

*Shopping in the Metropolis: Consumerism in Jean Rhys's "Voyage in the Dark and
Good Morning, Midnight"*

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Over the past few decades, the imperial dimensions of Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Morning, Midnight* have received significant critical attention. While Jean Rhys's apparently anti-imperialist political views have already been traced in her novels, critics like Veronica Marie Gregg and Mary Lou Emery have acknowledged the intimacy of complicity and critique in Jean Rhys's narratives of England and West India in her descriptions of the British Empire. As these critics suggest in separate arguments, such complexities place her texts in a contested middle ground, relying upon the very textual tropes of empire and colony to formulate postcolonial literature.

Writings to be explored in this essay are *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1938). *Voyage in the Dark* tells us a story of a Creole girl named Anna Morgan who, like Rhys herself, falls in love with a wealthy man only to be abandoned later, resorting to prostitution in order to keep on living. Anna's dark voyage, from a chorus girl to Walter's lover and finally to a prostitute, ends with a catastrophic abortion, after which Anna breaks down completely both mentally and physically. The heroine of *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha Jansen, is the eldest of Rhys's female protagonists. When the story begins, Sasha is on a two-week trip to a Paris that she knows well. During her stay, she remembers rooms, streets, and scenes from her past, meets a few foreigners, has several unpleasant encounters with the man next door whom she dubs the *commis voyageur*, and meets a gigolo who later attempts to rape her in her room. Sasha drives him away but later regrets it. She opens the door hoping he will come back again, but the *commis* enters instead. Although she always rejected him in the past this time, Sasha embraces him and pulls him onto the bed, saying, "Yes---yes---yes."

In this paper I shall consider how the two novels register commerce and consumer capitalism as part of the literal and figurative administration of empire and the articulations of Englishness with which the empire is intimately linked, and which place colonial women into a difficult plight. On the one hand, Jean Rhys's depictions of consumerism and commerce indicate an evolving capitalist culture which is related to the designations of class, gender and racial categories. On the other hand, Jean Rhys's texts use the tropes of the marketplace in ambivalent ways, challenging us to determine the status of resistance and complicity within capitalist and imperialist regimes. *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Morning, Midnight* enables us to trace the effects of a consumer capital which affects colonized women ideologically, psychically, politically, and economically, placing them in an impasse where they cannot obtain what they desire through consumption.

Dream and Promise

Alissa Karl (2009, p.29) precisely notes how consumer capital "promises belonging to the foreign and in this case explicitly colonial woman" in Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*. Shopping falsely promises Anna Morgan that she can locate herself in England and assume an English identity. Anna quickly recognizes this form of dressing up as a potential and effective way "out of her fixity" (Snaith 2005, p. 81); in other words, as

a way to change her fate. With the money given to her by Walter, she purchases new clothes, which represent a re-invention. In the shop, she thinks: "This is a beginning. Out of this warm room that smells of fur I'll go to all the lovely places I've ever dreamt of. This is the beginning" (Rhys 1934, p.28). Here, at the "scene of the sale" Anna imagines her possibilities in terms of consumer practice that will enable her to start a new life in England. For both Snaith and Karl, this dress shop scene indicates the promises of consumption. Karl contends that such instances indicate "not how Anna wants to become ladylike, but rather how she understands discipline as a matter of displaying commodities and avoiding visual conspicuousness" (Karl 2009, p.32). However, it is my claim that Anna wants to become ladylike in order to conform to the English discipline and mores, believing it as the only effective way to change, even momentarily.

Thus, by showing how commodities shape her characters' self-invention, Rhys identifies the sexualization of foreign women. On the one hand, fashion and commodity locate them, allowing them to re-invent themselves. On the other hand, however, being alone and foreign, these characters are extinguished by the fashion commodities which increase the awareness of foreignness. For instance, when Anna returns from the dress shop, dressed up to the nines, the landlady concludes, "I don't want no tarts in my house, so now you know" (Rhys 1934, p.30). The irony is that the mannequin in the dress shop is not considered as a tart although being clothed in an identical dress. In addition, Anna's anxiety over her ladylike appearance reflects her feeling of exclusion from English culture and identity. Feeling that the houses are sneering at her and that she will be laughed at for her inappropriate clothing, Anna is ashamed of her "hideous underclothes" and determines to "do anything for good clothes" (Rhys 1934, p.25). According to Rosalind Coward (1985), women are always subordinated to and disempowered by the gaze in a consumerist context.

Furthermore, Anna depends on men for economic survival, which determines her status as a sexualized commodity whose social and economic currency fluctuates with male desire. The scrutiny directed toward her body not only commodifies her femininity but also confirms men's control and mastery behind the gaze. Walter, for example, speculates about Anna's body; he notes Anna's white teeth during their first encounter and comments twice on her teeth, as a slave owner would while purchasing slaves. Anna survives in the novel by exposing herself to specularization and commodification in order to secure her economic circulation. The end of the novel affirms this cycle of commodification and desire when the doctor remarks after abortion, that Anna should be "[r]eady to start all over again in no time" (Rhys 1934, p.187). This remark suggests that Anna will continue to circulate as a sexual commodity. When women from the fringes of empire try to conform or assimilate into the dominant society, these women, with a colonial perspective, try to apply the dominant viewpoint into their own bodies. Meanwhile, the consumer relationship, with men as consumers of women's bodies, establishes a dynamic of colonial visibility in the metropole as well as the specific procedures of consumer capitalist

markets.

The consumerist masculine gaze that dominates *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Morning, Midnight* recalls the cultural negotiations of gender. The visual norm, which is based specifically upon Anna and Sasha's being looked at, both keeps them separate and controls them. When Sasha leaves the shop after her hat-buying, she is pleased because no one stares at her anymore. Anna worries about her looks and clothes when she meets Walter one evening and is glad that Walter makes no comment on her appearance. Both women adjust themselves to this form of visual regulation, where the display of fashion commodities satirically traps those marginalized women into inconspicuous circulation. Therefore, the marketplace enables economic authority to produce a gendered logic of consumerism.

Furthermore, the importance of visual regulation for the shopper cannot be denied, as Rachel Bowlby (1985, p.32) stresses:

Consumer culture transforms the narcissistic mirror into a shop window, the glass which reflects and idealizes image of the woman (or man) who stands before it, in the form of the model she could buy or become. Through the glass, the woman sees what she wants and what she wants to be.

The shop window raises Anna's aspirations and fantasies with a transformative power which can bring her an altered identity. While shopping gives Anna the hope for change, the act of gazing into the shop windows foreshadows the impossibility of such a transformation: "The shop-windows sneering and smiling in your face, and then you look at the skirt of your costume, all crumpled at the back" (Rhys 1934, p.25). The shop window even strips her naked and sees through her "hideous underclothes" (Rhys 1934, p.25). This is a kind of self-reflexive female gaze. Her desire for fine clothes causes her financial dependence on Walter. As a result, she has to acquire money to dress well in order to sell her body to attain more money.

Circulation and Aging

Both *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Morning, Midnight* depicts a woman who trades on her body and has to maintain her beauty in order to sustain herself financially and survive in sexual circulation. For example, in *Voyage in the Dark*, when Anna meets her stepmother Hester, she is afraid to tell Hester that she is living on the money from Walter:

I sat there. I didn't know what to say. There wasn't anything to say. I kept on wondering whether she would ask me what I was living on. 'What is Purity? For Thirty-five Years the Answer has been Bourne's Cocoa.' Thirty-five years...Fancy being thirty five years old. What is Purity? For Thirty-five Years the Answer has been.... (Rhys 1934, p.59)

This scene suggests that the discourse of purity is associated with upper-class gentility, as Walter insists that virginity is important and that "it's the only thing that matters" (Rhys 1934, p.32). As Karl (2009, p.32) interprets, just as the colonial import cocoa is brought back to England for processing and "purification," "Anna herself understands

‘purity’ as it circulates in the marketplace, yet as it is naturalized by capital and empire.” Here, purity becomes a commodity to fit the imperial narrative that is constructed by British male society.

Both protagonists act as consumers and objects of consumption, needing to consume goods in order to maintain themselves as objects of consumption. Albeit the decrease of their value “like coins or stamps that enter circulation” (Port 2005, p.150), they continue to invest in their clothes and appearance to sustain themselves as devalued commodities. *Good Morning, Midnight* in particular emphasizes the heroine’s dread of female aging as “an economy of loss” which requires constant funding of an investment that will inevitably lose value. As Sasha approaches middle age, her anxiety grows:

Now, money, for the night is coming. 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 heel), money for good clothes, money, money. The night is coming. (Rhys 1939, p.120)

In his essay entitled “Femininity,” Sigmund Freud (1933, pp.34-35) observes that a woman of about thirty often frightens us with her psychological rigidity and unchangeability as her libido has assumed a final position and seems incapable of exchanging this position for others. Likewise, Sasha devotes her energy to preventing herself from being deemed obsolete. In other words, she resists this “unchangeability.” In order to “compensate for the loss of youth through purchases that mask or prosthetically renew the surface of the body” (Port 2005, p.151), she cosmetically alters her face and body to conform with commodified femininity.

As she approaches the “midnight” of middle age, Sasha is also anxious about, in addition to money, the linear progression of time and hopes that by spending money on fashion items, the “sensation of spending” could relieve this anxiety:

Tomorrow I’ll go to the Galleries Lafayette, choose a dress, go along to the Printemps, buy gloves, buy scent, buy lipstick, buy things costing fcs.6.25 and fcs.19.50, buy anything cheap. Just the sensation of spending, that’s the point. I’ll look at bracelets studded with artificial jewels, red, green and blue, necklaces of imitation pearls, cigarette-cases, jeweled tortoises....And when I have had a couple of drinks I shan’t know whether it’s yesterday, today or tomorrow. (Rhys 1939, p.121)

With some drinks, Sasha wishes to lose track of the passage of time without remembering yesterday, today, or tomorrow. In his famous work *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, John Maynard Keynes suggests that “the importance of money essentially flows from its being a link between the present and the future” (1963, p.293). For Sasha and the other female characters, money links the present and the future “by allowing women to cover up evidence of the past” (Port 2005, p.151). While her shopping plan at first is situated in a future time (tomorrow), Sasha’s moves from alienating present to traumatic memory are ultimately suspended since it might be yesterday, today, or tomorrow. Out of a linear progression and into a

cyclical marketplace, Sasha constructs a narrative, motionless impasse which obscures perceptions of past, present, and anxieties about the future. While the black dress, new hat, or fresh hairstyle fixes Sasha in time and place, the perpetual circulation in the department store allows Sasha to fight against the fixing and fragmenting. *Good Morning, Midnight* applies the requirement of capital–circulation as an alternative method of shopping for identities.

Both novels witness Rhys's vaguely foreign and marginal heroines being offered the promise to fulfill their dreams in the capitalist market place and being absorbed into urban life as they participate in the consumer culture and visual economies. However, they fail to locate themselves, and their positions are always held at bay. Recent critical works on Rhys have examined how her early novels treat urban space as a metonym for colonial subjectivity. These works almost exclusively discuss *Voyage in the Dark* perhaps because it is the most explicitly colonial of Rhys's early novels. The consumer culture in her novels also plays a vital role in rendering the marginalization of Rhys and her heroines in the metropolitan space.

Conclusion

Capitalism reshapes the psyche of colonial women like Anna and Sasha. To avoid the “imperial gaze” and to fulfill their dreams, they choose to dress in a ladylike way, to conform to the imperial norm, and to adopt social and sexual discipline. Both novels not only exemplify the contradictions of consumer choice in the marketplace, but also emphasize the marketplace's circuit of endless desire. Anna and Sasha circulate as sexualized commodities according to the rules of British male society which dominate female sexuality and link the metaphorical colonization of women's bodies through “commodification, visual control, and imperialist tropes of specular fantasy to actual colonizations (economic, military, cultural and sexual)” (Karl 2009, p.34). The unattainable desires generated by the marketplace force these heroines into the impasse of economic and imperial paternalism.

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