

# Politics of Identity and Oppression in Rhys's Voyage in the Dark

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### Politics of Identity and Oppression in Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*

Jean Rhys's 1934 novel *Voyage in the Dark* tells a tragic story of a young woman, Anna Morgan, who is forced to relocate her life from the warm, vibrant tropics of the West Indies to the cold, bleak city of London after her father's death and her family's subsequent financial turmoil. Anna, though deeply feeling and highly self-reflective, is swept into a whitewashed world of male privilege and female dependency where her voice is repeatedly silenced and utterly dismissed by most figures of authority in the text. Within the walls of silence placed around her, Anna is forced to retreat into herself and the disjointed memories of her life in the West Indies for comfort and any sense of what it means to be 'home.' She travels from boardinghouse to boardinghouse, all of which are as similar as the landladies who rent her the rooms. Anna's unique cultural identity and depth of feeling create a seemingly impenetrable gap between her sense of self, which is almost entirely constructed through rapidly cycling emotions and fragmented memories, and the almost interchangeable faces of England of whom surround her. Through her usage of repetition, metaphor, and imagery relating to color, Rhys exposes to her readers Anna's inner world of isolation, and offers a critique of her supposed lack of agency and a possible challenge to white, male superiority within the cultural institutions of the white patriarchy.

From the beginning and throughout the course of the novel, Rhys constructs Anna's memories of her home in the West Indies as fragmented and, at some points in the text, even difficult to decipher; however, once these memories have been articulated, some of their content later resurfaces at other, sometimes unpredictable, points in the novel. While this repetition may at first seem random and possibly even meaningless, the context in which certain elements of Anna's memories reemerge in the text are used as a kind of echo in order to alter and deepen readers' understandings of the moment in which the memories are recalled back to the surface. The first and perhaps most notable instances of this repetition occurs when Anna first opens up to the man, Walter, who chooses to 'keep' her (ie: pay her expenses in return for sex and company) about a memory from her mother's estate, Constance. Rhys writes, "I saw an old slave-list at Constance once...It was hand-written on that paper that rolls up. Parchment, d'you call it? It was in columns – the names and the ages and what they did and then General Remarks.'...Maillotte Boyd, aged 18, mulatto, house servant. The sins of the fathers Hester said are visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation" (52-53). This, however, is not just a fleeting moment of reminiscence, a portion reinserts itself into the novel only a few pages later while Anna lays with Walter after their intimate encounter. Anna asks, "Walter, will you put the light out? I don't like it in my eyes" and it is directly after her question that the line, "*Maillotte Boyd, aged 18, Maillotte Boyd, aged 18...*" reappears (Rhys, 56). In her article, "The Politics of Form: Jean Rhys's Social Vision in *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*," Mary Lou Emery states that this italicized monologue shift, "reveal[s] a running interior commentary alongside Anna's story. These [italicized] voices offer conflicting interpretations of Anna's identity and the events of the novel" (420). Although Anna is the one asking Walter to do something for her (put the light out) it appears that she, "seems to willingly adopt a slave-like

role” (Emery 420). As Emery points out, the placement of this reemergence definitely seems to change the implications of Anna and Walter’s sexual encounter. In the original recollection Anna remembers, but does not mention to Walter, that her stepmother stated what she refers to as, ‘the sins of the fathers.’ While this statement is initially ambiguous, the repetition of the slave girl’s name in Anna’s mind after she and Walter are sexually intimate, could clarify for readers what Hester’s statement really meant. The ‘sins’ Hester mentions could refer to either the raping and impregnating of native women as an act of male, imperial domination, or the pillaging and enslavement of the native people and their land, in either case, there is an indirect reference to imperialism and a direct reference to slavery, since the memory itself is centered around the impression of the slave names.

With this context in mind, readers must then ask why the name of the slave girl, as well as her age, is repeated as Anna lies next to Walter after their encounter. Since the original mention of the name is surrounded by a history of English imperialism, this repetition seems to be an echo of and link between Anna and Maillotte, the slave girl. They are both around the same age and they are both essentially owned by and dependent on white men for their material stability (home, food, clothing, etc). Women of color who were enslaved by the white invaders were often raped, as Hester may have been implying, which makes the connection between Anna and Maillotte even more striking and perhaps frightening. Only a matter of several pages before this sexual encounter, Anna and Walter had their very first physically intimate experience. Anna begins the experience drunk, stating, “‘I must go, I must go’” but immediately returns to narrating, “going up another flight of stairs and I walked softly...I stopped. I wanted to say, ‘No I’ve changed my mind.’ But he laughed and squeezed my hand and said, ‘What’s the matter? Come on, be brave,’ and I didn’t say anything, but I felt cold and as if I were dreaming” (Rhys

37). Clearly, the act of taking Anna up to his bedroom this first time was an act of coercion rather than pure consent. Afterwards, he proceeds to take up her purse, “and put some money into it” (Rhys, 38). This puts Anna into a situation that is not entirely different than that of the mulatto slave girl brought up during their second encounter in that both are being forced into a nonconsensual experience in order to obtain their means of living. Similarly, both are also considered to be ‘outsiders’ from the English world and being physically exploited by the white English patriarchal ideologies of the time. There then seems to be a close metaphorical connection between the imperialist dogmas of greed and entitlement taking hold in and exploiting the resources and people of the West Indies for profit, and Anna herself acting as a kind of individual, physical continuation of that imperialist exploitation which is instead, this time, happening on English soil.

Although the association between the repetition of the mulatto slave girl’s name and her own recent sexual experience seems to suggest Anna’s awareness and almost complacency in her victimhood, this does not remain static throughout the text. Just as Anna does not see the natives of her home in the West Indies as weak-minded or complacent in their demise, the way many whites during that time were inclined to see them, she does not consistently seem to see herself as a naïve, powerless victim, the role many of the men in the novel have tried to place her within. She draws comparisons between herself and the native people who were resilient against the colonial invasions. After Walter has left her and she is struggling to make a life for herself once again, the passage Anna repeats is, “The Caribs indigenous to this island were a warlike tribe and their resistance to white domination, though spasmodic, was fierce. As lately as the beginning of the nineteenth century they raided one of the neighboring islands, under British rule, overpowered the garrison and kidnapped the governor, his wife and three children. They are now

practically exterminated” (Rhys 105). Here, Anna seems very aware of the forces of societal oppression acting upon her and since she has constructed a large part of her identity around her affiliation with and connection to the West Indies, the brief history Rhys presents to her readers is far from random. Emery writes, “Anna links her exploited situation to that of other oppressed people, not in slave-like submission this time, but in resistance to it no matter what the odds. Neither the Spanish in the sixteenth century nor the English in the seventeenth century ever entirely defeated the Dominican Caribs. At least in her own mind, Anna fights with a strong will to survive despite her passive, shy appearance and in spite of the internal splitting this survival requires” (422). These two conflicting views of herself, as a complacent slave-like figure as well as a resilient warlike agent of resistance, seem to work together to illustrate the fluidity of Anna’s own sense of self. Although others have attempted to place Anna into a stagnant, concrete role, either as a prostitute or as a naïve insecure child, in her own mind the memories of her individual experience and cultural identity have shaped her view of herself more than the opinions of the other characters in the text. She sees herself differently depending on her own private analyses regarding the culture she came from, she reads certain characters and moments in Dominican history as an echo of herself and her own personal situation and is therefore able to take an active role in constructing her identity through those lenses, arguably endowing her with more agency than many readers may have initially assumed.

While Anna’s unique method of constructing her identity around her home in the West Indies may at some points seem empowering, as was the case in her brief recollection of the natives’ resistance, her strong attachment to her past also creates a large barrier between the ‘self’ she has constructed and the English world where she lives her life day to day. She often feels isolated and completely alone in England and seems to depend on her ability to retreat into

herself and her memories as a way to cope with her feelings of alienation. Although there is a commonly noted connection between the concepts of 'home' and 'family,' for Anna it is as if memories of immediate family, including her step-mother Hester, provide no real comfort for her. In fact, her relationship and interactions with Hester seem to only solidify the seemingly impenetrable wall she feels between herself as constructed by her lush homeland, and her daily reality in the cold city of London. Hester symbolizes the conventions of English society of which Anna is expected to conform to; even though she has grown up with Hester as a mother-figure, she cannot seem to find the desire to fulfill the kind of purely English identity Hester wishes she could fit into. Anna associates Hester not really with her physical form but rather her voice and the language she uses when speaking to her. In her article, "Voyage in the Dark:" Jean Rhys's *Masquerade for the Mother*," Deborah Kelly Kloepfer also comments on the fact that, "It is Hester's voice, more than her physical presence, that intrudes into the novel as a representative of a repressive cultural and linguistic structure...It is Hester's language that serves to sever her from any kind of relationship with Anna" (449). During the only face to face interaction between Anna and Hester, Rhys writes, "[Hester] had...an English lady's voice with a sharp, cutting edge to it. Now that I've spoken you can hear that I'm a lady. I have spoken and I suppose now you realize that I'm an English gentlewoman" (57). Since most of the characters in the text attempt to silence Anna and drown her voice underneath their own, the power of one's voice becomes a central issue. Anna associates her step-mother with an "English gentlewoman" whom does not allow her to speak but instead attempts only to speak over her, just as many of the men in the text attempt to do. According to Kloepfer, "...much like the men in the novel...[Hester] censors and negates Anna's attempts to express what she thinks or feels" (449). This complete lack of ability to express herself and be understood, for Anna, acts as a defining

and central characteristic of England. Hester acts as a symbolic embodiment of the England that has attempted to turn Anna into a kind of prisoner with no outward voice.

Since she has not been granted a way to express her internal sense of self to the external world around her, Anna retreats further into her isolation. Because this forced silence is closely associated with the idea of “English ladylikeness,” Anna continues to mentally distance herself from the world of English convention and back further into her past in the West Indies. As stated, Hester does not suffice for Anna as any kind of maternal figure, and the image of ‘home’ is often closely linked to the idea of the mother, the dark-skinned native woman, Francine, ends up acting in Anna’s mind as surrogate figure of maternal connection. While Anna associates England with images of bleak, uniform “grey-brown” and “grey green” (Rhys 8) and “hundreds of thousands of white people rushing along and the dark houses all alike frowning down one after the other all alike all stuck together – the streets like smooth shut-in ravines and the dark houses frowning down” (Rhys 17), she associates the West Indies with images of things like, “pink roses on the table in a curly blue vase with gold rings” (Rhys 70). In short, England is symbolized by conformity, bleak whiteness and greyness, and the West Indies with color, vibrancy, and warmth. This association closely mirrors the distinction between her relationship with her step-mother and her relationship with Francine. Rhys writes, “The thing about Francine was that when I was with her I was happy. She was small and plump and blacker than most of the people out there, and she had a pretty face. What I liked was watching her eat mangoes. Her teeth would bite into the mango and her lips would fasten on either side of it, and while she sucked you saw that she was perfectly happy” (67-68). While her interaction with Hester centers around convention and “stew [that] tasted like nothing at all” (Rhys 58), her memories of Francine are very sensual and bright, their interactions based on natural connection rather than



strict social convention. Kloepper writes, “Francine...operates in a matriarchal rather than patriarchal sphere; Hester and Francine, then, juxtaposed, embody the split between the respectable ‘femaleness’ of white male culture and the rather lust, forbidden power of island women” (449). Anna has a better and more natural connection with Francine, which could be read in this context as a challenge to the essentialist belief that women’s happiness and sense of self is completely dependent on men. Anna claims to be naturally happy around Francine, which is perhaps the only point in the novel where Anna is truly happy and it is not a result of gaining material objects and physical affection (as she did with Walter).

Rhys’s depiction of the colorful imagery of the West Indies, however, not only serves to construct Anna’s childhood home as a place teeming with vibrant, natural life against the grey-brown conformity of London, it also acts a powerful, subversive statement about race.

According to Anna the people in England appear to, “swarm like woodlice when you push a stick into a woodlice-nest at home. And their faces are the color of woodlice” (Rhys 26). While “whiteness” is typically associated in the English literary tradition with beauty and purity, Rhys’s description of what it is to be white completely undermines those traditional assumptions. She associates whiteness with ‘woodlice’ which are essentially small, parasitic crustaceans which only travel in packs. Whiteness for Rhys, then, becomes synonymous with conformity and lack of individuality, which clearly aligns with my previous discussion of her representation of Hester. Rhys also calls her readers attention to “whiteness” which challenges the idea that being white is the default position in society and that everyone who lies outside that assumption is an “Other.” Anna herself does not want to see herself as white but rather, she thinks, “I wanted to be black, I always wanted to be black. I was happy because Francine was there, and I watched her hand waving the fan backwards and forwards and the beads of sweat that rolled from

underneath her handkerchief. Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad” (Rhys 31). While this perspective on the white/black binary certainly challenges the commonly used metaphor that “whiteness is good” and “blackness is bad,” it also simply, “reverses rather than dismantles binary structures it depends on” (Spyra 84). In simply reversing the binary, Rhys is not exactly offering a fully functional deconstruction of race or following through with an assertion of race as a social construction, she is, however, attempting to challenge the assumptions many whites have about people of color being identical and lacking any individuality by asserting, through Anna’s perspective, the same claims about whites.

*Voyage in the Dark* serves as a critique of many of the social institutions of which many, even today, do not question the validity. Through Anna, Rhys is able to give a voice to a woman who otherwise may have been forced to remain silent. In the portrayal of Anna’s richly emotional subjective experience and her deeply personal connection to her past, Rhys offers her readers a new perspective on England which had previously been swept under the rug. English society was often thought to be a hub of grand civilization, the pinnacle of human excellence by many living there and even many abroad. Rhys shows her readers a different England, one that is illustrated through the purely subjective lens of someone who offers an image of England from a different, almost alien, angle. Rhys challenges the assumptions of whiteness as purity, femininity as inferiority, and women as voiceless and even internally complacent creatures. Though *Voyage in the Dark* can certainly be read as a tragedy, I believe it can also be read as a call to question the social systems in place and study their effects on those who are incapable of or simply refuse to conform to them.

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