

Cristina-Georgiana Voicu, *Exploring Cultural Identities in Jean Rhys' Fiction*, Walter De Gruyter, Berlin, 2014.

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In a world where the last stage of the decadent postmodernity interferes with the initial period of trans-modernism, Cristina Voicu proposes a complex type topic concerning *cultural identity*, within a fictional context, applied to the creation of the Dominican writer Jean Rhys. In the extensive theoretical introduction, "Identity in the Postcolonial Paradigm," which occupies nearly a third of the volume, comprising seven different chapters, including "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," "Types of Cultural Identity," "Hybridity versus Cultural Alterity," "Caribbean Cultural Creolization," the author starts with the basic lines (etymological, for instance) to subtle comments surprising the relationship between diaspora and hybridity, for example, considering the kind of genetic of the identity constructs and invoking famous names like Anthony Smith, Stuart Hall, William Connolly, Robert Young, Frantz Fanon, Paul Gilroy, and many others. The main thesis from which it starts is to identify the postcolonial cultures as hybrid, fragmented due to the geo-social process beyond, in the broad sense of the word, implying the de-territorialization of those cultures, together with their protean becoming as well as their trans-culturalization. Here, C. Voicu insists on fractal identities, i.e. on those almost metonymic fictional aspects, which preserve the whole, while dissociating the notional pairs such as: margin versus center or master versus slave, continuing with little shades related to super-syncretism and hyper-hybridity.

On one hand, it outlines the subtle idea of *exoticism* in a contiguous relationship with the concept of (cultural) *otherness*, the image of the "Black Atlantic" as a defining symbol of such literature, of Jean Rhys, who the author deals with in detail. The exotic show of this novelist merges the power of marginality seduction that paradoxically takes, positive characteristics, therefore a "strategic exoticism." On the other hand, it refers to the conceptual couple *exploration-taking*, by which the sense of any individual's identity is determined to a large extent by the exploration and assumptions on which the individual makes in respect of certain personal and social traits. Such demarcations take place in the analysis on the main writings of Jean Rhys: *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Voyage in the Dark*, *Good Morning*, *Midnight*, *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, *Tigers are Better-Looking* thoroughly and profoundly interpreted. Moreover, the author examines the presence of the mirror used by the female character, as an instrument of duplication, and at the same time, the link between identity and alterity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, meaning the continuation of a deep self-reflection. In the chapters on Ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism, there

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are some implications of racism, and then a variety of cultural relativism is pursued. In addition, in the chapter "Ethnicity, Identity, Masculinity," the masculine overwhelms the colonial representation, when the womanhood is frequently inserted in the post-colonial paradigms; therefore, the identity crisis of the mid-twentieth century is the only option of the fictional and non-fictional characters from the literature. This leads to a kaleidoscopic identification with the genuine self, up to a point, at the narrative level, and to the intertextuality, at the level of the text itself. In *Voyage in the Dark*, the author notices that the main character, Anna, takes refuge in a world dominated by illusion produced by alcohol, to circumvent the real world, on the one hand, and create a new, distorted, but more authentic for the character's world, thus illustrating the need for integration in the English society, and the resistance to it, on the other. Therefore, eloquent or recurrent expressions such: "The girl I saw was myself yet not quite myself" or the obsessive words such as "too much" on the extra light, on the life of the Caribbean region, achieve the tenuous distinction line between *idio and alter*, which can lead, in another sense, to a serious schizoid state or just to a simple ambivalence.

The critical study of Cristina Voicu could have also been called, *In Search of Identity* because the approach mainly focuses on identifying the particles of the self to all these characters, generally female, together with the clotting of a singular portrait that should expose the special features of the artistic discourse supported by Jean Rhys. The mixture of races, the strangeness of the names, the mix of the specific sounds and colors build the Caribbean imaginary and the legends circulating in this space are frequently mixed with the realistic writing notes: "To conclude, Jean Rhys insists on literary allusions, multi-focality and on various facets of the same reality, which stands for the disconnected form of the narrative structure, and the casual reference to the intertextual relationships of her stories." A relevant observation is that on the writer's pre-texts inducing the configuration of the text itself, such as letters and book excerpts, overheard conversations and gossip and the multi-subject perspective, which includes the alternative focus on the inner states of various characters. Memory as the dominant lens, sometimes convex, sometimes concave, usually augments the feelings of all who use it. Sometimes the use of adverbs (*never, always, sometimes*) manages to capture the seriousness and levity feelings invested in the middle of the narrative. Finally, the insinuation of *madness* seen as a supra-character melted in verbal clichés or in deconstructivist pictures of some rooms, is a poignant look into the meaning and significance of these books as the performed hermeneutics indirectly warns us. In this contextualization, Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics comes to mediate some relations between showing and telling, or presentation and mediated narration, or mimesis and diegesis in Jean Rhys' fiction, which may be at the limit of the short story and novel ("The frequent repetition of 'laugh' and 'smile' will be analyzed in a selection of extracts from *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which these items occur under different

types of laughter. Thus, a linguistic sign, which appears to signify a new order, turns out to identify the power structures of the novel"). The symbolism of dreams is another decryption key of the facts, and especially of the characters' thoughts involved in the epic progress. In the chapter "Power-textualization" the force lines of the argument in terms of the condition of exile and self-exiled protagonists are drawn – "Living in a world almost totally isolated from any human contact, the women in Jean Rhys' short stories persistently refuse to abandon their stubborn freedom from social ties. They suffer from their exiled condition yet they refuse to belong as if they were doomed never to be at home wherever they went."

In fact, in this respect, we might speak of undermining the *exotic* category in favor of the indoor confinement, almost ignoring the lush, overwhelming (outside) nature, the reader ultimately assisting to a kind of *endotic* diction, i.e. to reverberations of the repressed contemplation. Thus, sometimes, the autobiographical pact is not followed, the labyrinthine impression of the characters' psychology being permanently emphasized. In the precious final conclusions, C. Voicu states that "In the Caribbean world, Rhys suggests that memory is malleable and imagination is influential," in other words, the extensive colonial space alter somewhat the insular inside time and, paraphrasing, the self becomes important for the Caribbean identity, because of the previous slavery, of the racial *métissage* and *créolisation*, all the characters' traits being contaminated of different cultural and racial shades, more intense than in the common European vision. It is remarkable that the author is dealing with a literary niche area concerning the Caribbean writings which always arouse the reader's interest, and she aims in detail at the ambivalence of the narrative structures specific to Jean Rhys, of the hybrid books of short stories, which seem to reach everyone, but which challenge us to further reflect on the fundamental phrase meaning (from *Wide Sargasso Sea*) – "There is always the other side, always."

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