



# The Achievers Journal

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## **A Postcolonial Reading of George Lamming's *A Wedding in Spring* and Jean Rhys *The Day they Burned the Books***

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### **Abstract**

*The colonial enterprise laid down the foundation to a well-defined discourse of domination and subjugation and an established asymmetrical power relation where the colonizer's master narrative is the superior and dominant voice. Such discourse is a totalizing and denigrating account of the colonized whose voice is smothered and turned into a voiceless passive subject. In this context, the colonial subject engendered a counter discourse within the colonial womb to tell their side of the story. This discourse of resistance has concretized in what has come to be called post-colonial discourse and post-colonial literature.*

**Keywords: colonial; post-colonial; discourse; resistance; power; subjugation**

### **Introduction**

Postcolonial theory and literature have been a fertile soil for disseminating a heavy legacy of colonial superiority. It has laid the ground for the crystallization of a dehumanizing discourse and knitting a relationship between colonized and colonizer based on bipolarization and otherness, a dominant discourse that focalizes on bringing the colonized and their colonizer to exist in a correlation of an inescapability of binary structures such as self/other, white/black, civilized/ uncivilized, superior/inferior.



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In response, a counter colonial discourse is to be sharpened as to counter attack and primarily expose a prevailing colonial discourse. In doing so, "anti-colonial" theories and literary products undertake a dissecting task of deconstructing and dismantling the minds of an oppressive colonial legacy, a purging mission of decolonizing and liberating the colonized from, in Cesaire's term, 'thingification'.

The aim of this paper is to analyze and approach two short stories that are written in a postcolonial theoretical framework. I attempt to scrutinize and dissect George Lamming's *A Wedding in Spring* and Jean Rhys' *The Day they Burned the Books*. My analysis would proceed in decoding the major themes that are embedded in both stories, as well as pertaining them to major postcolonial theories and attitudes. This is to be attained by inspecting main instances and manifestations of pertinent issues as identity, racial discrimination, ethnicity and exile. The stories reflect the writers' understanding and portrayal of the colonial legacy and its effect on the social and psychological makeup of the main characters.

A brief overview of both stories is essential to understanding the writers' attitudes, views and positions. Lamming and Rhys illustrate the effect of colonialism in dissimilar settings. Lamming's story takes place in England as an ex-colonial country, while Rhys' occurs in an island of the Caribbean. Both stories mirror conflicting situations and realities that the writers try to approach in their own styles and perspectives.

In lamming's *A Wedding in Spring*, the main events of the story revolve around a wedding of the protagonist, Beresford, who wants to marry a British white girl. Flo, Beresford's sister, disapproves of the marriage and tries to convince her brother's childhood intimates, Snooker and Knickerbocker, to turn against him. The story describes Beresford's need to marry the white girl as an outlet, as knickerbocker puts it 'he don't want to roam wild like a bush beast in this London jungle' p(30). Indeed, Beresford's marriage is an embodiment of two cultures'



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union. He is torn in between his own culture and that of his bride; this state of ambivalence is described by Frantz Fanon as “the unreflected imposition of a culture”. Beresford desperately endeavors to assimilate and mingle in his new life atmosphere, an action disapproved and disdained by Flo who considers her brother’s decision as ‘a conspiracy against what they had learnt’ p (27)

On the other hand, Rhys’ *The Day They Burned Books* recounts the life of the family of an English steamship agent in the Caribbean island. The narrator, a little white English girl, sketches and recounts instances of her life in relation to Mr. Sawyer’s family. In fact, she is a close friend of Eddie’s, Mr. Sawyer’s son, and great admirer of his mother. The writer tells us about Mr. Sawyer who hates everything about the island and how he periodically abuses his wife in drunken moments.

Focal to the discussion is the issue of ‘troubled’ identity. Both stories manifest traumatic incidents of a problematized identity. In Rhys’ story, Eddie is trapped in an unsettled emotional state of ambivalence towards his ‘homeland’, England. He seems to defy the narrator’s supposition that everything that represent homeland is superior to anything on the island. Eddie’s passion for his father’s books is discernible; he cherishes the books which serve to bridge his vague and displaced memory of a ‘homeland’. Confused about his identity, Eddie, accompanied by the narrator, seeks refuge in his father’s library to learn about and, perhaps, identify with “an England”. Rhys allegorizes Eddie’s traumatic state in the climaxing moment of burning the books; a scene which symbolizes the burning of his ambivalent identity. Eddie’s ambiguous reaction, hating his father, hating ‘homeland’, but loving his father’s books, puts him face to face with his mother’s rage. He is caught in between two conflicting and contending cultures and opting for an in-the-middle of a road space seems far from reaching; he is torn between emotionally identifying with one and intellectually inquisitive about the other.



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The state of ambivalent identity is also plain in Lamming's story. The main characters are overwhelmed by the 'unfamiliar' reality of the metropolis where in emigrants' and natives' 'contact zones' are brought into a clash. Flo believes Beresford's action is a betrayal to his roots, culture and identity, and therefore veraciously fights to abort his plan. Lamming tells us that Flo is attached to her identity in the way she makes her hair and that she even refuses a glass of wine from knickerbocker in a way to disassociate herself from an English custom. She is also concerned about her mother's reaction to her brother's 'intolerable' decision by exclaiming "...Gawd res' her in de grave, would go wild if she know what Beresford doin'..." p (27) Daring to hide her brother's suit and cancel the limousine, Flo's ambivalent state is intensified when she has to compromise her brother's humiliation for the marriage.

Another instance of the conflicting identity is manifested in Beresford's composition. The story provides no plain evidence that his marriage is for love. We are told by knickerbocker that 'he don't want to roam wild like a bush beast in this London jungle' and that he wants to 'make his own bed'. Beresford does not even consider his sister's accusations of his would be bride, rather he exposes his sister's past in defense of his 'honor'. Lamming depicts Beresford in a moment of self-contemplation and second chance consideration of his action. In a soothing move, Lamming binds Beresford to his 'homeland' via his mother's letter, an umbilical cord through which she transmits her consent, emotional and psychological security.

In both cases, Beresford and Flo are emotionally rooted in a homeland that has become a mere mental representation, an emotive and nostalgic refuge. These two experiences would be interrelated to Salman Rushdie's argument that "it may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that is its loss is part of our common



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humanity'. To both characters, negotiating a space and compromising in their uncomfortable ambivalent situations is crucial for their coming to terms with a new reality. In this respect, Rushdie maintains that "the broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also, I believe, a useful tool with which to work in the present". Thus, sparing her brother humiliation, Flo swallows down her nervous identity's conflicts and buries the hatchet.

Rhys tackles the hybridized identity of Eddie as a byproduct of two conflicting cultures. Carrying two 'discrepant' genes, Eddie exists in what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls "Third Space of Enunciation". The kid is polarized by a bicultural colonial antagonism and unfairness; he is victimized by a ravaging collision of the two cultures that, indeed, Rhys succeeds in reflecting its effect on his physical portrait:

"My friend Eddie was a small, thin boy. You could see the blue veins in his wrists and temples. People said that he had consumption and wasn't long for this world." (p 52)

Eddie's hybridized identity is a reflection of Rhys' herself who is a 'product' of a mixed-breed. Taking a glance at her biography, we would know that her father was a Welsh doctor and her mother was a Dominican Creole of Scottish ancestry. Rhys even problematizes identity for the narrator, the little girl, and binds her to Eddie's own way of coming to terms with his own identity. At the end of the story, we can realize that the narrator tries to recuperate Eddie and finds herself as an extension of his ambivalent hybridized identity.

Moving from Homi Bhabha's controversial concept of hybridity, I shall spot mimicry as another postcolonial identifiable notion in Lamming's story. Mimicry is when members of a colonized society imitate the language, dress, politics, or cultural attitudes of their colonizers. In "A Wedding in Spring", the conscious imitation of the British is apparent in the excessive importance given to appearance by some of the characters. Lamming



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accentuates knickerbocker's and Snooker's significant discussion over appearance, especially the morning suit. Snooker's negative attitude towards his suit is reflected in his reaction to knickerbocker's claim "you goin'to play jackass". Ironically, knickerbocker's mimetic attempt, to teach the English their own way, is realized only in a moment of fantasy.

The importance of appearance transcends to the homeland. We are told in the mother's letter that she insists on dressing properly:

"... see that you dress proper, I mean real proper, like the folks in that land would have you..." (p 29)

Beresford tries to provide the same wedding rituals as the English themselves would carry out. Not only does he urge his friends to dress property, but also he strives to get a limousine and arrange for a church's ceremony. This endeavor to mimic colonizer's practices is usually aborted or incomplete. Here Bill Ashcroft's argument is pertinent:

"When colonial discourse encourages the colonial subject to 'mimic' the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a 'blurred copy' of the colonizer that can be quite threatening". (Bill Ashcroft et al, 1990: p.139)

The story evidences sequences that mirror Beresford's and knickerbocker's failure to attain appreciation of their mimetic attempts. As the story rolls towards the end, though Beresford finds the hidden suit, Flo succeeds in depriving him of the limousine and forcing him to ride a bicycle to the church. Also, the story uncovers two ironic moments about Snooker and knickerbocker. The first is not only obliged to wear the hateful suit, but also



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take the bride's father's position. As for knickerbocker, his fondness of a smart look is destroyed by the poodle tearing of his cravat.

I shall now discuss mutual rejection as another common concept in both short stories. In Lamming's story, not only does Flo reject her brother's bride for racial considerations, but also on ethical ground. She describes the English girl as 'hawk nose English woman' p (30), and she also confronts her brother with the girl's notorious past. Flo's rejection is reciprocated by the bride's parents who, in the last minute, decide not to come to the wedding. The bride's family's rejection is what I would term as 'a rejection in absence', while another plain rejection can be read through the utterance 'how extraordinary' by the man in the balcony.

Similarly, Rhys' story evidences sequences of mutual rejection between Mr. and Mrs. Sawyer. The story unfolds 'peculiar' rejection between the couple; Mr. Sawyer's abuse would manifest in drunken moments. He addresses his wife as 'you damned, long eyed gloomy half-caste, you don't smell right' p(53 ). Mr. Sawyer's colonial legacy seems to govern his abusive contact with his wife which is a paradigm of the hegemonic colonial discourse. In the story, this discourse is counter attacked by Mrs. Sawyer's indifferent and 'pacific' reaction. She would disgust her husband's comments and despise him with a smile. Unexpectedly, Mrs. Sawyer's rejection towards her husband is aimed at destroying his books.

The death of Mr Sawyer marks a significant moment in the story. As the story unfolds, something latent about Mrs. Sawyer's position emerges, that of someone who breathes a grudge to her husband's homeland. England for her is an emblem of malice and injustice. She struggles with her husband, who is seen as a representative of European civilization, as a way to attain liberation from the suffocating embrace of European supremacy. She avenges her husband by destroying his books; a legacy she fears to be passed on to her child.



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The story also presents Mr. Sawyer as a colonizer who accepts his situation. He can clearly fit into Albert Memmi's portrait of the colonizer. This colonizer legitimizes his actions and justifies them against the inferiority and unworthiness of the local people. Indeed, Mr. Sawyer's marriage to a colored woman remains a puzzle. As I see it, a possible interpretation of this mixed marriage is perhaps Mr. Sawyer's need for psychological sustenance. According to Fanon "the presence of Negroes beside the white is in a way an insurance policy on humanness. When the whites feel that they have become mechanized, they turn to the men of color and ask them for a little human sustenance" (p 98). Another possible understanding of Mr. Sawyer's marriage is what Memmi terms "the Nero complex" a state of ambivalence the colonizer is trapped in. In effect, the colonizer, though hating the colonized, needs them to survive.

I intend to discuss language in both stories as another controversial point in postcolonial discourse. Lamming's use of Creole in his characters' conversations is a conscious choice of binding them with a cultural and social identifiable tongue. Hybridized and creolized English is a strategic choice by the writer to emphasize his characters' self-assertion and recognition. Relevant to the discussion is Ngugi Wa Thiongo's argumentation of language use in postcolonial discourse. In his "Decolonising the Mind" Ngugi pinpoints:

"The choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people's definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment, indeed in relation to the entire universe" (Ngugi Wa Thiongo, 4).

Seemingly, Lamming sides up and advocates creolized English as a subversive attempt against superior and alienating English language. Conversely, in "The Day they Burned the Books", Rhys' hybridised and creolised origin of the English language seems to have no trace





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in her story. She seems to share Achebe's attitude about the English language and adopts his statement "I was given the language and I intend to use it".

## Conclusion

By and large, both Lamming's and Rhys' stories have presented their characters as by-products of the colonial hegemonic binarisms. Hybridised and traumatic, the characters are trapped in an ambivalent and a quest-for-an identity state that is inflicted upon them by the colonial powers. The counter-discourse witnessed in both stories generates a momentum for the process of dismantlement and decolonisation of minds. It valorises the humanization of the colonized and brings them to terms with conflicting issues as identity, culture and alienation. It voices the dominated colonial subject's cry and falsifies the supremacy of a pretentious western civilization. Césaire raps it up in his offensive "Discourse on Colonialism": "A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization. A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization. A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization." p (1)

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