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A Moveable Feast? Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* and Paris

Abstract

In the 20th century modernist literature, the expatriate experience of the metropolis — particularly Paris — is usually associated with the towering figures of Hemingway, Crane, Pound, and later, Henry Miller and Anais Nin. Amidst post-war desolation, Paris retained its reputation as a bohemian paradise, a liberal, permissive, fashionable world where all that was *avant-garde* could thrive. Raymond Williams, in *The Politics of Modernism*, described this milieu as the “modernist universals” and attempted to dismantle their ideological hegemony by emphasising that their work actually accounted for only a small portion of all contemporary artistic production. Though Williams pointed towards “deprived hinterlands” and “the poor world” as the site where variations within the movement might be found, this paper attempts to recuperate them from Jean Rhys’s 1939 novel *Good Morning, Midnight* which chronicles the twilight years of Sasha Jensen, an English woman adrift in Paris. By studying the text through the prism of gender and class, I attempt to show how despite superficial similarities with the canonical figures, Rhys’ own marginal position, as a Creole woman of uncertain means, necessarily complicates her engagement with, and subsequent representation of, the dominant modernist ethos.

Keywords: Politics of modernism, Raymond Williams, Paris, Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight*, modernist literature.

A Moveable Feast? Jean Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight* and Paris by Neha Yadav

Good Morning—Midnight—
 I'm coming Home—
 Day—got tired of Me—
 How could I—of Him?

Sunshine was a sweet place—
 I liked to stay—
 But Morn—didn't want me—now—
 So—Goodnight—Day!

—*Good Morning, Midnight* Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

In 1958, Selma vaz Diaz was preparing a radio play of Jean Rhys' 1939 novel *Good Morning, Midnight* for BBC. An advertisement was sent out seeking information about the 'late Jean Rhys' that, in a sad but fortuitous twist, was answered by Rhys herself; sad because her almost two-decade long descent into oblivion was a literary injustice and fortuitous because Rhys' public resurrection led to the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), the importance of which to the field of postcolonial literature remains hard to overstate.

Jean Rhys (1890-1979), born Ella Gwendolyn Reese Williams in Dominica, an island of the British West Indies, straddled complex, overlapping terrains when it comes to the usual markers of identity—race, class, religion etc. While she belonged to the elite in colonial Caribbean, her father a Welsh doctor and mother a third-generation Dominican Creole, she was an outsider in England where she moved when she was sixteen. Rhys' adult life was characterised by financial and romantic/marital instability. Though her literary output was co-terminal with the giants of modernist literature, like Hemingway,

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Pound, Joyce, Ford, Woolf etc., and it engaged with the classically modernist themes of post-industrial urbanisation, cosmopolitanism, world war and alienation, Rhys' position in the canon is still peripheral. This paper intends to analyse *Good Morning, Midnight* an extremely poignant fictional account of a middle-aged, impoverished woman's experience of contemporary Paris, through the lens of race, class and gender and link Rhys' own canonical marginalisation with the subversive tendencies in the text.

Raymond Williams, in *The Politics of Modernism*, discussing the intimately, inextricably intertwined nature of modernist art and the phenomenon of the metropolis says, "...the social form of the metropolis, for the facts of increasing mobility and social diversity, passing through a continuous dominance of certain metropolitan centres¹ and a related unevenness of all other social and cultural development, led to a major expansion of metropolitan forms of perception, both internal and imposed."² Williams systematically dismantles the ideological hegemony of the "modernist universals"³, emphasising that their work actually accounts for only a small portion of all contemporary artistic production and deems it necessary to explore "...the many variations in this decisive phase of modern practice and theory."⁴ Though Williams located these variations in "deprived hinterlands" and "the poor world", this paper attempts to recuperate them from Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*; the argument being that, despite superficial similarities with the

1 By which he means Paris, London, Berlin and New York.

2 Williams, Raymond. *The Politics of Modernism*, 1996.

3 That is, the consecrated Modernist canon, comprising of largely well-off artists whose work was shaped by and thrived within the aforementioned metropolises, and who, according to Williams, interpreted their own processes as universals.

4 Williams, Raymond. *The Politics of Modernism*, 1996.

canonical figures in terms of life and work, Rhys' own marginal position, as a Creole woman of uncertain means, necessarily complicates her engagement with, and subsequent representation of, the dominant modernist ethos.

Good Morning, Midnight derives its title from the eponymous Emily Dickinson poem. The poem, sparse and largely unrhymed (yet curiously melodious), features a female voice asking cover of "Midnight" after being turned away by an anthropomorphised, masculine "Day." Titles, to use a phrase from Hans Robert Hauss' Reception Theory, create "horizons of expectation", thereby providing an entry point into the text and a frame of reference for interpretation and analysis. The title and its literary allusiveness, therefore, introduce the theme of feminine vulnerability, sexual rejection and rootlessness that permeate the novel.

In 1938, Sasha Jensen, after a failed suicide attempt in London, finds herself adrift in Paris on a friend's charity. She tries to impose a rigid schedule on her days, filling each slot of free time with eating, shopping or cinema to create a mental bulwark against the devastating memories of her previous five year residence in Paris—an ill-fated disadvantageous marriage and the death of her baby. However, hard drinking and acute loneliness wear down her defences, and she ends up on a miserable prowl through seedy Parisian bars. Sasha's encounters with a wide variety of strangers- two Russian men, a Jewish painter, an American gigolo are characteristically urban in their mayfly brevity and do little to assuage her loneliness, despair or disgust with the general human condition. Compounding her sadness is anxiety brought on by the physical ravages of age.

Sasha's Paris in Rhys's novel is undoubtedly Williams' cosmopolitan metropolis. The streets bustle with strangers hurrying by, or strolling along, looking at bright shop window displays; there are exhibitions, theatres, tourists, cafes, restaurants, bars and taxis. In the course of the narrative's stream

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of consciousness monologue, we encounter Russian men, American visitors, Chinese patrons, a German hairdresser and his English wife, an Arab, a “*Hindu*” assistant at a bookstore and a gigolo of uncertain nationality. Sasha’s own national origins are intriguingly elusive. However, Amy Clukey reminds us that “...cosmopolitanism is less an accomplished fact than an evolving ethic and perhaps an unattainable ideal.”⁵ In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Rhys, “...grappling with the contradictions and failures of a transnational sociability...interrogates the privileges of the very kind of Parisian expatriatism that has come to be seen as the quintessential modernist experience and testifies to the restrictions imposed on cosmopolitan mobility for women and ethnic minorities.”⁶

The issue of Sasha’s nationality is introduced explicitly when the xenophobic receptionist at her depressingly run-down hotel asks for her passport to check for discrepancy in her form. Evading the question, Sasha thinks to herself, “*Nationality - that's what has puzzled him. I ought to have put nationality by marriage.*” (Rhys, 4) There are similarly vague hints throughout the text that compel the reader to question the initial assumption that Sasha is English. For example, “*I have no pride - no pride, no name, no face, no country. I don't belong anywhere. Too sad, too sad....It doesn't matter, there I am, like one of those straws which floats round the edge of a whirlpool and is gradually sucked into the centre, the dead centre, where everything is stagnant, everything is calm.*” (Rhys, 17)

Meditating upon the revealing spatial metaphor Sasha employs to describe her bone-deep feeling of alienation, Erica Johnson argues that Sasha confirms her ethnic Otherness, since the

⁵ Clukey, Amy. “No country really now”. *Modernist Cosmopolitanism and Jean Rhys's Quartet*. 2010.

⁶ *Ibis*.

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“...centre-periphery metaphor...is a model of mapping the relationship of the colonies to the métropole.”⁷ Johnson further observes that by portraying Sasha’s ultimately futile search for “...a home-like dwelling within the rooms and streets of Paris...Rhys interrogates geographical and nationalist narratives of home.”⁸ Textual evidence in support of this theory range from its “...consciousness of heat, colour and tropical imagery,”⁹ to Sasha’s pained identification with the painter Serge’s story of a mistreated Martinique woman in London.

Sasha’s reference to “...*no name, no face, no country*” (Rhys, 17) is also irresistibly reminiscent of her much better-known contemporary, Virginia Woolf, who writes in ‘Three Guineas’ (1938), “...as a woman, I have no country.” The almost-palpable, claustrophobic sense of powerlessness and alienation that haunts Sasha is best understood not through abstract references to post-War, post-Nietzschean disillusionment but the concrete categories of race, class and gender that together serve to ensure her subjection to colonial, patriarchal, capitalist powers. Sasha, in the novel, is doomed to fail because she is attempting to navigate an increasingly market-driven world with absolutely no currency- money, youth or beauty. She makes this explicit in her characteristically understated way when she says, “*Money for my hair, money for my teeth, money for shoes that won't deform my feet (it's not so easy now to walk around in cheap shoes with very high heels), money for good clothes, money, money. The night is coming. That's always when there isn't any. Just when you need it there's no money. No money. It gets you down.*” (Rhys, 55)

⁷ Johnson, Erica. “Creole Errance in”. *Good Morning, Midnight*. 2003.

⁸ *Ibis*.

⁹ *Ibis*.

Through a series of almost involuntary flashbacks, Sasha's financial dependency on callous, predatory men is adequately established. Her disadvantageous marriage to Enno, which results in a permanent estrangement from her family, is haunted by economic uncertainty and ends in her abandonment post the death of her new-born child. Forced to borrow money from the patronising Mr Lawson, she has to passively accept his kiss: "*I am hating him more than I have ever hated anyone in my life, yet I feel my mouth go soft under his, and my arms go limp. 'Good bye,' he says in imitation American, and grins.*" (Rhys, 45) Her last remembered job as a receptionist in a shop ends in ignominy when the condescending, sexist English manager dismisses her, calling her a "*helpless little fool.*" (Rhys, 10) Silent in the face of this injustice, Sasha's internal tirade, however, is a positively magnificent critique of patriarchy and capitalism: "*You, who represent Society, have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month. That's my market value, for I am an inefficient member of Society, slow in the uptake, uncertain, slightly damaged in the fray, there's no denying it. So you have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month, to lodge me in a small, dark room, to clothe me shabbily, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings till you get me to the point when I blush at a look, cry at a word. We can't all be happy, we can't all be rich, we can't all be lucky - and it would be so much less fun if we were... Sacrifices are necessary....Let's say that you have this mystical right to cut my legs off. But the right to ridicule me afterwards because I am a cripple - no, that I think you haven't got. And that's the right you hold most dearly, isn't it? You must be able to despise the people you exploit.*" (Rhys, 11)

While it is true that Rhys and Woolf present a shared belief in the utmost importance of financial independence and security for women if they are to have dignified, productive lives, their treatment of it in their fiction is very interestingly informed by their own class positions. As Judith Kegan Gardiner insightfully points out, "Rhys implies that Woolf's view of money is that of

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its un-troubled possessor, for whom money has always been a means, never itself an object of desire... Woolf's money seems clean, productive, and hygienic, as Sasha claims the English view of sex is. For Rhys, money is always more complicated, more ambivalent in its libidinal investment. Money is always mixed up with love. Being refused money or being fired is being hated, rejected, and mutilated... Woolf's [vision] of independent female authorship are blurred by privileges of class and national tradition that she does not share."¹⁰

The libidinal investment that Gardiner points out achieves its climax, as it were, in the final scene where Sasha, in a truly vulnerable moment of hope of a fulfilling human connection, acquiesces to the lonely and similarly disadvantaged male prostitute Rene's sexual overtures. However, once inside her room, Rene reacts horrifically to Sasha's ambivalence and insecurity with violent hostility, accusing her of being a tease and trying to force himself on her. When Sasha tries to offer him money to save herself, he leaves affecting disgust. The episode brutally drains Sasha of her last vestiges of resistance against a rapacious world and she opens her arms to the distasteful traveling salesman who occupies the room next door and has spent the entire duration of the text harassing her.

Sasha's extremely disturbing "Yes-yes-yes..." (Rhys, 71), the last phrase of the novel in fact, is, as Gardiner points out, undoubtedly an allusion (another classical 'Modernist' conceit) to James Joyce's Molly Bloom: "...and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes. "

¹⁰ Gardiner, Judith. *Good Morning Midnight; Good Night, Modernism*. 1983.

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However, while Molly's "...sexuality is coextensive with her female identity...her final and powerful yeses...her creator's fantasy of total female responsiveness,"¹¹ Sasha's "Yes-yes-yes" is a disgusted, self-destructive admittance of a final defeat against an unjust, exploitative social order, a farewell to arms in the face of power structures that make life for those without it miserable and demeaning and make nigh impossible the chance of true communion.

The prejudices that shape Sasha's tragic trajectory in the novel have much in common with the ones that have informed critical reception of Rhys's work. Irene Johnson, in her comparative study of the careers of Ernest Hemingway and Jean Rhys, notes that either critics have completely overlooked Rhys¹² or focused obsessively only on the work's "...autobiographical and confessional elements."¹³ The latter type of critical work has birthed the archetype of 'the Rhys woman', a perennially distressed, helpless female figure who is ultimately unsympathetic in her passivity. Addressing the sexism that underlies this approach, Gardiner¹⁴ writes, "When a writer like Joyce or Eliot writes about an alienated man estranged from himself, he is read as a portrait of the diminished possibilities of human existence in modern society. When Rhys writes about an alienated woman estranged from herself, critics applaud her perceptive but narrow depiction of female experience and tend to

¹¹ Gardiner, Judith. *Good Morning Midnight; Good Night, Modernism*. 1983.

¹² Thompson mentions that Edmund Wilson, Leslie Fiedler, Malcolm Cowley and others who wrote about expatriate writers in Paris completely ignore Rhys.

¹³ Konzett, Delia. *Ethnic Modernism in Jean Rhys's "Good Morning, Midnight"*. 2003.

¹⁴ It is also worth noting that every single critic whose work was relevant to this paper about the marginalization of a female author is female.

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narrow her vision even further by labelling it both pathological and autobiographical.”¹⁵

To read *Good Morning, Midnight*, therefore, as a narrow account of one woman’s miserable years in late 1930s Paris is to share in the patriarchal bias that has kept Rhys’s literary output in the shadows for so long. The novel is a bleak but extremely powerful indictment of the exploitative nexus of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. While Rhys does employ the technical paraphernalia that came to be associated with ‘Modernism,’ her treatment of the aforementioned themes sets her apart from her more illustrious contemporaries who were more comfortably situated in the machine they raged against.

¹⁵ Gardiner, K. Judith. *Good Morning Midnight; Good Night, Modernism*. 1983.

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