

Historiographical metafiction: a postmodern reading of Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Dr. Ancy Eapen

Assistant Prof & Research Supervisor
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Jain Deemed-to-be University
Bangalore

Abstract

'Historiographic metafiction' is a term which has been coined by the Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon in the late 1980s. It incorporates fiction, history and theory. The term is used for works of fiction which combine the literary device of metafiction with historical fiction. It is closely associated with the works of postmodern literature, usually novels. According to Hutcheon, historiographical metafiction are novels which are self-reflexive and yet paradoxically lay claim to historical events and personages. It often employs parody, where each parody constitutes a critique in the way it problematizes them. This process can also be identified as "subversion" for the purpose of exposing suppressed histories to allow the redefinition of reality and truth.

This article attempts to analyse two well-known novels: Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* in this aspect. The study will give a postmodern reading of how history is used by writers of fiction to offer an alternate reading of history, and this can be termed 'historiographical metafiction'.

Historiographical metafiction: a postmodern reading of Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Hayden White, considered to be the historian of this century, has pioneered a new way of writing history, which is termed historiography. He diverged from the conventional empirical method of writing history, to a deconstructionist view of history in his seminal work *Metahistory* (1973) and *The Tropics of Discourse* (1978). In the chapter titled 'The Historical Text as a Literary Device'(1978), White states that a historian performs an essentially poetic act, where he prefigures the historical field and makes it a domain upon which to establish specific theories in order to explain what was really happening in that period. According to White the discipline of history is partly fictional as the historian resorts

to emplotment and chooses a narrative, a structure of explanation for a particular sequence of events. Historiography claims an alternate view of the same events from a different perspective. In his book (1973), White argues that writing history is essentially a literary enterprise: for the historian 'emplots' the past from the facts he obtains through research.

It is a fiction of the historian that the various states of affairs which he constitutes as the beginning, the middle and end, of a course of development are all 'actual' or 'real' and that he has merely recorded 'what happened' in the transition from the inaugural to the terminal phase.(1978,98).

When the world moves on from one state of affairs to another, we make sense of it by imposing a structure on it. In the writing of history, the historian dismantles the already existing structure to justify recording it in another. To recognise this fictive element in historical epistemology is not necessarily the degradation of history but the making of a historiography. It adds to the existing narration of history, by offering alternate histories. This is a postmodern phenomenon.

Michel Foucault challenged the empiricist and reconstructionist theories of history on the grounds that the recorded facts of a historian can only be seen as 'epistemic discursive creations. The data already exists in the form of invented narrative, a trope determined by the one who has recorded it. To Foucault, this data has already been packaged as a figurative code, and it gives the interpretation of an event which is in sync with or against the accepted norms of the period. Foucault terms this 'cultural encodation.'

White gives the example of the various ways in which the French Revolution can be represented: without changing the actual facts of the events, they are decoded and encoded in another way. We see a similar process happening in the novels of Salman Rushdie: *The Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*. These novels can be called historiographical metafiction according to Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon who first spoke about this category in 1980. The term is used to describe works of fiction which combines the literary device of metafiction with historical narratives. The term is closely associated with postmodern literature, mostly novels. Historiographical metafiction is intensely self-reflexive and lays claim to historical events and personages it selects for parody in the particular work of fiction. In doing so it critiques history by employing 'subversion' or 'alternate' reading for the purpose of exposing suppressed histories in order to allow a redefinition of reality and truth. Works that can be put into this category are: Shakespeare's *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*,(1608), John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1996), Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966, 1997, 2000) among many others.

Rushdie's novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* (hereafter written as *MLS*) was written in 1990s, during his exile following the 'fatwa' pronounced on him by the clerics of Iran, for his work *The Satanic Verses*. In *MLS*, Rushdie employs the metaphor of exile and flight to narrate the family saga spanning four generations: it is the story of Gama- Zogoiby, a Portuguese-Catholic-Jewish family, engaged in Spice trade in Cochin. Like the novelist the

narrator Moraes Zogoiby too is in exile, imprisoned in the Alhambra Palace, in Benengeli, Spain. He is the prisoner of Vasco Miranda, who is his mother's former lover and painter and has ordered Moraes to write a memoir about his family in India. Rushdie's novel *MLS* "is a double story --the story of the Moor, of his Indian family and his country, as well as the story of a story, of how and why Moor came to write it" (Beatriz Penas Ibanez et.al) It begins with his imprisonment and ends with him running out of the Alhambra towards a fatal end. The story is narrated in retrospection from the memory of Moraes. beginning with the family's origins in Cochin.

In *MLS*, Rushdie uses specific periods in Indian history: the period of the Jewish diaspora in 711BCE and 1492; the arrival of European traders in the fifteenth century to the port city of Cochin, and India of the post independent era, especially Mumbai(Bombay) in the 1990s. The narrator, Moraes Zogoiby is a half-Jew and half-Catholic. His mother, Aurora Zogoiby is descended from the family of the Portuguese adventurer Vasco da Gama, who is said to have come to Cochin in 1502. History records that after reaching the Malabar Coast city of Calicut, in 1498, he arrived in Cochin in 1502. The Rajah of Cochin of that time allowed a factory to be allocated to the Portuguese. Consequently, the Portuguese presence remained in Cochin and soon interracial marriages happened. It produced a new community of Anglo-Indians who were more loyal to England than they were to their own country. Aurora's father Camoens Da Gama, is the son of the Portuguese Francisco Da Gama and his Mangalorean wife Epifania Menezes. Camoens and his brother Aries Da Gama own the Da Gama Spice Company in Cochin that traded in pepper, cardamoms, cashews, cinnamon, ginger, pistachio and cloves. But pepper was "the coveted Black Gold of Malabar" and the traders were "filthy-rich folks" (*MLS* 6).

In *MLS* Rushdie depends on history to fill the background of his fiction. We are told that Moraes,' great-grandfather, Francisco Da Gama joined the Home Rule League that was started by Annie Besant in 1916. It was apolitical organization which aimed at self-government termed as "Home Rule." At the request of Annie Besant, Francisco started a Home Rule League in Cochin and invited dock-labourers, tea-pickers, bazaar coolies and his own workers to join. A few days after the League was founded, Francisco was arrested in connection with an incident where a few dozen militant Leaguers overpowered a small detachment of lightly armed troops and took away their weapons. The next day the League was banned by the British and Francisco put under house arrest on Cabral Island. For the next six months he was in and out of prison: "prison spells, and in his furious political activism between jail terms, ..in accord with Tilak's instructions, he deliberately courted arrest on many occasions,.. " (*MLS*19).

The first part of the narration is set in Cochin of the early twentieth century. Rushdie makes passing references to the political stirrings in India and the rumblings of the freedom struggle, through the character of Francisco Da Gama. However, instead of a linear narration of history, Rushdie resorts to a critique of the politics in India, through the diverse opinions and positions taken by the Indians, Anglo-Indians and the Indian-Jews living in Cochin. Francisco may have been a patriot, but his wife Epifania believes in the Empire as we see in the following words she says:

‘What are we but Empire’s children? British have given us everything, isn’t it? – Civilisation, law, order, too much. Even your spices that stink up the house they buy out of their generosity, putting clothes on backs and food on children’s plates. Then why speak of such treason and filth up my children’s ears filth up my children’s ears with what-all Godless bunk?’(18)

Even after hearing about the Amritsar Massacre, and the incident of Tagore returning his knighthood to the king, the response of Aurora’s grandmother, Epifania da Gama in Cabral Island was something like this: “ she stopped up her ears and continued to believe, to a degree that was almost blasphemous, in the omnipotent beneficence of the British;”(22). Her views were shared by her elder son Aires, while Camoens’ wife Belle (Aurora’s mother) shared the revolutionary spirit of her father-in-law Francisco. In fact, Belle’s arrival in the family lifted the spirits of an introverted Francisco. Belle kept Camoens informed about the political events of the world, and recited to him Nehru’s speech when he was re-imprisoned in May 1922. The novelist uses the speech to update the readers about the conditions in India: these incidents were a preliminary to the final struggle for independence. We hear from the mouth of Nehru a criticism of the Imperial rule in India.

“Intimidation and terrorism have become the chief instruments of government. Do they imagine that they will thus instil affection for themselves? Affection and loyalty are of the heart. They cannot be extorted at the point of a bayonet”(24).

In 1925 the Da Gama brothers, were sent to prison for fifteen years for the brawl that broke out between their extended relatives, the Menezes and the Lobos; it was however rumoured the arrest was more political than personal. Now the factory had to be managed by the women in the family and soon young Aurora da Gama, the only child of Camoens became the heiress. Abraham Zogoiby, a Jew had been working there as accounts keeper for some time. He was twenty-eight years old. His first encounter with Aurora da Gama, the self-willed, and considerably spoilt daughter of Camoens proved to be a turning point in his life. She fell in love with the handsome Jew. Abraham promised her that he would take care of her, and she surrendered her life into his hands. Despite resistance from both families, they started their life together. In this way Abraham became the owner and manager of the family business enterprise.

There are different strands in the narrative that are interwoven to create the rich tapestry of the story of the Zogoiby family. Through the genealogy of the Gama-Zogoiby family Rushdie makes references to the history of Spain and India in the fifteenth century. We are told that Moraes Zogoiby’s father, Abraham Zogoiby is a descendent of the Sephardim Jews who came to India from the Iberian Peninsula (Spain). They were forced to flee persecution in 1492 by the Alhambra decree.¹ A few families of Sephardi Jews is said to have landed in the coastal city of Cochin. Abraham’s mother, Flory Zogoiby’s ancestor, was among them, she was the mistress of Emperor Boabdil during his period of exile.

Rushdie makes references to the different phases of the Jewish diaspora. We are told that the earliest to arrive on the coasts of Southern India were the Black Jews in 587 BCE: “fleeing Jerusalem from Nebuchadnezzar’s armies five hundred and eighty-seven years before the Christian era”(71). These Jews entered into marital alliances with the local population and soon became Indians. The novel mentions next phase of the Diaspora as coming from Babylon and Persia in 490-518 CE. The Jews assimilated into Indian society by

setting up shops in Cranganore (modern Kannur) and Cochin. Jews from Spain, came to India in 1492, after being expelled from the country by Catholic emperors, Ferdinand and Isabella. Rushdie also makes reference about the “Jews with Arab names” (72); as well as the Muslim-Jew war of 1524 in the Southern peninsula. He describes in detail the destruction of the Cranganore synagogue by the Moors:

..the white Jews of India, Sephardim from Palestine, arrived in numbers (ten thousand approx.) in Year 72 of the Christian Era, fleeing from Roman persecutions. Settling in Cranganore, they hired themselves out as soldiers to local princes. Once upon a time a battle between Cochin’s ruler and his enemy the Zamorin of Calicut..had to be postponed because the Jewish soldiers would not fight on the Sabbath day. (70-71)

This gives the historiography of Southern India in the early periods, before the colonisation of the country. It is important to understand the demography of the coastal regions. Rushdie negotiates the histories of India, Spain, Portugal and the Jewish diaspora, around the fictional narrative of the Gama-Zogoiby family. The title of the novel suggests that the protagonist-narrator Moraes Zogoiby is also the model for the ‘Moor’ series of paintings being done by his artist mother Aurora Zogoiby. To her, he is the Moor. The ‘Last Sigh’ in the title is again a palimpsest technique used by Rushdie. Embedded in it, is the reference to the Moor, Emperor Boabdil of Granada, Spain There is a suggestion that Moraes is a descendant of the Sultan Mohammad XI who ruled Granada in the fifteenth century. He was also called Boabdil which means “the unfortunate one.” The particular period in reference is the Moorish rule over the Iberian peninsula from 711 CE to 1492. ² The kingdom of Granada fell to the Christian forces of King Ferdinand V and Queen Isabella I in 1492. On 2 January, 1492, King Boabdil surrendered Granada to these Christian emperors. The famous ‘sigh’ mentioned in the title is perhaps a conjecture by the novelist to explain the tragic circumstances of Emperor Mohammad XI (Boabdil), the last Sultan of Alhambra, in 1492: who it is said to have looked back at Alhambra and sighed, before fleeing the kingdom.

Moraes doubles up as the Moor, Emperor Mohammad IX of Granada, Spain. Rushdie juggles fact and fiction by simultaneously travelling backward and forward between time periods: 587BCE to the 1990s as well as over territories as distant as Spain and Cochin. The intertwining of fact and fiction is used to create a metafiction of historiography. As is typical of Rushdie’s style it’s a non-linear narration that he employs to tell the story of Boabdil-the Moor and Moraes Zogoiby’s family. His grandmother (Flory Zogoiby) on his father’s side has evidences to show her as being one of the descendants of the Serpadim Jews that arrived in these parts in the fifteenth century.

There is hint of a clandestine affair between the exiled Moor Boabdil and the Jewish woman who served as his mistress for few years before his death. The evidence of that liaison is the “dark green turban” and the dagger lying inside the padlocked box of Flory Zogoiby, and which Abraham discovered one day, when he was ten years old. When he asked his father, Solomon Castile as to how the “royal Moorish hat” had come to be in “a toothless woman’s box” his father had replied that it was “the uneasy jewellery of shame” (79). As the

years went by, Abraham sought the help of the oldest member of their Jewish community, Moshe Cohen to piece together the secret:

After years by his side, this anonymous ancestor crept away from crumbling Boabdil, and took ship for India, with a great treasure in her baggage, and a male child in her belly; from whom after many years begats, came Abraham himself (82)

The technique of magic realism is successfully used by Rushdie to join lives across centuries and nationalities. The ‘last sigh’ which the Moorish Emperor gave in tears, while looking for one last time at the Alhambra, and the glory of the Andulas,³ has been passed on to Abraham in the form of asthmatic attacks which he suffers periodically. The hidden treasures in the possession of Flory Zogoiby is evidence that the mistress who stayed with Boabdil during his last few years of exile, after his flight from Granada, was her own ancestor. Abraham confronts his mother with these truths and questions her objection to him marrying Aurora da Gama a Catholic and heiress of the Gama Spice Trading Company. As he sarcastically says: “My mother who insists on the purity of our race, what say you to your forefather the Moor?” (82)

According to Hutcheon in “A Poetics of Postmodernism”, works of historiographical metafiction while using historical events and personages, are also self-reflexive. By locating part of his narrative in Spain, Rushdie uses the political history of Spain to weave a metanarrative of the Gama-Zogoiby family of the twentieth century. The history of Spain and India is the historiography on which Rushdie builds his fictional narrative about the Gama-Zogoiby family. The novel is a multi-layered narrative where history plays a significant role. Historical events and personages are referred to in parodic terms too. Rushdie does not resort to a linear narration of history; instead uses historical interventions in the narrative. Historiography of India unfolds within the fictional narrative. Rushdie weaves poetry into the documentary-style narration of the riots of January 1993:

Bombay blew apart. Here’s what I’ve been told: three hundred kilograms of RDX explosives were used.. Also timers, detonators, the works. There had been nothing like it in the history of the city. Nothing so cold-blooded, so calculated, so cruel...Bits of bodies were lying everywhere; human and animal blood, guts and bones. Vultures, so drunk on flesh that they sat lop-sidedly on rooftops, waiting for appetite to return. (371-72).

The 1990s was a significant period in India’s history: the demolition of the Babri Masjid (December 6, 1992), followed by communal riots in Mumbai (Bombay) in January 1993. Just before the decade started there was Operation Bluestar (1 June-8 June 1984), followed by the assassination of the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi by two of her own bodyguards on 31 October 1984. Rushdie locates the origins of the crisis in India’s secularist discourse in the period of Emergency in India, in 1975, when Civil Law was suspended. Rushdie quotes the words of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, when, as Prime Minister she came to attend the silver jubilee celebrations of the Jewish Synagogue on December 15, 1968: “secularism in India does not mean animosity towards religious [. . .]It implies equal respect for all religions [. . .]”

It is a matter of pride for us in India that all great religions in the world are respected in our country” (Katz 57). It is this liberal ideology of secularism and tolerance that Rushdie critiques.

The concept of an individual’s freedom within the country is a central discourse in the narrative. This is not surprising, given the fact that the novel was the first major work of fiction to be written by Rushdie in exile. *MLS* is emblematic of the writer’s stance on the politics of his homeland as well as the issue of the freedom of expression. The novel critiques the politics of the country by focusing on the minorities: Portuguese-Catholics, Indian-Jews, and Indian-Muslims. The demolition of the seventeenth-century old mosque by a group of Hindu fundamentalists, is read as a dangerous trend that would threaten the fabric of India’s secularism and pluralist culture. The growth of religious, political and linguistic fundamentalism is evident; the danger seems to arise from within the country as we are told by the novelist that “Bombay will fall like Granada”(372).

Rushdie’s message in *MLS* is clearly to show the processes which lead societies to change for the worse. He draws a comparison between two nations: Spain and India. While Spain in the twentieth century is pluralist and peaceful with a society made up of Christians, Jews and Muslims, India is seeing the growth of nationalism which is radicalised by inter-ethnic intolerance as well as loss of space for freedom and exchange. And the narrator, Moraes Zogoiby has this to say: “..people had begun to speak of the coming kingdom of Lord Ram, and they say that the country’s ‘Mughals’ must be taught the same lesson that the mill workers had so painfully learned.” We are told that Bombay, the commercial capital of India, and where Abraham Zogoiby had shifted his family and business, was in the grip of rising fundamentalism: Raman Fielding was the leader. It is suggested that this character is a parody of Bal Thackeray. Fielding spoke about “the need to tame the country’s minorities, to subject one and all to the tough-loving rule of Ram” (309).

The nation was in the grip of religious fanaticism, and Rushdie captures it all in the last sections of this novel. By rendering a historical metanarrative of the Portuguese, and the Jews in the coastal port cities of Cochin, Quilon and Calicut, Rushdie validates India’s secularism. The minority groups are also an integral part of India. Their very existence challenge the nationalist myth of a monolithic nation-state. The narrator Moraes Zogoiby’s lineage itself is evidence of multiple races and communities. He calls himself a ‘catjew,’ neither Catholic (like his mother) nor Jewish (like his father), but a combination of both. His parents do not introduce him to any one particular belief systems. He is left to grow up as a secular Indian, and a global identity, transcending all national boundaries. He becomes in Rushdie’s work a representative of all who have fought against the dictates of sovereignty: Christ, Luther and Boabdil.

The title of the novel, clearly links India’s history with that of Spain and gives the writer a chance to compare the two countries. The disintegration of Moorish Spain during the time of Emperor Boabdil IX followed by the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from the country by Christian Emperors, is repudiated in the rejection of Nehru’s secular, pluralist vision of India by right-wing ideology of Hindutva. The ‘Mumbai Axis’ is the parody name Rushdie uses in his metafiction, for the Shiv Sena party which was growing in Maharashtra in

those days. It is referred to as MA and it threatened to swallow the secular fabric of the state, and in turn the country by its insistence on linguistic rigidities of ‘Maharashtra for the Maharashtrians.’(Mufti 246).

In Bombay Central Moraes Zogoiby’s family is annihilated. Moraes’s mother tumbles to her death; his father and sister die separately in bomb explosions that ripped through Bombay in the riots of January 1993. Referring to the demolition of the Mosque and events following it , the writer has this to say: “The building had fallen. It was time for consequences, not backward glances: for what- happened-next, not what might or might not have gone before” (363). Moraes had left Bombay just days before the riots on the advice of his father. Abraham had asked him to go and meet Vasco Miranda in Alhambra Castle, Spain, to know more about his mother, Aurora Zogoiby.

Michel de Certeau maintained that ‘fiction’ is the repressed Other of historical discourse. A true account of events in documentary manner as the historians give, can only give a very small portion of ‘reality’. The real would be everything that can be truthfully said about the particular reality: what it could ‘possibly’ be. Perhaps this was also what Aristotle meant when he spoke about the complementarity of history and poetry and joining both of them to philosophy in the human effort to represent, imagine and think the world in its totality, both actual and possible, real and imagined, known and experienced. De Certeau goes on to assert that the return of the repressed Other (fiction) in history creates the simulacrum (the novel) that the history refuses to be. In his essay “Fiction for the Purposes of History”, Richard Slotkin argues that historical fiction (history in fiction) can stimulate in a student an interest to study history. Historical fiction can also be a valuable adjunct to the work of historians in their discipline. A novel can be as accurate as history in telling what happened when, and how. The novel tests historical hypotheses by a kind of thought-experiment.

Jean Rhys’ novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*, published in 1966, is located in the turbulent phase of Colonial history in the Caribbean islands. The novel brings out the collapse of the social order in the Caribbean islands with the Emancipation Bill that was passed by the Britain in 1833. Rhys’ narrative exposes the life of the Creole community in the aftermath of the Abolition policy. Jean Rhys takes her subject from Charlotte Bronte’s eighteenth century popular Victorian novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847). In the novel, Rochester’s first wife is a Creole and is portrayed as being insane. Being a Creole herself, Rhys was annoyed, because she knew the reality of the Creoles more than the Victorian English woman-writer. Therefore, she challenged the English version of Bertha Mason, with her portrayal of Antionette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Rhys interpreted the colonial underpinning of Rochester’s thought and actions and wrote the story about white Creole women of the Caribbean islands, who had been displaced by a new wave of colonizers, greedy, calculating, bachelors from England who wished to inherit the plantations free: by virtue of marriage to the lonely and helpless women. Therefore Mr. Mason decides to marry the pretty widow Annette. We hear the comment made by one of the women at the wedding: “ -he came to make money as they all do. Some of the big estates are going cheap” (13). There were many Englishmen like Mr. Mason and Rochester, who took advantage of the situation and arrived from England to marry Creole heiresses.

Aspects of colonialism and the colonial spirit lie embedded in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The expansion of British imperialism and the coming up of the colonies in the West and East Indies was creating concerns regarding a national identity in the eighteenth century. There was a need for a distinction to be made between the multicultural, colonized British subjects and the racially, culturally and religiously homogenous Britons who possessed the coveted “Englishness.” Such ideas of English superiority found its voice in the narratives of English novels, especially those written in the Romantic and Victorian period. Rhys’ novel of 1966, became the Creole answer to Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). Rhys attempted to resist the superiority of English attitudes found in Bronte’s novel by engaging in what Homi Bhabha termed colonial mimicry. So Antionette is seen constantly defining herself as different from the blacks on the island: she was more white, more European, more English. However, she is rejected by the English and the blacks alike. To the Britisher, the Creoles had forfeited their “Englishness” through their colonial contamination. Rochester’s description of his Creole wife is: “Long, sad, dark, alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or Europeans either”(40).

The problem of identity troubles the Creoles in the Caribbean, especially after the Abolition Bill of 1833. For earlier they were the masters, white, wealthy and powerful and the locals were blacks who were the same race as the slaves owned by the white masters. But now the masters had lost the slaves with the Empire’s new policy and become victims of racial hostility and vengeance. They were at the mercy of the local black population. Antionette and Annette are forced to endure humiliation from the local population. Annette “still rode about every morning not caring that the black people stood about in groups to jeer at her, especially after her riding clothes grew shabby.” (5). Antoinette confesses: “ I never looked at any strange negro. They hated us. They called us white cockroaches” (9). Herein lies the paradox of their identity, for being Creole, is considered impure race by English standards. Before the Emancipation Bill, the ‘white niggers’ were wealthy and so the black slaves and locals obeyed them. But now the situation had changed. They were just white niggers without any money and the blacks considered themselves superior to them.

The unfortunate story of Annette and her daughter Antionette is a realistic representation of most Creole women in the West Indies of the 1830s. Rhys was especially haunted by the plight of the Creole heiresses. She saw them as tragic women exploited for the slavery-based wealth they had inherited. Rhys’ novel shifts between Coulibri, in Jamaica in the 1830s, Granbois, near Massacre, in Dominica in the 1840s and finally to Thornfield Hall in England. The novel does not give exact dates, but we know that it is set in Jamaica at some time after 1834 for at the end of Part I, Antionette mentions that she entered the convent in 1839.

The period is a moment of upheaval in the West Indies. The Emancipation Bill caused a sudden shift in the socio-economic condition of the colonies. The plantation owners could no longer keep slaves to work on the plantations since now they had become free. Consequently plantations lay abandoned, unkempt and uncultivated: “ All Coulibri Estate had gone wild..gone to bush. No more slavery—why should *anybody* work ?”(6). This resulted in a sudden decrease in revenue to the plantation owners. Many of them became poor. he failure

of Britain to give compensation to the plantation owners for the loss of the slaves compounded their economic problem.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* we see evidences of poverty in the Cosway family after the untimely death of Mr. Cosway. We are told that Antionette possessed only two clean dresses when she was a young ten-year-old child. This angers Annette because she begins to understand the reality of her situation. She was a poor widow with two children and no one to take care of the plantations left by her late husband, Mr. Cosway.

The Bill did not grant immediate freedom to the slaves. They had to serve a period of five years as apprentice before they could finally leave the services of their owners. This created hostility between the white owners and the disgruntled slaves. They openly showed their antagonism through defiance and rudeness. The European plantation owners found themselves at the receiving end of a situation they were least prepared for. It is this condition which influenced Annette to accept the marriage proposal of an Englishman named Mr. Mason, newly arrived from England, and seemingly wealthy and a gentleman.

If Annette devised a way out of her impoverished state by marrying Mr. Mason, there were others like her neighbour Mr. Luttrell who suffered because the compensation promised by the Empire to the plantation owners for letting the slaves go, was not fulfilled. Mr. Luttrell, their neighbour and owner of Nelson's Nest, grew tired of waiting for the compensation. "He shot his dog, one day and swam into the sea and was gone for always" (5). His house stood abandoned and soon black people said it was haunted. They kept away from the place.

Rhys' novel exposes the barbarity and cruelty in human nature, irrespective of race or culture. Both Annette and Antoinette become colonised subjects of the cruel colonizer, their English husbands. Ironically it is the blacks who, later, become their masters or colonizers in the dynamics of 'reverse colonialism.' The superior attitude of Mr. Mason is clearly evident when he laughs away the warning of imminent danger given by Annette. After their marriage she had repeatedly told him: "I will not stay at Coulibri any longer. It is not safe." (17). But, with the overconfidence, typical of the colonials, he rejected the wisdom of the 'inferior race' and laughed off the words of his pretty Creole wife saying: 'You talk so wildly. And you are so mistaken' (17). We see Annette's fears coming true when Coulibri is set on fire by the locals. Even at that moment Mason says: "there's no reason to be alarmed." He just put it down to mischief being played on them by "a handful of drunken negroes" (19). Although the family escapes alive, Pierre gets badly burnt and dies. Annette is unable to bear the loss of her house and her son. She becomes hysterical and disoriented. Mr. Mason leaves her to the care of Christophine, the black housekeeper, and goes to Trinidad on business, and from there to England. In all this we see the attitude of the colonial masters to the colonial subjects. Mason abandons Annette to her demented life in the care of Christophine.

Rhys portrayal of the white-black interaction is seen as becoming problematic after the Abolition Bill. There are some loyal blacks, like the carriage-driver, Baptiste, who remain with the Cosways even after their misfortune. Christophine, is more than a maid to the household. She seems to care for the family. However, she also changes as later on we find

her using Annette for her own profit. There is Amelie the servant girl who comes to help Antoinette, in Granbois. But she has no love for the bride. She gives herself freely to Rochester and afterwards shouts at Antoinette, “I hit you back , white cockroach,..”(62).

In Rhys’ novel, Rochester represents the authoritarian colonialist of the mid-nineteenth century England. He has been tutored from an early age to suppress the self, to hide his true feelings. He obeys his father’s advice to travel to the West Indies and seek his fortune by marrying a Creole heiress. He is a pure Englishman, and he is not comfortable with his Creole wife. Though, in the beginning he is attracted to her beauty and even persuades her to marry him despite her misgivings, once he has ‘conquered’ her through marriage he allows himself to be misled by gossips about her and her mother. We see in Rochester, the greed and avarice of the eighteenth-nineteenth century colonizer who wants to conquer and possess the colonial subject for his own profit. As the relationship between them deteriorates, Antionette pleads with him to give her some money so that she could go and live her own life. But he refuses to do so. He tortures her by taking the black girl Amelia blatantly, ignoring all courtesies of a gentleman. He has already charted the future of his wife. As he says: “..she’ll have no lover, for I don’t want her and she’ll see no other”(107).

Rochester and Mr. Mason are the new colonizers of the Caribbean Islands who exploit the socio-political situation for their own profit. It is clear that Creoles are considered inferior to the Europeans. Just as slaves would be re-named by the slave -owners, in the same way Rochester has re-christened Antoinette as Bertha, despite her protests. Daniel Cosway is also known as Esau. Rochester tells Antionette that she is not English or European. Antionette enacts her ‘middle passage’ when she is taken from her native home in Jamaica, ‘like a slave’(bound and against her wishes) to Thornfield Hall, England by her husband.

Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) suggests that classic realist fiction in Europe of the nineteenth century developed because of the ‘power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging”(xiii). It is seen as a way of asserting cultural superiority. Rhys has portrayed realistically the socio-historical and socio-political milieu of the mid-nineteenth century. Like Rushdie, she has chosen a particular period in the history of the West Indies as background for her metafiction on Charlotte Bronte’s fictional work *Jane Eyre* (1847). Throughout the novel Rhys has reflected the social hierarchy the British imposed upon the West Indies. The Creoles will always be the Other in the politics of colonialism. This is the reason of Annette and Antionette being rejected by their English husbands. Rhys has succeeded in giving the Creole version of Charlotte Bronte’s Victorian novel *Jane Eyre*.

Endnote

1. Alhambra Decree also known as Edict of expulsion was issued on 31 March 1492 by the joint Catholic Monarchs of Spain. It ordered the expulsion of practicing Jews from the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon in Spain.
2. The Moors were nomadic people from North Africa, originally inhabitants of Mauretania. They invaded Spain in 711, taking their Islamic religion and culture with

them. The Moors crossed the strait of Gibraltar from Northern Africa and invaded the Iberian peninsula 'Andalus' (Spain under the Visigoths). Many writers refer to Moorish rule over Spain spanning the 800 years from 711 to 1492.

3. Andalus or Al-Andalus was the name given by Muslim sources during the Middle Ages to the territory in the Iberian Peninsula which was culturally and religiously linked with them.

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