen, that's not me speaking. Don't listen. Nothing to do with me—I swear it" (153). Moreover, she is often haunted by intrusive thoughts hinting that she is reliving some of the experiences comprising her cumulative shattering: she deems it necessary to keep her eyes shut because, as Sasha tells René, "dead people must have their eyes shut" (152), and puts her arm around her face after the latter episode of dissociation as she thinks the gigolo is going to hit her (153). Remarkably, once he has left the hotel, an instance of dramatic monologue points to how the acting-out of trauma prevents her, as with Julia, from fully appreciating the support of her underdog friend, thus abandoning him: "I appreciate this, sweet gigolo, from the depths of my heart. I'm not used to these courtesies. So here's to you. And here's to you. . . ." (156). Maurel speaks of her ostracism of René in terms of a "self-defensive attempt to make him leave before she comes back to life" (125). By urging the gigolo to leave, she appears to enact the plan to hurt René that she contemplates in their first encounter, presumably to avoid further harm and an impending return to metaphorical death. Still, Sasha's final ruminations upon his leaving seem to show that she values his empathetic side.

⁴² The "silent struggle" (*Good Morning* 151) has been read by some critics as a rape attempt on the part of the gigolo (e.g., Maslen 143; Rogoff 182; Simpson 98). While this idea is further suggested by René's description of the methods to subdue women he saw in Morocco (*Good Morning* 152), his ambiguous fight seems kindled not so much by sexual desire or economic need as by his shame at being apparently mistreated when he needed Sasha the most: "But what do you think I am—a little dog? You think you can first kiss me and then say to me 'Get out'?" (151).

René's understanding is, as explained above, what temporarily offers Sasha a faint hope of leaving behind her inertia. The instances of dissociation and acting-out notwithstanding, she attests to an ephemeral sense of renewal when having physical contact with him, both as they hug each other and as they fight: "I stand there hugging him, so terribly happy. Now everything is in my arms on this dark landing—love, youth, spring, happiness, everything I thought I had lost" (*Good Morning* 148); "My mouth hurts, my breasts hurt, because it hurts, when you have been dead, to come alive. . . ." (153). Sasha's train of thought still evinces a perplexity cohering with her emotional wounds, and yet it is important to stress that she conceives of her bliss as a present experience: "Here we are. Nothing to stop us. . . . No past to make us sentimental, no future to embarrass us" (149). While in much of this section the use of the first-person singular pronoun is exploited, in this instance of interior monologue Sasha uses a "we" encompassing both René and herself, thus strengthening the link between them.

As is the case with Horsfield's musings as he accompanies Julia upstairs, the implication of Sasha's inner speech is that, amid their emotional turmoil and the oppressive city, these underdog figures have found a place of solace where they may freely share their common pains. Significantly enough, the name of the hotel where this scene takes place is "Hôtel de l'Espérance" (147), 'The Hotel of Hope'. Whether Rhys's use of this name is ironic or uplifting, it hints that the space-time coincidence of both characters in the hotel may offer them a type of hope that is unrelated to their future, but that is based on the mutual understanding they display at that moment. Hope, then, can also entail an emotional reconnection with others by recognising a common pain: the misery of the underdog. Indeed, when Sasha invites René to take one of her notes, he leaves it untouched, and this empathetic gesture enhances her awareness that they are cut from the same cloth, as suggested by her ruminations after the gigolo leaves. Hence, as midnight approaches, Sasha has left behind her initial doubts

concerning his intentions to eventually cry after coming to the conclusion that his misery is no different from hers.

Weeping is another display of empathy through which Sasha temporarily awakens from her inertia. She cries as she recognises some ambiguities and trials of underdog life with which she identifies, and this points to her testimony's relatability. Even if her reaction as the gigolo leaves might be read as an epiphany, there is earlier evidence of Sasha's crying for others' pain in two of the analepses. On those occasions, she feels for minor characters with whom she does not develop a bond as strong as that with the central figures perused above. Yet, these passages, like the snapshots analysed throughout this chapter, evince that the heroine, as representative of the underdog, is a solid human being that can relate to others through the dialogue between histories of trauma. The first of these textual cues can be found in the insight into her experience in the boutique. As Mr Blank calls her a "hopeless little fool" (24), she recalls a bald woman whom she has seen trying hats and who is mentioned in the preceding pages. More concretely, what Sasha remembers as she cries is the disapproval of the customer's daughter: "Well, you have made a perfect fool of yourself, as usual" (20). Such a reprimand ties in with that of her line manager, and positions both her and the bald woman as emotionally helpless people to be repudiated and reminded of their difference, as the narrating Sasha suggests: "I cry for a long time—for myself, for the old woman with the bald head, for all the sadness of this damned world, for all the fools and the defeated. . . ." (25). Sasha also bursts into tears after interacting with Lise, a cabaret singer she alludes to in the extended analepsis on her life with Enno. In this case, Lise's story is given prominence as Rhys devotes one paragraph to summarising the reasons for a misconceived "extreme sentimentality" (111).

The protagonist's attachment to Lise is strengthened when, as the two are enjoying their dinner, the young singer affirms that she would like another war to start, her justification laying bare a sense of self-defeat: "Yes, I do. I might have a bit of luck. I might get killed. I don't

want to live any more, me” (111). Lise’s is a fractured psyche that continues being subject to the force of insidious trauma, judging by the narrator’s subsequent account of her helplessness: “Then she’s off. She has nobody. She doesn’t think anybody likes her. The engagement in the Rue Cujas is finished. She can’t get another. She will once more have to try for a job as a brodeuse” (111–112). Sasha’s report of Lise’s misery is proof of her empathy for this underdog character. Indeed, not only does she speak for the young artist, but also touches on aspects that mirror her own experience, from her lack of friends to the fear of rejection. Remarkably, before Sasha and Lise start crying, the voices of the autodiegetic narrator and the young singer merge in an account of an event that brings to mind Rhys’s relationship with her mother: “She is afraid of her mother. When she was a little girl her mother beat her. ‘For anything, for nothing. You don’t know. And all the time she says bad things to me. She likes to make me cry. She hates me, my mother. . . .’” (112). The interspersed narratives is another hint at the relatability of the stories of underdog life foregrounded by Rhys, both in terms of the larger testimony and the embedded stories. By making Lise’s narrative heard, both Rhys and Sasha revisit some key traumatic events of their life. In this sense, it functions as the three examples of *mise en abîme* discussed below, namely mirror stories that enhance the novel’s success in challenging the two limits of autobiography as exposed by Leigh Gilmore, namely the truth/fiction boundary and the limit of representativeness.

The first of these stories is recalled after Sasha mulls over the implications of the question posed by the English women that take heed to her at Théodore’s restaurant. As the protagonist revisits the issues of undesirability, ageing and unbelonging, she reminisces about the fate of a creature that, like her, was unwanted. Her memory is elaborated on by the autodiegetic narrator in a paragraph that, like other snapshots in Rhys’s modernist novels, constitutes a story within the story. The narrator tells a story that took place in London and that revolves around the kitten of her neighbours. This animal is a female cat that, as Sasha puts it, “had an inferiority complex

and persecution mania and *nostalgie de la boue* and all the rest” (47). The use of polysyndeton evokes the idea of stagnation, which is deeply entrenched in underdog lives. Furthermore, it conveys a sense of iteration hinting that the listed pains, from the threat of persecution to feeling unfit, are so well known for both Sasha and Rhys that they turn them into recurrent topics in their narratives. The question of difference, which contributes to all Rhysian heroines’ alienation, is also stressed in this little story. The cat develops a sore on her neck and, due to it, her owners are intent on abandoning her. This experience dovetails with the ongoing pain of rejection Sasha feels for failing to meet the standards imposed by the society of interwar European metropolises. As such, the cat has little alternative but to remain at a distance from the family and fall into oblivion. This is precisely what eventually dawns on the unwanted animal: the kitten sneaks into Sasha’s room and, as the heroine rejects her, the animal flees and is finally run over (47).

The kitten brought the fore in this embedded story shares many features with Rhys, her heroines and with Sasha in particular: besides being a female creature dependant on others’ love, it has an inferiority complex, is repudiated and, most importantly, is ill-fated. As for the latter, it is foreshadowed from the outset that the cat is doomed to failure: “You could see it in her eyes, her terrible eyes, that knew her fate” (47). The cat’s implied anxiety shows that she suffers from an emotional wound besides her physical one. In an instinctive attempt to survive, she clings on to Sasha. This choice has great relevance, as she has approached a subject that, like her, is both alone and unwanted. Remarkably, the cat fixes her gaze on her, and the visual exchange links both characters on the basis of their underdog status. In this sense, the heroine’s decision to force the cat to leave cannot be read as an act of contempt, but it might point to her distress at being reminded of her own misery.

The second story likewise happens in London but, unlike the story of the female cat, its teller is Serge Rubin. He recalls a mulatto woman standing on his doorstep and explains the

circumstances leading her to beg him for help. In brief, she was an expatriate from Martinique who was living with an English man and who barely left her abode for fear of being disdained. The central theme of metropolitan alienation permeates the story, as Serge often speaks of the hateful looks she is subject to when roaming around London and reproduces the reaction of her neighbours' daughter when seeing her: "But it seemed that the child had told her that she was a dirty woman, that she smelt bad, that she hadn't any right in the house. 'I hate you and I wish you were dead', the child said" (81). The threat of racial contempt is what lies at the core of the Martinican woman's feeling that "she was at the end of everything" (80). Much in line with that of Rhys's underdog characters, her despair bespeaks a trauma characterised by insidiousness. Specifically, it is the streetwalkers' "cruel eyes" (81), which are reiterated at the end of Serge's account, that manifest themselves as evidence of the silent and cumulative shattering undergone by the victim addressed in this little narrative. She is rejected because she is different and, as with Rhys's protagonists, her cultural identity risks being eroded due to the negligence of some individuals that stand for the oppressing system, namely the British Empire. Significantly, the unnamed woman tries to blend English and French when telling Serge about her story. Yet, he acknowledges that he cannot understand her speech (80), and such a lack of intelligibility might be proof of her cultural neglect as well as an effect of her trauma.

Like Sasha, the Martinican woman suffers from an emotional paralysis contributing to a sense of dehumanisation. This is enhanced by Serge's remarks that she was "like something that has turned into stone" (80) and "no longer quite human, no longer quite alive" (80), such observations being related to the Rhysian heroine's self-identification as an automaton. The set of parallels between Sasha and the expatriate Caribbean woman is, therefore, built around their relatable experience of trauma. In this respect, both are undesirable *déclassées* whose social invisibility and lack of support—economic and, especially, emotional—has turned them both apathetic and self-destructive. Indeed, both take refuge in alcohol to evade themselves from

reality, and it is when this information item is mentioned that Sasha attests to the fact that her case is in dialogue with the Martinican's woman: "'Exactly like me', I say. 'I cried, and I asked for a drink'" (79). This is the first of a series of interruptions on the part of Sasha, through which both she and Rhys lay bare their empathetic bond with the woman. Whenever Sasha makes a remark on the content of the story, her understanding of the mulatto character's plight is foregrounded alongside her underdog consciousness. After Serge introduces the background information, Sasha relies on her cognisance that the Jewish painter's concern has been whetted by his social status, and so she says: "I'm sure you were kind to her" (80). Indeed, Serge later reveals that he was moved by her suffering, to the point that it fuelled his displacement in the metropolis: "Seriously, all the time I was in London, I felt as if I were being suffocated, as if a large *derrière* was sitting on me" (81). At this point, Sasha elaborates on a previous interruption where she asserts that "most human beings have cruel eyes" (81). When Serge finishes telling the story, she maintains that his relatable traumatic anxiety can be felt by some people, while this does not apply to "other people" (82). This is another instance of Rhys's emphasis on the chasm between metropolitan society at large and the underdog, who remain detached from it. Through this remark, the heroine, Serge and the mulatto woman are placed in the latter group: they are invisible people oppressed and distressed by a system whose indifference might evolve into cruelty, and the network of narratives that these victims share and with which they identify is the only sense of togetherness they may fathom.

The third and final instance of *mise en abîme* is the painting that Serge gives Sasha. This picture's significance as a token of underdog-to-underdog empathy is stressed from the beginning: Sasha's drive to pay for it can be read, in the words of Rademacher, as an act of "philanthropic engagement" (82), and the same goes for the painter's conclusion that he should downplay the fact that she cannot afford it. In the depiction of the scene at Serge's studio, no insight into the symbolism of the picture is given, the only reference to its content being a brief

sentence: “It is an old Jew with a red nose, playing the banjo” (*Good Morning* 83). Even if somewhat offhanded, this early description hints at some shared features between the musician and Sasha, namely their solitariness and their decay. In a subtler way, the representation of the nose seems to point to their emotional turmoil, its redness having been interpreted as evidence of their tendency to cry or to drink (Simpson 108). Still, it is not until the novel’s final pages that the significance of the painting is disclosed. When René leaves her room, Sasha recapitulates her interactions with the gigolo and the Russians —Delmar alongside his companion and Serge— and concludes with a reference to Serge’s painting: “Don’t forget the picture, to remind you of—what was it to remind you of? Oh, I know—of human misery” (*Good Morning* 155). The remembrance of the misery inherent in underdog life makes Sasha’s language highly fragmented, as befits the recall and articulation of trauma. Still, amid her disorientation, she manages to go beyond making explicit allusion to trauma by stressing its collective dimension through her mention of humankind. In this sense, the picture has triggered not only her recognition of her individual pain, but also her potential to empathise with the suffering of others.

Sasha’s understanding of the painting is expanded on in a paragraph in free direct speech that enhances her identification with the fictional figure of the banjo player. In the first part of the passage, she links her reinterpretation of the musician’s story with her own experience:

He’ll stare at me, gentle, humble, resigned, mocking, a little mad. Standing in the gutter playing his banjo. And I’ll look back at him because I shan’t be able to help it, remembering about being young, and about being made love to and making love, about pain and dancing and not being afraid of death, and about all the music I’ve ever loved, and every time I’ve been happy. (155)

The heroine's identification with the Jewish musician, enhanced by their exchange of glances, enables her to get a better understanding of her biography on hindsight. As she intertwines the still image of the picture with her unalterable past, a sense of vitality is generated: Sasha seems to temporarily leave behind her inertia, and it is not farfetched to hypothesise that her recall of joy and youth is triggered by her recognition that, due to the similarities between her, the banjo player and its painter, her life story relates to that of others. Applying the lens through which Rhys's texts have been analysed in this dissertation, this passage may be said to encompass the two challenges to autobiography posed by limit-cases. In this matter, not only does the interaction between fiction and biography allow the autobiographical subject to integrate her experience of trauma; the ensuing awareness of both Rhys and Sasha leads both to engage in an exchange of narratives manifested in the manifold little stories composing the novel and, as for this last example of *mise en abîme*, in the dramatic monologue covering the second half of the passage: "I'll look back at him and I'll say: 'I know the words to the tune you're playing. I know the words to every tune you've ever played on your bloody banjo. Well, I mustn't sing any more—there you are. Finie la chanson. The song is ended. Finished'" (155).

By bringing to centre stage the interaction between her female character and another artistic creation, Rhys is breaking the barriers of factual accuracy and representativeness. Significantly, her overcoming of the two limits may be strengthened by the fact that the picture is unrolled, thus lacking any of the frames mentioned above that might hinder such a transcendence of barriers. Accordingly, in Sasha's request that the player finishes his particular narrative at the end of her monologue, the novel might be hinting at the completion of a process that the passage reproduces in miniature: a storytelling-based performance involving trauma retrieval and verbalisation, and culminating in a move towards attaining a representative testimony of underdog experience.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of Rhys's depiction of the underdog in her modernist novels lays bare her urge to engage with the case of social outcasts whose tribulations are intermeshed with hers. It is such an awareness of a common experience that accounts for the author's passion for this group, noted by Ford Madox Ford as far back as the late 1920s. It can be inferred from the perusal of her four selected texts that her attention to the suffering of others enabled her not only to realise that there were people to whom she might relate, at least through empathetic identification, but also to better understand her own distress. Her interest in the world of the underdog is, then, key to her endeavour to make sense of her life story and turn it into a sharable narrative that, as maintained throughout the study, goes beyond individual experience. Both the enhancement of her self-recognition and the empathy-based reconnection with certain social groups prove enlightening for her and, in a way, therapeutic, as it leads to the articulation of a testimony through which she integrates her traumas as she links them to the trauma stories of other peers, whether real-life people or fictional characters.

The arrangement of the close reading based on the novels' date of publication lays bare an evolution in terms of the quantity of underdog stories with which the (auto)biographical subject identifies. The last two novels display a gamut of helpless figures far greater than that of the earlier ones, where the central issue is the legacy of the heroine's affair with a well-off man. The evolution from self-centredness to a more substantial acknowledgement of other social outcasts' trials runs parallel to Rhys's enhancement of her self-knowledge during the 1930s. While the end of the 'roaring twenties' was marked by the haunting legacy of Ford, the thirties meant an indefatigable endeavour on the part of Rhys to write and, subsequently, to revisit her life story. The analysis of her selected texts shows that, far from leading to a more pronounced egotism, Rhys's self-introspection through literature stimulated a process similar to the one she alludes to in "The Trial of Jean Rhys": she needed writing to redeem herself and,

like Mr Horsfield in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, rekindle her concern for people she related to. This process of reawakening is experienced by both her female protagonists and some less central underdog characters at some moments of revelation that are often depicted in the novels. It is on these occasions that, though temporarily, they leave aside trauma-induced behaviours such as detachment, alleged insensitivity or despair at being unable to change their status to put themselves in the position of other people, whether acquaintances or strangers. In so doing, they are metaphorically brought back to life, as Sasha confesses when brooding on her connection with the gigolo or as implied when, during her voluntary lockdown, Julia thinks about her female neighbour on the floor above.

The process through which Rhys achieved a network of relatable trauma testimonies on underdog experience mirrors in many ways the workings of the empathic bond between the heroines and some of their underprivileged acquaintances. These characters are devoted considerable space in the larger testimonies because their bond with the protagonists is only strengthened after a careful process that tends to follow an identifiable sequence: it starts with their urge to approach these women after identifying their suffering and culminates in their revealing themselves as people affected by a form of trauma similar to theirs. As with the two groups explored in Chapters 2 and 3, they are to remain alienated from a society that daily reminds them of their differences in terms of money, cultural identity and standing. Still, the variegated nature of the characters discussed in Chapter 4 is proof of the broad scope of the term ‘underdog’, which encompasses the social groups tackled in the earlier chapters but has room for other vulnerable individuals that do not necessarily fall into such categories. For instance, such cultural misfits as the Russians Delmar and Serge, the French-Canadian gigolo René and Marya’s French-Polish husband, Stephan, have no connection with the Caribbean; yet, as is the case with the expatriates addressed in Chapter 2, their invisibility is enhanced by their inability to find a community of compatriots to interact with and relate to. Their state of

perpetual loneliness ties in with that of Horsfield, the chorus girls and Ethel. Significantly, the case of these characters allows us to notice that their English nationality—or, in some cases, their male gender identity—does not prevent them from drifting into the margins of the metropolis. Indeed, these attributes are shown to be outweighed by their class and economic need, barriers that thwart any possibility of belonging and that make them susceptible to insidious trauma.

It has been proved that Rhys hints at the commonality of underdog experience by bringing into dialogue her experiences, her heroines' and those of other outcasts. To do so, she resorts to the inclusion of relatable snapshots on underdog lives. In these mini-narratives, intrusive and scattered around the texts, she relies on the intensity and aesthetic wholeness of the short story to create brief but impactful testimonies of human experience. These stories' concentration in terms of time and meaning, alongside their placement in relation to key epiphanic moments experienced by Rhys's women, enhances their potential to generate an analysis of human personality. More concretely, they bring to centre stage the inner life of the underdog, with their trauma-induced volatility, but also with a deep sense of empathy that stems from their self-awareness. Even in the case of the cat recalled by Sasha or artistic creations like the banjo player, the characters foregrounded in these embedded stories have a psychological complexity that coheres with Rhys's keenness to thoroughly examine the case of the underdog. They are, as argued throughout the chapter, solid individuals that stand as emblems of underdog-to-underdog empathy: just as they arouse the heroines' identification with them, they often engage with these women's emotions and, by the same token, with their stories. Such an interaction brings about a multidirectional dialogue of trauma experiences that shows not only that Rhys's limit-case testimonies tackle representative experiences of collective trauma, but also that they enable other underclass characters to revisit the legacy of their traumas and turn it into a story, whether they are women or men, European or Creole,

inexperienced or seasoned. Thus, Rhys's representative limit-cases offer this array of underdog figures the prominence and agency that they are denied in the metropolis, and this evinces that they constitute a microcosm of the human condition in the face of trauma that transcends identity categories altogether.

5. CONCLUSION

As I have intended to demonstrate in this dissertation, Rhys's acknowledgement that she wrote about herself because that was the only thing she knew of (Vreeland 237) attests to an endeavour of self-introspection involving the use of literature to make sense of her life. The novels under analysis revolve around topics Rhys was well familiar with since they derive from her experience, most of them being in tune with her daily routine. What brings these themes, happenings and reflections together is their potential to bespeak the traumas of the author, in what constitutes an exercise of retrieval of traumatic memories aimed at integrating an otherwise unfathomable traumatic experience. This process lies at the core of the so-called 'limit-case' narratives, the self-representational literary genre under whose rubric Rhys's interwar novels have been read. The identification of common concerns through which the author explores her shattered psyche responds to the perusal of the first limit of autobiography that, according to Gilmore, these narratives challenge: the frontier between truth and fiction. As has been highlighted throughout the dissertation, the very nature of the traumatic event hinders any attempt to represent it as it happened. Hence, Rhys's frequent blending of autobiographical and fictional elements, manifested in her tendency to revisit different events or feelings under different guises, allows for an articulation of trauma that helped her give expression to her plight, making it tangible. Rhys's experience of trauma leaks into the representation of her protagonists' psyche, and in all her modernist novels such an inward turn reveals a minute depiction of the workings of trauma, from manifestations like dissociation, hypervigilance and emotional numbness to the stressors that induce both the aggravation and the durability of this condition.

Both the thorough representation of trauma in Rhys's four modernist novels and its interrelation with the author's own ordeal leads us to make a case for a re-reading of her leading

characters. In bringing to the fore the complexity of her heroines' suffering, this dissertation has provided an exploration of these women aimed at transcending their archetypal categorisation as the 'Rhys woman' and, hence, counteracting the offhanded interpretation of their trauma as passivity or as making a scene. Through the insight into their vulnerability as social outcasts, it has been demonstrated that their psychic fractures are the result of systematic oppression. The cumulative effect of social, cultural and gender-based alienation is what informs the complex network of traumas lying at the root of the heroines' distress. Their angst at being metaphorically incarcerated, subjected to mockery on the part of strangers or in need of a respectable attire is provoked by the multiple forms of microaggressions to which they are exposed on a daily basis. It has been found that this form of trauma, which corresponds to what Maria Root has termed 'insidious trauma', is the most common form of trauma in all four Rhys's modernist limit-cases. The shared experience of both the author and her protagonists as victims of insidious trauma has led us to speculate to what extent these narratives speak for other individuals or groups. There is plentiful evidence hinting at their testimonial dimension, which coheres with the second limit of autobiography identified by Gilmore, namely that of representativeness. Rhys's modernist novels bring into conversation the story of the autobiographical subject with that of other invisible people who undergo similar hardships to do with displacement, destituteness and lack of emotional support. The dialogic quality of these modernist texts allows for an assessment of trauma that goes beyond what appertains to the protagonists, hence acquiring a collective outreach that evinces their testimonial nature.

The close reading of the Rhysian heroines' interaction with their surrounding world has revealed that their attention to the life of other vulnerable subjects is a key trigger for the representativeness of Rhys's modernist novels. Though often embracing detachment from society, the autobiographical subject turns her focus to the moral dilemmas, despair or listlessness of people whose predicament is similar to hers. The sustained insight into the

existence of the helpless ones bears witness to some of the social inequalities that marked modern European metropolitan centres like London and Paris during the first decades of the twentieth century, especially in the interwar years. Firstly, Chapter 2 has explored the alienation of those lacking the stable national identity defined by colonial discourse and, on the whole, failing to meet dominant society's standards. In this sense, the in-between women of Rhys's modernist novels have been read as representative of those Anglo-Caribbean migrants that had settled in the metropolis, especially white Creoles. Even if the only clearly Caribbean protagonist in these interwar limit-cases is Anna Morgan, all four heroines go through potentially traumatic situations that apply to these colonial expatriates. The sheer absence of fellow outsiders to identify with and the metropolitan society's disregard for their cultural background are among the many factors that cement their alienation and links them to other faceless figures that cannot claim to an abode. The sense of unbelonging shared by these outcasts has also been found to define the everyday life of the group explored in Chapter 3: interwar *déclassées*. The analysis of the selected novels has delved into the experience of the autobiographical subject as a woman, paying attention to how the imbrication of womanhood and destituteness heightens her alienation while giving rise to new gender-based traumas. Like her real-world counterparts, Rhys's protagonists are disempowered women that lack both the means and the initiative to make a living. Their negative inertia, usually enhanced by their detrimental relationships with former male partners, drags them into a cycle of economic and emotional need in which the recourse to these or other well-off men seems a temporary way of survival. However, in all the targeted Rhys's novels the *déclassé* women return to their abiding helplessness, being ultimately forsaken and, in the case of *Quartet* and *Voyage in the Dark*, being taken advantage of sexually.

The cumulative influence of stressors to do with cultural and gender differences is proof of the intersectionality of the traumas depicted in the limit-case narratives tackled in this

dissertation. Just as Rhys fleshes out the relatable traumas of her heroines drawing on how she coped with issues of ethnicity and gender roles, she puts the spotlight on how belonging to non-affluent social classes leads to the enhancement of insidious trauma. In this respect, my analysis has elaborated on the debates raised in Chapters 2 and 3 to focus on the highly representative plight of ‘the underdog’. The close reading conducted in this dissertation’s final chapter upholds Ford Madox Ford’s oft-quoted remark that Rhys was passionate about stating the case of this wide-reaching social group, which encompasses the sectors discussed in the previous chapter and other characters who do not necessarily fall into those categories. In poring over the suffering of the underdog, my analysis further underscores the sophistication of Rhys’s representation of trauma while laying bare the psychological complexity of these neglected characters. It has been stressed through this close reading that such an in-depth depiction of the underdog responds to Rhys’s urge to move beyond her inertia and rekindle her empathy for these people, as she confessed in “The Trial of Jean Rhys”. This undertaking, facilitated by the act of storytelling, can be said to encapsulate how Rhys’s modernist novels successfully challenge the limits of autobiography pointed out by Gilmore. Indeed, Rhys’s attention to underdog life allowed her to make sense of her inner turmoil through fiction and ultimately link her traumas—and, by extension, those of her women—to a series of underdog figures, thus turning her novels into a testimony of individual and collective trauma.

In stressing the plentiful connections between individual and collective traumas, the examination of Rhys’s interwar novels through the limit-case lens has brought to centre stage these narratives’ relationality. The emphasis on this issue leads us to expand on the twenty-first-century body of research that revisits Rhys through contemporary foci such as transnationality, new materialisms, ecocriticism or posthumanism. Indeed, relationality can be said to be a defining trait of our age, since we live in a global society characterised by hyperconnectivity. In other words, our present world offers us multiple opportunities of

interacting with other selves. As Christian Moraru has remarked, we are leaving behind the “egology” (70) defining the modern world to move towards a paradigm shift he terms ‘cosmodernism’, whose main trait is “being-in-relation, with one another” (2). In this sense, this dissertation endorses a network-like conception of trauma that underscores the dialogue between the different trauma narratives that give shape to the Rhysian limit-case as a unit. Following Gilmore’s theses in *The Limits of Autobiography*, it has been noted that this relational dialogue is twofold: it starts with the criss-crossing of the author’s biography and the experience of her protagonists and culminates with the interplay of the heroines’ testimony with the little stories of other underdog figures. My view of self-representational trauma narratives as inducing a relational dialogue between survivors not only points to well-trodden debates such as the healing power of literature or the difficulty to separate one’s experience from that of others; it gives pride of place to the relatability and shareability of trauma narratives, and how these qualities contribute to strengthening interpersonal bonds between trauma survivors. To put it differently, this dissertation has sought to underline that the Rhysian autobiographical subject depicted in her modernist novels ultimately makes sense of her emotional wounds when being assessed in relation to others’ experiences.

In a similar vein, the reading of Rhys’s modernist limit-cases as inherently relational has called attention to the role of the dialogue between underdog trauma stories as a form of resistance. Except for some punctual cases in which the victims are so drained to engage with their peers’ feelings, the Rhysian underdogs have been shown to be kept alive by their drive toward empathy. Their awareness of a common pain enables them to counteract the neglect of mainstream society while prompting their urge to narrativise their life stories. The ensuing act of confession, so central in testimonies, allows them to temporarily cope with their alienation as they realise that they are not completely alone. In this respect, the emphasis laid on the testimonial nature of Rhys’s interwar texts hints at a reconsideration of modernist subjectivity,

characterised by self-absorption, emotional paralysis and utter detachment from society. In this fashion, some possible avenues for future research might involve addressing her modernist novels from the lens of affect studies or recent theories of intimacy. These approaches, which largely rely on close reading as an act of intimacy, may shed new light on the emotive bonds between the Rhysian autobiographical subject and on the ways in which these texts elicit empathic responses from readers. At the same time, an analysis of Rhys's modernist novels based on affect and intimacy might broaden the scope of this dissertation to include the anxieties of characters belonging to the social elites. This would be particularly interesting in the case of those Rhysian figures who play the role of the intruder, such as the Heidlars, Walter Jeffries or, in a way, Mr Mackenzie. Ruthless though they might seem, they are full-fledged characters that sporadically show signs of unsteadiness, melancholia, and apprehension, both when being introduced by the narrative voice and during their interactions with the Rhysian protagonists.

As with the affect-focused approach, the study of Rhys as a modernist writer would benefit from an acknowledgement of how her interwar novels hint at the global dimension of this artistic movement. This dissertation has raised a number of debates that undermine the canonical focus on Western European and American modernist expressions. All along the analysis, especially in Chapters 2 and 4, there has been an emphasis on some recurrent topics evincing that her work oversteps conventional geographical bounds of modernism. Some of these concerns are the following: the liminality of Rhys, the hesitancy as to some of her women's Englishness, Anna's Creoleness, the characters' sense of alienation in an urban space where topographical, cultural or class-based boundaries are well defined, the polycentric identity of some of the underdogs the protagonists interact with, or the idea of the voyage. All these discussions contribute to laying the groundwork for a transnational approach to Rhys that, in keeping with the recent volume by Lopoukhine et al., foregrounds the boundless

outreach of her work. The limitlessness of Rhys's writings, encapsulated in the limit-case approach taken in this dissertation, corroborates the verdict Wilson and Johnson arrive at in their critical study: Rhys still matters. Four decades after the first large-scale scholarly analyses of her work, there is a long way to go in Rhysian studies, as her inherently perennial work easily adapts to the ever-changing world we live in. The continuing revisitations of her literary heritage in our present times are proof that she managed to create a timeless set of testimonial narratives whose mapping of human experiences—individual or collective, shattering or renewing—is always on the making.

CONCLUSIONES

Como se ha intentado demostrar a lo largo de la tesis, la admisión por parte de Rhys de que su obra versaba sobre sí misma porque era lo único que conocía (Vreeland 237) es indicativa de un esfuerzo de introspección destinado a dar sentido a su vida mediante la literatura. Las novelas sometidas a estudios abordan temas con los que Rhys estaba muy familiarizada ya que derivan de su experiencia, estando la mayoría de ellos presentes en su día a día. El denominador común de estas experiencias y reflexiones es su potencial para revelar los traumas de la autora, en lo que constituye un ejercicio de recuperación de recuerdos destinado a integrar una experiencia traumática de otro modo insondable. Este proceso es uno de los rasgos centrales de los llamados «casos límite», el género literario de autorrepresentación bajo cuyos presupuestos se han analizado las novelas modernistas de Rhys. A través de la identificación de una serie de preocupaciones cuya exploración permite a Rhys entender la fragmentación de su alma, se ha puesto de relieve el primero de los límites de la autobiografía que, según Gilmore, estas narraciones subvierten: la frontera entre verdad y ficción. Se ha puesto de manifiesto que la propia naturaleza del trauma dificulta cualquier intento de representarlo. Por consiguiente, lo que hace posible que la experiencia traumática de Rhys se convierta en una narrativa coherente y tangible es la confluencia de elementos autobiográficos y ficticios, patente en la persistencia de ciertos temas o dilemas que se abordan con diversos pretextos. La dimensión psicológica de las heroínas de Rhys bebe de las fuentes del sufrimiento de su artífice, y dicho impulso introspectivo, presente en toda su obra modernista, da como resultado una representación pormenorizada del fenómeno del trauma, desde manifestaciones como la disociación, la hipervigilancia o la represión de emociones hasta aquellos factores de estrés que afectan a la intensidad y durabilidad del trastorno.

La minuciosa representación del trauma en las cuatro novelas modernistas de Rhys, así como la interrelación de estas vivencias con el propio calvario de la autora, nos llevan a abogar por una reinterpretación de sus protagonistas femeninas. Al poner de manifiesto la complejidad de la miseria de sus heroínas, se ha destacado la necesidad de trascender la categorización de estas mujeres como la «*Rhys woman*» inactiva y propensa a arranques de furia. Mediante el análisis de su vulnerabilidad social y su rol marginal en la metrópoli europea de entreguerras, se ha subrayado que sus traumas son el producto de una opresión sistemática. El efecto acumulativo de la alienación social, cultural y de género conforma la red de traumas subyacente a la angustia existencial de las heroínas. Su desazón al estar metafóricamente encarceladas en la sociedad de su época, ser objeto de burlas o sentir la necesidad de vestirse de forma respetable está causada por el cúmulo de microagresiones a las que están expuestas a diario. Se ha explicado que este trauma, correspondiente a lo que Maria Root denomina «trauma insidioso», es el más común en las obras abordadas en este estudio. La experiencia compartida de la autora y sus protagonistas como víctimas de un trauma insidioso nos ha llevado a especular hasta qué punto estos testimonios son representativos de otros individuos o colectivos. Se han hallado abundantes indicios que apuntan a la dimensión testimonial de estas obras, lo cual concuerda con el segundo límite de la autobiografía según Gilmore, a saber, el de la representatividad. Las cuatro novelas modernistas de Rhys ponen en conversación la historia del sujeto autobiográfico con la de otras personas marginadas que sufren penurias análogas de enajenación, destitución y falta de apoyo emocional. La dimensión dialógica de estos textos permite una valoración del trauma que trasciende la experiencia individual, adquiriendo así un alcance colectivo que evidencia su naturaleza testimonial.

El análisis de la interacción de las heroínas rhysonianas con el mundo que las rodea ha desvelado que la atención de estas mujeres a la miseria de otros sujetos vulnerables es un detonante clave de la representatividad de las novelas modernistas de Rhys. Aunque a menudo

aboga por su distanciamiento de la sociedad, el sujeto autobiográfico dirige su atención hacia los dilemas morales, la desesperación o la apatía de aquellas personas cuyo predicamento es similar al suyo. El papel fundamental que juegan los desamparados en la obra modernista de Rhys saca a la luz algunas de las desigualdades sociales imperantes en metrópolis europeas como Londres y París durante las primeras décadas del siglo XX, en especial en el período de entreguerras. En primer lugar, en el capítulo 2 se ha analizado la enajenación de quienes no se ajustaban a los moldes de la identidad nacional estable definida por el discurso colonial y, en general, no alcanzaban los estándares de la sociedad dominante. En este sentido, las mujeres liminales de las novelas modernistas de Rhys se han interpretado como representativas de los emigrantes anglo-caribeños que se habían asentado en la metrópoli, especialmente los criollos blancos. Aunque la única heroína claramente caribeña en estos «casos límite» sea Anna Morgan, las cuatro protagonistas sufren situaciones potencialmente traumáticas que guardan relación con la experiencia de dichos expatriados de las colonias. La falta de compatriotas con los que identificarse y el desprecio de la sociedad por su bagaje culturales son algunos de los muchos factores que explican su enajenación, vinculada a la de otros desvalidos que nunca llegan a alcanzar un sentido de pertenencia. Dicho sentimiento también caracteriza la experiencia del grupo social abordado en el capítulo 3: las *déclassées* de entreguerras. En este apartado se ha ahondado en la experiencia del sujeto autobiográfico como mujer, centrándonos en cómo la imbricación de feminidad y defenestración agudiza su enajenación a la vez que da lugar a nuevos traumas de género. Al igual que sus homólogas del mundo real, las protagonistas rhysonianas son mujeres que carecen de empoderamiento, acción y medios de subsistencia. Su inercia negativa, agravada por sus relaciones con distintas parejas masculinas, las arrastra a un círculo vicioso de necesidad económica y emocional en el que aferrarse al hombre supone la única forma temporal de supervivencia. A pesar de ello, en los «casos límite» de Rhys estas

mujeres acaban volviendo a la casilla de salida al ser abandonadas y, en el caso de *Quartet* y *Voyage in the Dark*, manipuladas con fines sexuales.

La influencia conjunta de los factores estresantes ligados a las diferencias culturales y de género evidencia la interseccionalidad de los traumas narrados en los casos límite de Rhys. La autora no solamente articula los traumas representativos de sus heroínas en base a su opresión por razones de etnia o género, sino que pone de relieve cómo la pertenencia a clases sociales en ocasiones se traduce en una experiencia de trauma insidioso. En este sentido, mi análisis ha profundizado en los debates planteados en los capítulos 2 y 3 para centrarse en la situación sumamente representativa de los *underdog*. El análisis realizado en el último capítulo de esta tesis sustenta la observación que realizó Ford Madox Ford de que a Rhys le apasionaba dar protagonismo a la experiencia de este grupo social, que engloba a los colectivos analizados en los capítulos anteriores y a otros personajes que no pertenecen necesariamente a dichos grupos sociales. Al profundizar en el sufrimiento de los desvalidos, este estudio subraya de manera más evidente el grado de sofisticación de la representación que Rhys hace del trauma, al mismo tiempo que muestra la complejidad psicológica de estos personajes. Se ha defendido que una representación tan profunda de los desvalidos responde al deseo urgente que siente Rhys por superar su inercia y reavivar su empatía por estas personas, como confesó en «The Trial of Jean Rhys». Podría decirse que este esfuerzo, manifestado en su urgencia por contar historias, es indicativo del modo en que estas novelas ponen en entredicho los límites de la autobiografía señalados por Gilmore. De hecho, el foco que Rhys pone en la vida de los desvalidos le permitió dar sentido a su fragmentación interior a través de la ficción y, en última instancia, relacionar su experiencia traumática—y, del mismo modo, la de sus protagonistas femeninas—con la de una serie de figuras desvalidas, dando como resultado una obra literaria que se puede considerar un testimonio de traumas individuales y colectivos.

Al hacer hincapié en las múltiples conexiones entre el trauma individual y colectivo, el análisis de las novelas de entreguerras de Rhys como casos límite ha puesto en primer plano la relacionalidad de estas obras. El énfasis en dicha relacionalidad nos conduce a la reevaluación de Jean Rhys a través de focos contemporáneos como la transnacionalidad, los nuevos materialismos, la ecocrítica o el posthumanismo. En efecto, puede decirse que la relacionalidad es un rasgo definitorio de nuestra época, ya que vivimos en una sociedad global caracterizada por la hiperconectividad. Dicho de otra forma, nuestro mundo actual ofrece múltiples oportunidades de interacción con otros sujetos. Como arguye Christian Moraru, estamos dejando atrás la «egología» (70) inherente al mundo moderno para pasar a un cambio de paradigma que él denomina «cosmodernismo», cuyo rasgo definitorio es «estar-en-relación, unos con otros» (2). En este sentido, esta tesis adopta una concepción del trauma en forma de red con el fin de acentuar el diálogo entre las diferentes narrativas del trauma que sustentan los «casos límite» de Rhys. Basándose en los postulados de Gilmore, se ha señalado que este diálogo relacional es doble: comienza con el encuentro entre la biografía de la autora y la experiencia de sus protagonistas y culmina con la interacción del testimonio de las heroínas con las pequeñas historias de otras figuras desvalidas. Mi visión de las narrativas de trauma autorrepresentativas como instigadoras de un diálogo relacional entre supervivientes de trauma no solamente sugiere debates muy conocidos en los estudios de trauma—la función terapéutica de la literatura o la dificultad de separar la experiencia propia de la ajena entre ellos—; este enfoque también subraya la relacionalidad y la representatividad de las narrativas de trauma, y también cómo estas cualidades pueden reforzar los lazos afectivos entre supervivientes de traumas. Dicho de otra forma, esta tesis defiende que el sujeto autobiográfico que Rhys representa en sus novelas modernistas acaba da sentido a sus traumas cuando los evalúa en relación con las experiencias traumáticas de otros seres.

En líneas similares, el estudio de los «casos límite» modernistas de Rhys como una obra intrínsecamente relacional ha puesto de relieve el papel del diálogo entre historias traumáticas de desvalidos como forma de resistencia. Excepto en algunos casos puntuales en los que las víctimas se encuentran demasiado indolentes para escuchar las emociones de sus semejantes, se ha evidenciado que el motor último de los desvalidos rhybianos es su impulso hacia la empatía. Su conciencia de un dolor común les permite contrarrestar el olvido de la sociedad dominante, a la par que les impulsa a narrar sus historias vitales. El ulterior acto de confesión, que juega un rol tan central en los testimonios, les permite hacer frente a su alienación de forma temporal, al entender de que no están completamente solos. En este sentido, el énfasis puesto en la naturaleza testimonial de los textos de Rhys de entreguerras sugiere una reconsideración de la subjetividad modernista, caracterizada por el ensimismamiento del ser, su parálisis emocional y el desapego absoluto para con la sociedad. Así pues, algunas posibles líneas de investigación futura podrían consistir en el análisis de sus novelas modernistas desde el prisma de los estudios de afecto o de las teorías más recientes sobre intimidad. Estos enfoques, que se basan en gran medida en el análisis de texto como acto de intimidad, pueden arrojar luz sobre los vínculos afectivos entre el sujeto autobiográfico rhybiano y el lector, en la medida en que estos testimonios pueden inducir respuestas empáticas por parte de este último. Asimismo, una lectura de las novelas modernistas de Rhys basada en teorías del afecto y la intimidad podría ampliar el alcance de esta tesis, incluyendo así los dilemas morales de los personajes socialmente acomodados. Esto sería especialmente interesante en el caso de aquellas figuras rhybianas que desempeñan el papel del intruso, como los Heidler, Walter Jeffries o, en cierto modo, Mr Mackenzie. Pese a su evidente falta de escrúpulos, son personajes que en ocasiones muestran signos de inseguridad, melancolía y temor, tanto al ser presentados por la voz narrativa como durante sus interacciones con las heroínas.

En sintonía con el enfoque afectivo, los nuevos horizontes de la investigación sobre Rhys como escritora modernista podrían incorporar un análisis de la dimensión global de sus novelas de entreguerras, que va de la mano con una visión transnacional de esta serie de movimientos artísticos. Esta tesis ha planteado una serie de debates que trascienden la visión canónica del modernismo como un movimiento exclusivo de Europa Occidental y Estados Unidos. A lo largo de este estudio, y en particular en los capítulos 2 y 4, se ha hecho en ciertos temas recurrentes que muestran que la obra de Rhys desmonta los límites geográficos convencionales del modernismo. Entre estos asuntos centrales cabe destacar los siguientes: la liminalidad de la autora y sus heroínas, las dudas sobre el vínculo de sus mujeres con «lo inglés», la identidad criolla de Anna, el sentimiento de alienación de los sujetos en un espacio urbano donde las fronteras topográficas, culturales o de clase están bien definidas, la identidad policéntrica de algunos de los personajes desvalidos con los que interactúan las protagonistas o la idea del viaje. En cierto modo, todos estos debates sientan las bases de una aproximación transnacional a Rhys que, en consonancia con el reciente volumen de Lopoukhine et al., resalta el alcance ilimitado de su obra. La ausencia de límites sólidos en la obra de Rhys, sintetizado en la teoría de los «casos límite» que se ha tenido en cuenta en esta tesis, corrobora la hipótesis de Wilson y Johnson de que Rhys sigue siendo importante hoy en día. Cuatro décadas después de los primeros estudios a gran escala de su obra, queda mucho camino por recorrer en la investigación sobre Rhys, puesto que su obra, intrínsecamente perenne, se adapta fácilmente al mundo en constante cambio en el que vivimos. Las continuas reevaluaciones de su legado literario en nuestros días evidencian que Rhys consiguió crear un conjunto atemporal de testimonios literarios cuya cartografía de la experiencia humana—ya sea individual o colectiva, desgarradora o renovadora—está siempre en proceso de (re-)elaboración.

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