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**Submit or Rebel: Identity Crisis or Creation among the Female Protagonists
of Jean Rhys' Novels: *Quartet*, *Voyage in the Dark*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and
*After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie***

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Abstract:

Quartet, *Voyage in The Dark*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* are the famous and acclaimed novels of the female writer Jean Rhys. While *Quartet*'s Marya, *Voyage in The Dark*'s Anna and *Wide Sargasso Sea*'s Antoinette have lost their own identities and are submissive to the strong males following the rule of patriarchal society, on the other hand *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*'s Julia thrives to create her own identity. Marya, Anna and Antoinette are always objectified by the stronger sex of the patriarchal society and have been rejected once they have met the ends whereas Julia tries to uphold herself as a human being creating her own space, firmly holding the ground and establishing her own mark. The former characters end up in dark at the end of their journey as they fail to place themselves individually in the society, but Julia thrives. Jean Rhys here tries to show that in the traditional society ruled by the authoritative superior male, a female should be more of Julia rather than Marya, Anna and Antoinette, create a position of her own in the society and retain that individual identity without attaching it to any dominating men.

Keywords: gender studies, 20th century literature, Jean Rhys, sexuality literature, patriarchal, feminist.

"[Woman] is simply what man decrees; thus she is called "the sex," by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being...She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to

the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute -- she is the Other."

— *Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex*

All through history women have always been given the secondary role in relation to man, being relegated to the status of the "Other", i.e. that which is dependent on the existential activity of the man. Whereas man has always been given the opportunity to surpass and control his environment, always pushing the domain of his physical and intellectual achievements, women has been kept imprisoned as a slave within the circle of duties imposed by the superior sex. Throughout history women were not only deprived of education and financial independence, they also had to battle against a male ideology deprecating them to virtual silence and obedience. Indeed the portrayal of women in male literature – as angels, goddesses, whores, obedient wives, and mother figures- was an integral means of preserving these ideologies of gender. In comparison, fairly recently have women writers started to paint the real picture of the dominated women, have begun considering events from their perspectives.

According to Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own*, there are three phases of women's writing- the "feminine" phase where women writers imitated the art created by ideal male authors, the "feminist" phase in which women writers started challenging those male models, and the "female" phase where women started advocating their own perspectives. Jean Rhys has undoubtedly secured her place in the last phase. She not only expresses the unavoidable circumstances, the pain and a woman's thoughts of being unable to break through the domination by the male, but also the will and the power of a woman to emerge out of the harmful influence of the patriarchal society to create her own identity and character.

Rhys has comprehensibly projected the causes that leads to a woman's loss of individuality and identity in her novels. The plasticity of women is exploited and used for the needs and pleasures of the man. Jean Rhys, in most of her novels, has shown the detachment of her female characters from their origin. A lack of stable background or milieu is seen to have disquieting effect on Marya, Anna, Antoinette and other of Rhys' heroines. They feel lost among the chaotic world and is often seen to be wandering through the streets and narrow lanes in search of comfort and help to be rescued.

Marya in *Quartet* roams about purposelessly through the lanes of Paris as if she has lost her identity somewhere in the "sordid streets". She has lost her association and communication with her family; her aunt refuses to help her further when she faces extreme catastrophe in her

life. She lives with her husband Stephan in different hotel rooms without having a permanent place which she can call home-

“...she realized that her existence...was haphazard. It lacked, as it were, solidity; it lacked the necessary fixed background...a cheap Montmartre hotel cannot possible be called a solid background.”

-Quartet (chapter 1)

Marya never finds an unwavering home in the novel as she moves in with the Heidlars against her will and is forced to stay there. She fails to establish her identity as she is not provided with a stable, secure and peaceful establishment.

A comparable situation is seen in *Voyage in the Dark* where the author begins the novel with the heroine's insecurities and her grievances about her troubles in adapting with the unsteady background. She “shuts” her eyes to “pretend” that she is “standing outside the house at home”. Anna is dismissed by her family to fend her own self. She yearns to go back to the warmth and safety of her source but, being a chorus girl, she is left with no other choice-

“Sometimes it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream...but I could never fit.”

-Voyage in the Dark (chapter 1)

Anna, on setting foot in England, loses just about everything she ever possessed. There is an overbearing presence of the loss of her West Indies Island in one of her conversations with Walter. She keeps on talking about her stepmother, her uncle Ramsay, her estate which is “very beautiful” and she wishes she “could see it”. It is as if she is frantically trying to retain her lost origins and identity through these memories.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys devotes the entire novel to Antoinette's search of her true self which she fails to get throughout her unstable life. On one side there is Europe and civilization, white skin, patriarchy and masculinity. On the other side, there are the wild emotions of the Caribbean, matriarchy and femininity. These opposing forces clash within the mind of Antoinette, thus, creating inner complexities and insecurities. Antoinette's mind is being suspended between these two worlds and thus it ultimately belongs to neither. The tragedy of *Wide Sargasso Sea* shows that the sea is so wide between the Caribbean and Europe that Antoinette finds herself trapped in the middle of it as she is unable to cross it, thus belonging to neither.

Rhys has not created only submissive female protagonists but also portrayed a powerful “weaker sex”, Julia Martin, in her novel *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*. Julia is such a personality

who is a sharp slap against all the codes of conduct which a society enforces on women. While Anna, Marya, Antoinette are in search of their lost identity due to capitulating their selves to a superior man, Julia thrives to create a new self, a new identity. In her quest of creation she experiences peace and calmness-

“Julia went for a walk...kept to the back streets...She walked on towards the quay, feeling serene and peaceful. Her limbs moved smoothly; the damp soft air was pleasant against her face. She felt complete in herself, detached, independent of the rest of the humanity.”

-After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (part 1, chapter 1)

Julia's trip to London is more of a journey in time than in space. She means to get back in touch with an old lover, her sister, her uncle, her mother, her childhood, and so on. Her stay is interspersed with memories of the past. She wants to appropriate her roots and to bridge gaps. Winning back her connections, taking up things where she had left them, she might regain a sense of direction. However, Julia's quest is a failure. Although she is physically present, she fails to reunite with her family emotionally as she is casted “outside the sacred circle of warmth”. Yet she does not break down or crumble when she is separated from her origin. She continues her life in Paris and in establishing an identity which can provide her a peaceful life.

Women go through inevitable and inexorable circumstances which force them into losing their own individuality and, in course, increases dependency on men. Rhys, through her novels *A Voyage in the Dark*, *Quartet*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, has represented the concept of existential crisis and loss of identity among women as a result of male superiority, domination and the ideology of society.

In *Quartet*, Marya is an extremely passive character pushed around by people and that is how the narrative progresses. Marya has no power to take her own life decisions and she has to succumb to the wishes of the others. Although against her will, she agrees with Stephan to stay with the Heidlars –

“She would have agreed to anything to quieten him and make him happier”

–Quartet (chapter 7)

She desperately tries to get back her freedom from the Heidlars but the more she tries, the more she is confined into their house. She feels entrapped when Miss Nicholson visits her, metaphorically represented in a zoo where the young fox pitifully runs up and down the cage.

She knows her lack of confidence, worth and significance in the society and she surrenders. She is like a blank page waiting to be written upon by others.

A similar conduct is faced by Anna in *Voyage in the Dark*. She is manipulated into a relationship by her friend who thinks woman must choose a “rich man” to support her and “swank as much” as she can to keep him from leaving. Walter keeps Anna happy financially and she follows and obeys Walter wherever she is asked to like a pet. Finally when Walter realizes that “he doesn’t love like that anymore”, he leaves her which devastates her. After Walter’s abandoning of Anna she desperately tries to associate herself with several men in order to regain her lost stability and, thus, earning herself the position of a prostitute. Anna, just as much as Marya, is relegated to a position where she has absolutely no control over her own life but lives on support of others. None of them has any identity to hold on to, and their existence is decided by the male members in their lives. The dependency of a woman on a man is the product of the myth created by the patriarchal society that women are incapable of having own authority on their lives and need the advocacy of men. Since the beginning of their lives they have been handled like weak and fragile creatures who need to be taken care of because of their inferiority to the strong and supreme male community.

The moment woman takes control in her own hands, man trembles. Mr. Mackenzie in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* tries to separate himself and shut Julia down with money after exploiting her physically. Unlike the other protagonists, Julia fights back, refusing to be treated like a beggar. She has the confidence and strength in her which makes her confront Mr. Mackenzie and makes him fear her. He realizes that he has lost his control over her, which every man dreads, and “he felt surprised and not at all pleased”. Rhys makes a man feel helpless and weak in front of a woman-

“Mr. Mackenzie was afraid of the expression in her [Julia] eyes. He thought, ‘My God, she’s going to attack me. I ought to stop her.’ ...But...he could not do anything to stop her.”

-After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (part 1, chapter 2)

Due to the lack of identity, subjected to the desires of others and deprived of the means through which one can form own opinions and decisions, the heroines of Rhys’ novels are always viewed as objects. In *Voyage in the Dark* Anna is taught by her co-worker Laurie who exclaims that for women there is “No fascination without curves”. The worth of a woman is measured by the way she dresses herself. Rhys, quite sarcastically, mentions in her novel that “a

girl's clothes cost more than the girl inside them" which is unfortunately how the world views a woman. Under the pressure of appearing according to a convention, women like Anna spend hours in front of the mirror only with the hope of being accepted in the society. Marya is addressed by Lois as "doll" in *Quartet* whom she can dress up and play with anytime. Lois entraps her in the house just as if she is her possession. She is asked to sing during suppers and amuse them. Lois even finds her a job as a mannequin which ultimately shows how Marya is being objectified and is carried along as if she is being owned by someone. Lois tries to make it clear that Marya owes them to behave or dress up just as they please as they are permitting her to stay with them-

"We must get Mado [Marya] another hat...She must be chic...she must do us credit.' She might have been discussing the dressing of a doll" *-Quartet (chapter 12)*

In *Wide Sargasso Sea* we sympathize with Antoinette when she is bought off like a commodity by Rochester in their wedding. Their marriage is based on the business-like transaction which Antoinette mistakes for love. In all of Rhys' novels, women have been painted as the weaker sex, they are materialized and constantly paid off with money. Their sole purpose is to be means of pleasure and enjoyment for men and they are bought for their services. Antoinette, Marya, Anna, even Julia in *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* are owned by men at some point of their lives. Just because women are thought of as feeble and delicate, as fragile as glass, they are subjected under the care of men but for a price. Women are reduced to mere puppets in the hands of men, dolls whom they can dress up and play with just as they like. The reason why women accept this poor treatment is explained by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. From childhood, while boys are given cars and balls to play with outside the comforts of home, girls are given dolls to play with and to keep them engaged necessarily inside the house. As she plays with it she starts relating herself to that foreign object. She realizes she too is cuddled, caressed and decked up by elders like she does to her doll.

"...the little girl pampers her doll and dresses her as she dreams of being dressed and pampered; inversely, she thinks of herself as a marvelous doll."

-The Second Sex (chapter 1: Childhood)

She discovers the meanings of the word "pretty" and "ugly" and finds out that the two are treated separately- the former with love and the later with contempt. Hence, in order to please everyone and receive love she starts putting additional effort to beautify herself, and in the

process submitting herself to the opinion and needs of males. Beauvoir has rightly stated that one is not born but becomes a woman through these unpremeditated but destructive upbringings of girls.

In contrast, through *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Rhys projects that not all women apply paints to beautify themselves only. Make-up plays a substantial role in Julia's life. Frequently in the text she powders her face mechanically. This "inevitable, absent-minded gesture" is like a blank page, a trope for Julia's creativity. According to Susan Gubar, the woman's interest in cosmetics or fashion is persuaded by her restriction from active artistic creation. Unable to become artists for historical reasons, women tended to work in private, using the only materials at hand, their bodies and selves, thus turning themselves into artistic objects. Susan Gubar states that this "ornamental behavior", enable women to shape things on their own. Julia's applying make-up is then typical of "the deflection of female creativity from the production of art to the recreation of the body". Julia uses make-up and clothing to create her own unique identity while revolting against the conventional categorization of women.

Just as worn out goods are discarded by their owners after their usage, women are, too, thrown away into pits after men realize that they have had the maximum with them. Women are loved and used as owned property but just temporarily. Like any new owner, men like to cuddle them, play with them and do everything to keep them pretty. No sooner do they get attracted or charmed by something even shinier and prettier than they start neglecting their previous "love" and finally abandoning them, throwing them in the darkness. Women have been taken care of by the superior authority since their birth. Now that they are discarded like trash they fall into a deep pit from which they cannot climb out. They are used to the dependency and support of someone else and without that they cannot survive. Anna in *Voyage in the Dark* is paid off after Walter suddenly feels that he "doesn't love" her "like that anymore". Walter has such disregard for Anna that he breaks up all ties with her through just a letter written not by himself but by his brother. Walter's show of false love is metaphorically described by Rhys as "false teeth" which Anna remembers, they only pretend to be real. After Walter turns his back to Anna, she desperately tries to scramble back up-"I'll [Anna] hang on to your knees and make you understand and then you won't be able to".

"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

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from under the water. And how do you know what it is like to try to speak from under the water when you're drowned?"

-Voyage in the Dark (part 1, chapter 9)

Anna drowns further because she has no self-identity to which she can adhere to. She was in search of her lost soul and she even started finding England beautiful. But the moment she is let go of the hand, she loses everything. She tries frantically to reach out to her family, her home, but she finds herself unwelcome there too, losing her origin. Thus, her voyage in the dark continues and it grows darker with time. She is pushed towards being a call-girl, trying to find love and identity with everyman she associates herself with. She loses herself completely in search of her own self. Her loss of identity in the world compels her to abort her unborn child as she isn't ready to provide individuality to someone else.

Quartet shows a similar picture of the ruin of Marya when she loses the support of men in her lives. Marya's life is like a blank page waiting to be written on by the men in her lives. Stephan takes Marya under his care which gives Marya a sense of stability. Stephan molds her just as he likes and Marya accepts this treatment-

"But, good or bad, there Monsieur Zelli was. Definite. A person. He criticized her clothes with authority and this enchanted her. He told her that her arms were too thin. He told her that...if she were happy and petted she would become charming. Happy, petted, charming- these are magical words. And the man knew what he was talking about, Marya could see that." -

Quartet (chapter 2)

Right after Stephan's arrest Marya is pushed into the household of the Heidlars against her will. She plays no role in taking the decision and quietly moves in with the household. She does try to voice her opinions but is shut down. She has no identity of her own and when she tries to leave Lois thrusts on her the hard truth of the society-

"D'you suppose that I care what you are, or think or feel? I am talking about the man, the male, the important person, the only person who matters" -*Quartet (chapter 11)*

But later Marya finds herself very comfortable under the care of a man who can cajole her, caress her, and take care of her. With no individuality of her own Marya can never survive alone. As soon as Mr. Heidler comforts her, she understands the need of a strong, supporting and powerful male in her life to survive. It is not long that Mr. Heidler shut her out in Cannes when she starts asserting her opinions in her relationship with him. Like Anna, Marya is also thrown

down into a pit from where she cannot crawl up. Heidler never comes to visit her but sends someone else instead to make sure that she is of no trouble. Marya feels like a trapped fox in a cage running frantically in search of her true self and love. She has sensed she has lost Stephan the moment she has stepped into the Heidler family and now she is losing Mr. Heidler. The thought of living alone terrifies her and devastates her. She again has lost the male authority she is so used to in her life and is she needs to go back to Stephan. Finally she loses herself completely when Stephan “swung her sideways with all his force”. She is trampled and crushed down under the dominance of the man because she dared to choose and decide with whom she wanted to live. Women never have the authority to choose but must accept whatever and whenever is thrown at their way. The identity of a woman is based on her relationship with a man, be it her father, brother, husband, friend, or son. And without the necessary male figure in her life, Marya is never going to be able to find her own identity.

Rhys paints Julia, on the other hand, in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, as a self-reliant, strong, revolting and imposing heroine who takes control over every situation. Julia is also devastated when Mr. Mackenzie gets tired of her and tries to pay her off with money like a call girl who is of no more service to him. Mr. Mackenzie mistakes her to be like any other woman with whom he had affairs with earlier but his misconception shatters down-

“A cunning expression came onto Julia’s face. She picked up her glove and hit his cheek with it...”

-After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (part 1, chapter 2)

Julia’s slap is a sharp blow against all the assaults that the male community inflicts upon women and is condoned by the society. Unlike Rhys’ previous protagonists, Julia is a storm that brings chaos and confusion in the patriarchal society simply because she tries to defy the beaten down status of women. She is the one, and not the men in her lives, who takes everything under control. Very often we see her commanding the men, thus questioning their superior position. Julia screams hysterically when Mr. Horsfield touches her without her permission in the dark stairs. She is not submissive like Marya who gives herself away physically to Mr. Heidler without her will. Julia does not wait any man to save her when she is asked to leave the hotel. She knows she has the ability to “manage better” than men. Instead, she orders around Horsfield and he quietly obeys. Her incomplete relationship with Horsfield does not wreak havoc on her, like the effect of Walter’s breakup has on Anna, but she is “dead indifferent”-

“I don’t care whether you send me any money or not...And I don’t care whether you come or not”

-After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (part 2, chapter 14)

Julia's unpredictability disturbs Horsfield and he feels relieved and happy that Julia leaves because. Neither Mr. Mackenzie nor Mr. Horsfield can subdue her and she continues to be self-dependent, creating her own personality and character, unguided by socially dictated codes of conduct.

Towards the end of the novels the female protagonists are confined into and entrapped in darkness. They have been crushed and humiliated in such a manner that it has rendered them powerless to even leave their dark rooms. Yet, Rhys ends with a tone of hope that women still retain and which compels them to continue with their lives, with or without their personal identity.

Antoinette in *Voyage in the Dark* suffers badly when Rochester tries to divide her into a wild black woman and a tame white girl. She throws tantrums and behaves like a madwoman. Rochester, because of her strange desperate reactions, is made to believe that Antoinette is psychologically unstable and ultimately shuts her in a dark room. Antoinette, quite surprisingly, accepts the decision. This shows how exhausted she is in search of her true identity. This search has tormented Antoinette all her life and she then requires peace of mind. But this path of solution proves to be quite painful. She shuts out all external influences so that she can come in terms with her inner self. She is not even given a mirror to see her reflection. The fact that her brother, Richard, fails to recognize her shows the state of disposition Antoinette has reached. The theme of identity has a connection with the recurrent images of mirrors in the novel. When Antoinette sees herself in the mirror, she tries to come closer to understanding her true identity. But it is also true that mirrors can reflect the distorted reflection of the true self. The mirror would have thrown back at Antoinette the schizophrenic image of herself which definitely did not define her. But there can be a similarity between the mirror image and the dream Antoinette has at the end of the novel. Antoinette feels that every time she passes a mirror she hopes- she hopes for the best. In her dream, she sees herself walking down a "dark passage" with a candle. May be she still hopes that she will be able to overcome the darkness she has been pushed into and live a normal life.-

"There must have been a draught for the flame flickered and I thought it was out. But I shielded it with my hand and it burned up again to light me along the dark passage"

-Wide Sargasso Sea (part 3)

Following the abortion her unborn child, metaphorically shedding her last bit of identity, Anna in *Voyage in the Dark* lies in the dark room on the verge of death. Like Antoinette's dream, she hallucinates about her family, her mother, her uncle, and tries to "clung desperately" in the hope of reuniting with her family. Although emotionally beaten down to death, she aspires to start her search of identity all over again-

"...The ray of light came in again under the door like the last thrust of remembering before everything is blotted out. I lay and watched it and thought about starting all over again. And about being new and fresh...And about starting all over again, all over again..."

-Voyage in the Dark (part 4, chapter 1)

The one who can never be tamed or trapped in a room was Julia. She has continued living freely and without any sort of dependency. She declines or accepts the financial support given to her by Mackenzie and Horsfield according to her will. The fact that she holds the ultimate power of deciding her way of life shows Rhys' subtle portrayal of the New Woman. The death of Julia's paralyzed mother metaphorically represents the death of codes of conduct enforced upon every women making them paralyzed. She does not want to be treated like a women but like a human being. She is the character which Anna, Marya, Antoinette strive to achieve but fail. Quite similar to the earlier novels, *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* ends with lightening up of dull and dark milieu-

"The Street was cool and full of grey shadows. Lights were beginning to come out in the cafes."

-After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie (part 3, chapter 3)

Jean Rhys, through her novels, categorizes women in two separate streams; as Beauvoir states the "pretty" and the "ugly, the category which submits herself to superior master and the category which rebels. Rhys represents the predetermined gender roles patriarchal order writes upon women. She carefully delineates conventional identifications of women as objects and even examines women's own contribution to their entrapment in the form of romantic fantasies of falling in love and of abandoning self to male mastery. However, Jean Rhys's resistant voice can also be heard. She also speaks for the women who battle against the societal norms and determines an identity for themselves. Rhys strives to portray a utopian society where men and women complement each other, where there is no weaker or stronger sex and where there is equity over authority.

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