Childlike Women and Paternal Men: Colonialism in Jean Rhys's Fiction

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IT IS A COMMON CRITICAL ASSERTION that Jean Rhys portrays the female victim in novel after novel, but the archetype must be placed in context. Although her women are victims, they are victimized by both men and society; in fact, the men are the society. Rosalind Miles in *The Fiction of Sex* notes that Rhys heroines are always pitted against "institutionalized masculine hostility in the shape of the law, the professions, the police, the bureaucrats" (99). These are the forces that oppose and ultimately destroy Rhys protagonists — from her first to her last.

Other feminist critics have echoed Miles's claim. Judith Kegan Gardiner has pointed to *Quartet* where Marya has a "conditioned response to her situation of . . . socialization to the role of dependent woman" (77). Cheryl L. Brown has noted (293) that all Rhys's early novels cast the woman as daughter or as child — economically dependent, helpless, powerless — and the opposite forces as male, wealthy, powerful, paternal, and protective. In truth, these women are defined by the men they subordinate themselves to. According to Cheryl M. L. Dash, they "see themselves not as individuals but as extensions of their male counterparts" (198).

That Rhys should see the world as divided between male "haves" and female "have-nots" and that the females should be defined by the males is not surprising, given her childhood under colonial rule. Just as her position as a white West Indian woman placed her somewhere between the natives and the English elite and left her isolated on her own island, the institution of colonialism too had its effect. Helen Tiffin draws the parallel, which I will discuss in detail here, between "destructive male/female

relationships and between imperial nation and colonial underdog . . ." (329). It is one possible explanation for this recurring pattern of childlike women and paternal men.

Voyage in the Dark, Rhys's first written novel, is about the young Anna Morgan, freshly-arrived in London from the West Indies. During the novel, a *bildungsroman* in its most sordid sense, she begins and ends her relationship with Walter Jeffries and learns to exist alone in the harsh demimonde of London. Having left her safe, protective environment in the West Indies, Anna yearns for a similarly comforting one in her new home. Unfortunately, her stepmother Hester, who lives in England, gradually abandons her. Symbolically, women, for Rhys, are not up to the task of providing anyone with sufficient protection. Without her stepmother, Anna must rely on her own resources — mainly her physical attractiveness. Because her acting jobs on the stage are too infrequent and pay too little, and because she is far too distracted to put her own life in order, Anna searches for a man to protect and support her.

She finds Walter Jeffries, a man her father's age. He wants to take charge of her life, give her singing lessons and help her with her career. Clearly, theirs is a father-daughter relationship: " 'You're a perfect darling,' " he tells her, " 'but you're only a baby. You'll be all right later on. Not that it has to do with age. Some people are born knowing their way about' " (43). Anna is obviously not that sort, but rather a child-woman, the most childlike of all Rhys heroines. Walter's brother, in fact, calls her an "infant" (78). It doesn't take Walter long to tire of Anna, but he continues to support her for a time. She finds another man and then another. At the end of the novel she is having an abortion. Rhys's point is clear: women are not creators or sustainers of life. Anna will continue her pattern of searching for male protection, for she cannot survive on her own in London; she is dependent economically and emotionally.

In London, Anna has no roots, no friends, no family, and no prospects. Part of an alien culture, without the security of money or familiarity with the culture's rules, Anna has no ability to effect any change and is ultimately powerless. In her dream she is on a ship surrounded by small islands, and she is trying to get

ashore: "I took huge, climbing, flying strides among confused figures. I was powerless and very tired. . . ." (140-41). A symptom of her dissociation from place is that political events have no bearing on her life. Although *Voyage* is set in Europe in 1912-14, the years immediately before the Great War, the volatile political events of that period and place are rarely mentioned. By this deliberate omission, Rhys contributes to the impression that Anna is somewhere else, floating above the earthly beings around her.

One manifestation of her lack of authority and powerlessness is that she experiences life in London in a fog, through a filter of haze; nothing is clear and straightforward. In the first half of the novel, she has a cold. Later she is sleepy, and she gets the flu. When she is neither sick nor asleep, she is drunk. As a result, she doesn't recognize the subtleties; she has to be told, for instance, that her friend is a prostitute. Anna manages to function in such a state because her actions have no import. Because of her upbringing in Dominica under British rule, Anna does not expect to wield any influence or have any power, and in England she is as powerless as she was in her colonial home. She sees herself as a dominated individual. Using Edmund Wilson's image, this is the "psychological wound" of colonization (quoted in Mahood 167).

Quartet, Rhys's first published novel, is a fairly realistic account of the relationship between Ford Madox Ford, his wife Stella Bowen, and Rhys during the period of her husband's imprisonment. When her husband was imprisoned for currency violations, Rhys was left penniless and was forced to seek comfort in the Ford household. *Quartet*, however, is more than a semi-autobiographical story of a *ménage à trois*; it is the chronicle of an English expatriate's fear and sadness in Paris and an undeniable expression of the parallel between masculine/colonial oppressors and the feminine/colonized oppressed.

Heidler, the Ford character in the novel, is an older man, a "rock of a man" (43) who offers warmth and stability, and an entré into the English community in Paris, an attractive prospect for the penniless, desperately-isolated Marya. Rhys unambiguously establishes another father-daughter relationship between Marya and Heidler and indicates the profound significance of

this role in her attraction to him. Judith Kegan Gardiner has noted that Rhys omitted from this autobiographical novel that both couples had young daughters at the time, probably because the maternal role would have obscured her point (71). "When he touched her," Rhys writes to show Marya's response to the paternal Heidler, "she felt warm and secure . . ." (73). Marya literally waits on Heidler, seeing him as "very majestic and paternal in a dressing gown" (59); he is there to soothe her tears in one moment of fear (73) and again at another moment when she feels the "fright of a child shut up in a dark room. Fright of an animal caught in a trap" (90). Here Rhys emphasizes the child role and introduces a second symbol, entrapment.

Several critics, among them Judith Kegan Gardiner, have noted the prevalence of this image, not only for her husband Stephan, who is literally imprisoned, but also for Marya. Early in the novel the Heidlers' "cage" provides protection; however, it becomes increasingly malevolent and tortuous to Marya. Finally, leaving the hotel room supplied by Heidler, accompanied by a friend supplied by his wife, Marya visits a zoo where she watches a fox futilely bang its nose against the bars of its cage. As such a metaphor makes clear, Marya is like an innocent animal, who will be tamed to fit the needs of male authority. Heidler's wife Lois already resembles, according to Marya, a "well-trained domesticated animal" (107), and Marya in relationship to Heidler is later compared to "some unfortunate dog abasing itself before its master" (131). Marya is, in fact, haunted by an ambiguous fear of enslavement which relates also to colonial domination:

> It was a vague and shadowy fear of something cruel and stupid that had caught her and would never let her go. She had always known it was there — hidden under the more or less pleasant surface of things. Always. Ever since she was a child . . . You were mysteriously sure of its terror. You could only walk very fast and try to leave it behind you. (33)

Her fears are justified, for Heidler's ultimate authority over his wife and mistress is unquestioned, and his desires alone triumph. By way of explanation, Lois tells Marya he is the "man, the male, the important person, the only person who matters" (81). Like

her fellow victim, Marya is ultimately conditioned to have no will of her own but solely to accommodate the needs of the male authority.

Rhys drums home the colonial parallel. Marya remarks on Heidler's resemblance to Queen Victoria and repeatedly on his authoritarian stature, which overwhelms her. To Marya, Heidler is "impressive and full of authority" (114) and "large, invulnerable . . ." (148). He defines her very existence: "Life before him was like being in a cold, dark night" (83). Later, Marya compares their love affair to a fight where she "had no chance of victory" (117). Even their love-making is a battle for power, which she loses: "He crushed her, bore her down" (119), and Heidler actually calls her a "savage" (131). As in the colonial situation, Marya loses her personal identity, all will of her own. Like Anna before her, she is repeatedly described as mentally absent; she feels "hypnotized and impotent" (89), "as if life is a dream" (123), and like a "soul in limbo" (146). At the end of the novel, she goes off with a strange man, "like a sleepwalker" (152).

Marya never does realize what has happened to her, although she wonders at her lack of "kick" as she accepts the dictates and unreasonable demands of Heidler. She is completely powerless to confront his invincible male force. She is destitute, friendless, and ignorant of the "rules." Mention is often made of the "game," and Marya admits she felt "she were playing some intricate game of which she did not understand the rules" (29).

The Heidler character reappears in her next novel, *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, the story of a lonely Englishwoman in Paris who attempts to return home. The protagonist, Julia Martin, has no discernible background: "Her career of ups and downs has rubbed most of the hall-marks off her, so that it was not easy to guess at her age, her nationality, or the social background to which she properly belonged" (14). She is, we later learn, the daughter of a Brazilian woman who presumably married an Englishman, and she is another typical Rhys heroine — childlike and helpless, frequenting cafes and bars and living primarily off the beneficence of lovers and former lovers. As in the earlier novels, the men in her life are older and have a need to

protect and nourish her. George Horsfield, for example, is apparently willing to take the blame for the world's prosperity and offers money for some obscure personal need.

Julia returns to London knowing her mother is ill; now, after several strokes, she is paralyzed — another impotent woman. She dies during the course of the novel. But even if her mother had not died, Julia's return to London would still have been unsuccessful and unpleasant, for she is like a ghost who has returned to life. In his study of Rhys, Thomas F. Staley has shown that ghost figures pervade the novel (69). Julia is described as "pale as a ghost" (*Mackenzie* 28) and while walking in a foggy night, she imagines "the ghost of herself coming out of the fog to meet her," (*Mackenzie* 68) but her own ghost does not acknowledge her. A man seated next to her in a restaurant sees a man he had thought was dead (*Mackenzie* 69). In her hotel in London, Julia screams, unreasonably imagining a ghost has touched her (*Mackenzie* 164). In Paris, she sees an old ghost-like woman on the steps near the quay (*Mackenzie* 181), a reflection of her own future. Rhys thus characterizes Julia's fragile mental state, but more significantly she creates here a metaphor of powerlessness, for as a ghost, Julia is invisible, physically absent, and totally unable to exert any influence.

Here too, Rhys sets up the familiar poles: solitary woman vs. the institutions. Mackenzie and his lawyer represent, as Julia says, "organized society" in which she had "no place and against which she had not a dog's chance" (22). Against the respectable classes, the moneyed, usually male "haves," Julia fights. In Julia's world, money represents power and only men have power. Uncle Griffiths, who disapproves of Julia, contemptuously gives her a five-pound note. Her former lover gives her only slightly more. Her future lover, George Horsfield, too, offers her money. At the end of the novel, she is again in Paris, with Mackenzie, another former lover. Although in her indignant rage she had torn up his final payment to her, after her trip to England and her confrontation with her bleak possibilities, she is cowed; now she openly asks him for money and accepts her subservient role.

Rhys employs images of predation and entrapment, as in *Quartet*, to underscore the point of female subservience. Julia's

dying mother is said to look like an animal in a cage. During Julia's visit home, her sister Norah is reading Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*, and Rhys quotes a passage about the lack of power among slaves. Mr. Horsfield, who represents Julia's only salvation, has a cat and he is thus the powerful "cat" in the "cat and mouse game" they are playing, an image also reminiscent of *Quartet*.

Sasha Jansen, the protagonist of *Good Morning, Midnight*, the next novel, is Julia Martin five years later. Sasha is English but until five years before, she had been an expatriate in Paris. She returns now for a visit, a trip meant to help rehabilitate her — a friend financed it for that reason — but that becomes a nightmare of loneliness and alcohol. Like Julia before her, Sasha has no nationality, no home. She tells herself, "I have no pride — no pride, no name, no face, no country. I don't belong anywhere" (44). She too is dissociated from place. Although she is easily recognized as English, she feels rejected by England: once after a lengthy stay abroad, her family asked why she hadn't drowned herself in the Seine (41). Like Julia, Sasha is associated with ghost images and images of death: she describes her room, for example, as a coffin.

Once again, the two familiar poles are established: the haves, the respected society, vs. the have-nots, whom Sasha refers to as "all the fools and all the defeated" (28). She clearly identifies with the latter, for she perceives herself as an outcast. Sasha, however, is more complex than earlier Rhys heroines because she is also a victim of class oppression. Sasha is fired from her job and she speaks, according to Rosalind Miles, in *The Fiction of Sex*, "for all the exploited, all the underpaid and helpless" (100). Here, Rhys links class struggle with the battle between the sexes.

Sasha has an interior monologue with her boss which delineates the power of the faceless male boss, whom she calls Mr. Blank, over the dependent female:

> Well, let's argue this out, Mr. Blank. 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 on 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. . . . Let's say 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. (29)

Rhys also touches here on a result of colonialism, what Aimé Césaire noted in his work on the subject. He writes of the "boomerang" effect on the colonizer (20). "The colonizer . . . in order to ease his conscience," Césaire writes, "gets into the habit of seeing the other man as *an animal*, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal" (20). This is Conrad's point in *Heart of Darkness*, and E. M. Forster has Mrs. Moore note with distaste her son's transformation — his loss of "young-man humanitarianism" — after his short sojourn in India.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rhys's last novel, the Englishman Rochester has moved to the West Indies, forced by his distressed economic situation to marry a wealthy Creole woman and here, for a time, the man — not the Rhys heroine — is alone in a foreign locale. During the course of the novel, he falls in and out of love with his wife, driving her mad in the process. The final cruelty occurs when he returns to England, taking her with him and forcing her into exile. There, she becomes the Creole lunatic of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, the first Mrs. Rochester.

While Rochester views himself as alienated and vulnerable in the mysterious West Indies, he is at least able to feel superior by virtue of his English birth. Rochester's self-righteousness and superciliousness would have been commonplace and his ultimate right to control his wife's life unquestioned because of his birth and his sex. As the female colonized person, Antoinette has no control over her destiny but is at the mercy of her husband who, despite a moment of ambivalence and compassion, nearly despises her. Her dream reveals both her nameless fears and her passive position regarding them:

> I am walking towards the forest . . . following the man who is with me. . . . I follow him, sick with fear but I make no effort to save myself . . . this must happen. Now we have reached the forest . . . He turns and looks at me, his face black with hatred. . . . I follow him, weeping . . . and I think "It will be when I go up these steps." . . . (60-61)

Antoinette's acceptance of his arbitrary power over her and his exploitation of her own resources again parallels the roles of the colonized possession and the colonizer. Rochester, who represents England, emigrates to the British islands of Jamaica, later Dominica, and strikes an economic arrangement. He exploits Antoinette's emotional, sexual, and even financial resources — for her inheritance becomes his — and then leaves the island, offering no explanation and suffering no remorse.

Antoinette, of course, can only lose in this arrangement, for she has no control over her life. She was given in marriage by an older step-brother to his uncaring friend in a marriage of convenience born of economic necessity. When she wisely hesitates to marry Rochester because she fears the power he will exercise over her, he convinces her she will be safe once they are married. "I'll trust you if you trust me," he tells her and asks, "Is that a bargain?" (79). But Antoinette, in truth, has nothing to bargain and has no choice but to acquiesce.

In addition, the partners in this economic arrangement are drastically different people. For a time Rochester indulges in the exotic sensuality around him — the luxuriant flowers, his wife's sexuality, the heady perfume in the air — but eventually he is repelled by her eroticism, as Pratt points out (51), and threatened by the hint that she has slept with a native. He then rejects her and all she stands for. What she stands for is the archetypal happy primitive, the natural woman; he stands for the cultivated, civilized man. He is the restrained classical male where she is sensual and emotional Romantic female, a dichotomy which parallels that of the male/colonizer and the female/colonized.

The dichotomy is also presented later in the novel when Rochester and Christophine appear to battle for Antoinette. That battle pits the same two forces against each other as the earlier struggle between Hester and Francine in *Voyage in the Dark*. In

Wide Sargasso Sea, Rochester draws Antoinette to the European way of life; he calls her "Bertha," in an attempt to dissociate her from her West Indian past, and to establish her rebirth. As Selma James sees it, this is the "European identifying the Third World woman; here is the man defining his wife" (66). Not surprisingly, Rochester is all the more enamoured of his wife when he sees her drinking tea, remarking to himself how English she looks. His opponent in this battle is Christophine, with her symbolic name of a root-like vegetable, who represents the honest, emotional island side of Antoinette's existence without which, it is revealed, she cannot survive. When Christophine fails — as do all the women in Rhys's novels who try to wrest power from men — Rochester sails to England with Antoinette, where "rootless" now, she will surely die.[1]

We have seen here how in Rhys's canon dependent females are always pitted against powerful, institutionalized male forces and the parallel to the colonial relationship. But one final point must be noted. In novel after novel, helpless women seek out powerful males for protection — but the men ultimately fail them. Walter Jeffries tires of Anna and eventually abandons her; Heidler and Mackenzie do the same; Sasha searches but finds no one at all — her husband has left her before the novel begins — and Mr. Rochester locks his wife in an attic. Women too are failures at providing protection, even the well-intentioned ones. Hester abandons her stepdaughter, claiming financial constraints: with her male support and protection, Anna's father, dead, she too must struggle to survive. Francine and Christophine do what they can, but as black women they are powerless.

Rhys's final message may be that control by others doesn't work. Women must be adults, autonomous and independent, not perpetual children, seeking adult saviours. Women must resist the trap of false protectionism.

NOTE

[1] In the autumn 1985 issue of *Signs*, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi interprets *Jane Eyre* from a black feminist perspective, showing that once in England, Rochester casts his "black" wife aside in order to marry a white woman, Jane Eyre. The burning down of Thornfield Hall is symbolic of burning down the "white patriarchal edifice" (66).

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