

Rajni Walia, *Women and Self: Fictions of Jean Rhys, Barbara Pym, Anita Brookner*

Sue Thomas
La Trobe University

Keywords: Rajni Walia, Jean Rhys, Barbara Pym, Anita Brookner, women's novel, self-analysis, feminist quest.

Abstract: This review calls into question Walia's views, calling them 'dated' and questioning their validity in light of modern scholarship and her 'under-acknowledged dependency' on other scholars' works.

In *Women and Self* Rajni Walia focuses on the 'women's novel', 'a novel which in some way or another illuminates female attitudes to experience, throws light on the texture of women's lives.'¹ Her definition is a quotation from Nicola Beauman's account of the early twentieth-century woman's novel in *A Very Great Profession*.² Walia chooses as her exemplary contemporary writers of women's novels Jean Rhys, Barbara Pym and Anita Brookner, and proceeds to argue that their fiction constitutes 'exercise[s] in self-analysis', that it is autobiographical, not in offering a minute reprisal of their lives, but in 'portraying their own aspirations, longings and emotions.'³ In this, it evinces an 'implicit feminist quest.'⁴

Walia analyses closely three novels – Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Pym's *Excellent Women* (1952), and Brookner's *Hotel du Lac* (1984) – paying methodical attention to themes, character, plot, and narrative technique. She opines that '[i]n the mode of a realistic self-appraisal, the novels of these contemporary women writers illumine the inability of feminist reform and women's liberation, [sic] to change some of the fundamental ways in which some women persist in viewing themselves. The images of women projected in their novels, [sic] reveal the continued hold of the eighteenth and nineteenth century concepts of femininity in the shaping of their consciousness, and their notions of themselves.'⁵ Such sweeping generalisations abound in the more wide-ranging sections of *Women and Self*. Questions about an implied female readership of women's novels and about the use of the category as a marketing ploy by publishers are not taken up in the detailed textual analyses. Walia is on more solid ground in her analyses of *Excellent Women* and *Hotel du Lac*. There, in particular, she has a sure sense of the plays of irony and point of view. Early undergraduate students might find them useful.

Walia's theoretical reference points are drawn principally from feminist scholarship of the 1970s and early 1980s. Drawing on the work of Elaine Showalter, Walia situates her approach as gynocritical. Jane Gallop locates its heyday as being 'around 1975 to around 1983' and notes its focus on 'women's writing in the Euro-American high cultural tradition', which was challenged by the rise of feminisms of difference, gender studies and cultural studies.⁶ Walia's recourse to recent postcolonial and critical race theory is also very scant.

The scholarly value of Walia's interpretations of her chosen novels is undercut by the datedness and limited range of the theoretical paradigms on which she draws, her failure to engage with recent scholarship on the authors, and, on occasion, recourse to stereotype in establishing the relationship between an author's life and work.

These problems are amply illustrated in her discussion of Rhys. Walia's account of Rhys draws on a stereotype of the 'Rhys woman', which Sonie Wilson has argued collapses Rhys and her characters into a 'phallogocentric version of the feminine' as 'passive self-obsessed victim who is * dependent on men.'⁷ Rhys, Walia insists, is 'dependent by nature' and 'each of her heroines is really herself at a particular stage of her life.'⁸ Helen Carr succinctly characterises this kind of approach as '*ad feminam*', a 'myth of feminine distress.'⁹ By placing Rhys's work 'as the retelling through her heroines of her own melancholy tale of defeat', the myth has obscured 'the range and intelligence' of Rhys's writing, its 'crucial political dimension', and her 'irony, wit and satire.'¹⁰ Walia, too, situates Rhys unproblematically as British or English. Dominica, Rhys's birthplace, is reduced to a site of family slave ownership, 'hankering for a lost idyllic childhood', and exotic sensuality.¹¹ Walia's approach to Rhys was a common enough one among critics of the 1970s and 1980s, and she does try to elaborate a nascent feminist political dimension in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys's 'awareness of the exploitations and hypocrisies on which most interaction between the sexes is based.'¹² Walia's reading in Rhys criticism is very thin. Among the many books devoted to study of Rhys, for instance, Walia has read Louis James's *Jean Rhys* (1978), Thomas Staley's *Jean Rhys: A Critical Study* (1979), Peter Wolfe's *Jean Rhys* (1980), and Carole Angier's *Jean Rhys* (1985) and *Jean Rhys: Life and Work* (1990). Walia's work on Rhys is not informed by substantial recent scholarship on Rhys's Caribbean contexts and engagement with, and mediation of, history (O'Connor, Emery, Ferguson, Hulme, Gregg, Raiskin, Savory, Thomas) or by theoretically sharper feminist readings of Rhys (Harrison, Le Gallez, Howells, Carr). Primitivist racial and cultural stereotypes and terms like 'black natives' and 'half-caste' circulate uncritically in her reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. That the early reviews of, and marketing materials for, *Wide Sargasso Sea* position it as tropical Gothic rather than as a woman's novel is not taken into account.

The number of spelling, typographical, punctuation and proofreading errors in *Women and Self* is distracting. There are also, worryingly, many factual errors. For example, according to Walia, a 'Feminist phase' in English women's writing 'emerged from about 1880, or the winning of the vote.'¹³ Some British women over thirty (wives, university graduates, and householders) were enfranchised in 1918; full adult suffrage was introduced in 1928. Walia mistakenly suggests that all West Indian slave owners in the 1830s were white.¹⁴ Rhys's date of birth is given by Walia as 1894, rather than 1890. Walia then has (thirteen-year-old) Rhys meeting Jean Lenglet and accepting his proposal of marriage in 1907 (rather than 1917) and this after an affair with Lancelot Hugh Smith. In *Jean Rhys: Life and Work* Carole Angier writes:

On her mother's side Jean's great-grandfather was a Scot: James Potter Lockhart, a cousin of Sir Walter Scott's biographer. According to family lore James had come to Dominica at the end of the eighteenth century to manage a sugar plantation. In 1824 he bought it: "Genever" or "Geneva" Plantation at Grand Bay, an estate of 1,200 acres and 258 slaves. For ten

years he was a prosperous sugar-merchant and slave-owner, with many mistresses and children amongst his slaves, like old Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.¹⁵

Walia's account introduces error by overlooking the detail of class mobility and is excessively derivative in formulation:

On her mother's side, Rhys's great-grandfather, James Potter Lockhart, was a Scot. He came to Dominica towards the end of the eighteenth century and bought Geneva Estate, on which Rhys has based, [sic] Coulibri Estate, [sic] in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. He was a prosperous sugar merchant and slave-owner, with many mistresses and children amongst his slaves, just like Old Cosway, Antoinette's father, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.¹⁶

In an endnote to the chapter Walia merely acknowledges that '[b]iographical details' about Rhys's family have been 'taken from Angier.'¹⁷ There are further instances of such under-acknowledged dependency in Walia's use of biographical sources.

Notes

¹ Rajni Walia, *Women and Self: Fictions of Jean Rhys, Barbara Pym, Anita Brookner* (New Delhi: Books Plus, 2001) 3.

² Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983).

³ Walia, 21.

⁴ Walia, 29.

⁵ Walia, 16.

⁶ Walia, 240.

⁷ Sonie Wilson, "Tracing the Caribbean: Elaine Savory's *Jean Rhys*," *CRNLE Journal* (2000) 196-200.

⁸ Walia, 41-42.

⁹ Helen Carr, *Jean Rhys* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1996) 17.

¹⁰ Carr, 1, 5.

¹¹ Walia, 42.

¹² Walia, 42.

¹³ Walia, 11.

¹⁴ Walia, 45.

¹⁵ Carole Angier, *Jean Rhys: Life and Work*, Rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992) 7.

¹⁶ Walia, 46.

¹⁷ Walia, 70.