

The Experiences of Sasha Jansen in Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*

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DOI 10.58564/MABDAA.62.2.2023.431

Abstract

They desired to be elevated out of their gender as women without the power to hold onto the ones with power: including their fathers, their brothers, and their bosses. These women are Jean Rhys's characters, a woman who is similar to Jean Rhys, who lived in London and Paris through the world wars. During this period, four novels were published by Rhys; *Postures* in 1929, was supposedly based on Rhys's affair with Ford whom she has a relationship with him while she was married to Jean Lenglet, a French-Dutch. Rhys's sensitive, sexually attractive, vulnerable, and somewhat self-defeated heroine is first introduced in this work, a figure that is often repeated in her later books. *After leaving Mr. Makenzie* in 1931, *Voyage in the Dark* in 1934, is considered Rhys's most autobiographical work, and the last novel is *Good Morning, Midnight* in 1939. Each one of her novels pictures a struggle of a woman to make her life in a pathetic or indifferent society, alienated even from those nearest to her, particularly men. She is forced to participate with them in an encounter for money and power; each struggle she loses brings her closer to the edge of economic ruin.

Keywords: feminist movement, alienation, patriarchal society, fragmentation, otherness.

المستخلص

لقد رغبن هؤلاء النساء في الارتقاء من جنسهن كنساء بعيدا عن القوة والسلطة التي تمارس عليهن: بما في ذلك آبائهن وإخوانهن ورؤسائهن. هؤلاء النساء هن شخصيات جان ريس، امرأة تشبه جين ريس، التي عاشت في لندن وباريس خلال الحربين العالميتين. خلال هذه الفترة، نشرت ريس أربع روايات؛ من المفترض أن تكون المواقف في عام 1929 مبنية على علاقة ريس بفورد الذي كانت على علاقة به عندما كانت متزوجة من جين لينجليت، وهو فرنسي هولندي. تم تقديم بطله Rhys الحساسة والجذابة جنسياً والضعيفة إلى حد ما والتي هزمت نفسها إلى حد ما لأول مرة في هذا العمل، وهو الرقم الذي غالباً ما يتكرر في كتبها اللاحقة. بعد ترك السيد ماكينزي في عام 1931، تعتبر رحلة في الظلام في عام 1934، أكثر أعمال ريس السيرة الذاتية، وآخر رواية هي صباح الخير، منتصف الليل في عام 1939. كل واحدة من رواياتها تصور صراع امرأة لجعل حياتها في مجتمع مثير للشفقة أو غير مبال، معزول حتى عن أقرب الناس إليها، وخاصة الرجال. إنها مجبرة على المشاركة معهم في لقاء من أجل المال والسلطة؛ كل صراع تخسره يجعلها أقرب إلى حافة الانهيار الاقتصادي. الكلمات الافتتاحية: الحركة النسوية، العزلة، المجتمع الذكوري، التهشم، الاختلاف

Jean Rhys (1890-1979) is considered one of the most novelists of alienation; in which most of her works have an obviously autobiographical base because she was comparatively vague during her writing life. Rhys has been handled out of her historical context as an individual and pathological voice which is the voice of a female victim. The alienation of her characters has alienated some critics who wish to accept themselves from the experiences about which she writes, although they acclaim her artistic skill, particularly her purity of style. Thus, most of her

heroes are women who alienated themselves from others, just because they are female, poor, and sexually active (Kegan, 1982, 233).

Rhys was born in Dominica. She went to England at age of sixteen. She became a chorus girl before moving to Paris where she started to write in the late 1920s. She starts with publishing a story collection and her four novels. After that, she disappeared from people and lived reclusively for many years. In 1966 she made a sensational comeback with her masterpiece *Wide Sargasso Sea* which is written in difficult circumstances over a long period.

The feminist movement of the late nineteenth century began opening many doors for women, as they fought to change political, legal, and social fields that, for too long, had afforded power exclusively to men. The new woman also brought about changes in literature “a continuing cause for concern in the latter part of the nineteenth century, for many felt surely women were reducing and disrupting the ‘high art’ of writing”. New woman fiction often was from a different point of view, that of the woman as an outsider. It rejected the Victorian ideal of the stable, fixed identity of a character (Rykett, 57). Unfortunately, with the turn of the century, the notion of the independent woman was still very much an ideal rather than a reality, as Joan Acocella says:

With the move to the city and the loosening of ties to family and class, women were thrown into a new situation...one in which (some) found themselves wholly abandoned, both by the system that had formerly hemmed them in, and by the new one, which still had no place for them...Even after women began to make their way economically in twentieth-century culture, they were still left with an ages-old inheritance of emotional dependency, the thing that marriage and the family,... If in old days women were enslaved by men, they nevertheless have legal claims on them. Now they had no legal claims, so all the force of their dependency was shifted to an emotional claim..love. (81)

Sasha Jansen was married once to a charming but unemployed man named Enno. Enno is sure that money will turn up some way or another if he and Sasha are married and are living in Paris. Enno, however, does not find work and cannot find the money. Poverty is not what Sasha bargained for: “I didn’t think it would be like this— shabby clothes, worn-out shoes, circles under your eyes, your hair getting straight and lanky, the way people look at you... I didn’t think it would be like this.” Then, after accusing Sasha of not knowing how to love, Enno leaves for three days; at this time, she becomes sure that she is pregnant. On the fourth day, he is back and she believes she loves him even more deeply. After the birth and death of an infant son, Enno leaves again, as Sasha really always knew he would. At this point, her life begins to go to pieces. She returns to London, where a small annuity keeps her from starving and provides a series of rooms in which she lives. She spends her time trying to drink herself to death, a condition Sasha likens to drowning in a large, dark river. Then, a friend rescues her by providing some extra money for a trip to Paris, which is to be an attempt at greening (Kegan, 1982, 230).

In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Rhys criticizes modernist pretension by presenting a “distorting mirror” of the “truth” of the alienated individual. The theme of alienation in Rhys's works is expressed not as a necessary condition of existence but as a consequence of the social and historical conditions of women’s establishments as “Other” in relation to men. Rhys does not only direct her attention to the creation of a woman’s constitutive otherness; for her, the power structures of organized society depend on the complex interaction of economic, class, racial, national, and gender privilege (Smith, 2004, 293).

Rhys’s title, *Good Morning, Midnight*, sets up the association to the epigraph poem by Emily Dickinson where images of day and night are juxtaposed to underscore the “paradoxes about female rejection” (Kegan, 1982, 234). In the poem “Day” and “Sunshine” are embodied male who rejects the female speaker; she affirms that “Day got tired of me/ How I could of him?” in effect, by writing the poem about rejection where female welcomes “night” because she has been cast aside by “Day”. Dickinson spotlights how women traditionally depend on male approval as a means of defining themselves and their happiness. Through exploring the poem, Rhys searches all the implications by presenting Dickinson’s own version of human acceptance and/or rejection. On one hand, Rhys also reveals how women’s identities are divided by a patriarchal system that accepts a type of woman and rejects another. On the other hand, Rhys illustrates how women themselves are guilty of perpetuating their own oppression by molding themselves into their prescribed roles (Kegan, 1982, 233).

Good Morning, Midnight is an examination of a woman struggling with depression and living a marginalized and alienated existence. Sasha is a woman and the alienation is all the worse by reason of that. Sasha suffers not only from the stigma of insufficient money, poorly chosen relationships, and drinking more than is socially acceptable but also from the shame of being a woman for whom these things are true. Society disdains the drunk, but it disdains far more the female drunk. Her position is worsened merely by reason of her gender. Sasha moves through Paris almost as if she were a ghost, choosing bars that have few patrons, restaurants where no one will pay attention to her. She drinks but is ashamed of doing so, seeing in the mirror her own bedraggled state and condemning herself as much as, if not more than, others do. She whiles away her days wandering the streets, avoiding meaningful contact, lost in her own private darkness (Bauman, 1991, 38).

The dominant figure in Good Morning Midnight is Sasha Jansen and all action is filtered through her perception. Her voice is the only one heard while the other characters seem to serve just “as bit players filling out the scenes of her life’s routines”. Throughout the course of the novel, Sasha does meet some others, two exiled Russians who treat her kindly because they thought she is wealthy (Emery, 1990, 155). Concentrating on Sasha’s consciousness, Jean Rhys in fact encourages the readers not to focus on the plot itself but rather on the way Sasha conceives what happens both around and inside her. The author’s goal is not to simply narrate a story but to show “the gendered perceptions of an isolated and marginalized woman who wages her own battles” (Emery, 1990, 157). In order to achieve that, Rhys prefers to use first-person narration. This technique turns out to be very effective not only because it reveals the heroine’s “first-person awareness of herself and the world she inhibits”, but also because it helps us understand the behavior of a character as complex as Sasha is (Emery, 1990, 158).

From the outset, Sasha ironically notes “I haven’t got a care in the world” and there is “nothing to worry about” (Rhys, 15-6), she is depicted as a survivor whose life is now at an impasse. Sasha claims to “have forgotten about dark streets, dark rivers, the pain, the struggle and the drawing” (Rhys, 10). Her story starts in Paris in 1937 where she has gone for two weeks’ vacation, from London, at her friend Sidonie’s suggestion and expense. The story is told through Sasha’s thoughts, memories, and experiences which are revealed in fragments and must be gathered by the reader in order to determine her process of degeneration. Toward the end of the novel, Rene, the gigolo who has befriended Sasha asks her “What happened to you, what happened? ... Something bad must have happened to make you like this.” Sasha answers “One thing? It was not one thing. It took years. It was a slow process” (Rhys, 146). It is the slow process and the combination of factors, not just one thing, which has made Sasha an isolated, cynical, and sad individual.

Sasha’s fragmented “self” is depicted as being a social construct. She is a product of her environment. It is for this reason that Rhys melts the private and public realms into one world rather than into separate domains. Sasha’s identity is determined by what she sees reflected back to her by others. Inasmuch as Sasha attempts to be herself, she finds that her “self” is determined by others. She is insulted, ridiculed, befriended, and exploited because she is a “public” woman. On her first night in Paris, Sasha begins to cry and is immediately rebuked for her public display of sadness. The dark woman says to her “I understand. All the same... Sometimes I’m just as unhappy as you are. But that is not to say that I let everybody see it” (Rhys, 10). The keeping up of socially acceptable appearances is immediately established as important. Thus, the exposing of one’s true feelings is regarded as unacceptable.

Rhys effectively breaks down the division between the public and private selves by exemplifying how one is dependent upon the other. She also reveals how the practice of dividing the two realms produces a split or fragmentation within the self. Social decorum then is depicted as an artificial construct that is designed to mask any behavior which is deemed socially unacceptable. Thus, those who are not adept at appearing to be socially acceptable are victimized and banished. The victims that Rhys focuses on are the elderly, women, the poor, immigrants, black people, Jews, and the sexually active. Hence Sasha recognizes the importance of keeping up appearances and conforming to the status quo as a way of avoiding discrimination. She admits that she is “trying so hard to be like you” and that every morning she spends “an hour and a half trying to make herself look like everyone else” (Rhys, 88). She tries to make herself like others by applying make-up, wearing the right clothes, and behaving in an acceptable manner. While she is walking, looking at some West African-style masks which

Sege, the Jewish artist, has made, Sasha thinks “I know that face very well; I’ve seen lots like it, complete with legs and body” (Rhys, 76). She claims that people resemble these masks when they are in the process of judging another person. What is suggested through the image of the mask is that one must hide oneself behind a “mask” in order to avoid harsh judgment by others, who in turn are themselves wearing masks. Rhys ironically illuminates the idea that in a world of exhibition, artifice becomes a necessity for survival (Kegan, 1982, 235).

Sasha’s constant efforts to fit in are highlighted as means of Rhys’s underscoring of the deceptive nature of appearance, or the unreality of reality. By exposing the artificial construction of self, Rhys suggests that one’s identity is not a unified or fixed entity, it is rather, something that changes according to public opinion, and, furthermore, it can be denied as a result of social marginalization. Her position as alienates ‘Other’ is represented by the deliberated obscuring of her nationality. While Sasha is expressed about other people’s nationalities, she is vague about her own. When the patron of the Parisian hotel at which Sasha is staying, informs her that she has forgotten to include her passport number on the fiche, she answers “I’ve filled it up all right, haven’t I? Name So-and-so, nationality So-and-so... Nationality- that’s what’s puzzled him. I ought to have put nationality by marriage (Rhys, 13). Her nationality is never clarified. In fact, when Sash meets the two Russian men on her way to the hotel, they “stop ...to guess nationalities” (Rhys,39), although their nationality is revealed to the reader, hers is never identified. She claims to have “no pride, no name, no face, no country” (Rhys, 38). She is a “stranger, the alien, the old one” (Rhys, 46) who “has seen that in people's eyes all her life” (Rhys, 4). As much as she tried to change her appearance to be like everyone else, she does not succeed. Her designated role as an ‘alien’ or ‘stranger’ is constantly being reinforced by her interactions with others, and their subsequent ill-treatment of her (Kegan, 1982, 235). “Otherness” is to “divide reality up to into separate components, one component represents a norm and other components, divergences from the norm. Thus to characterize a person, group, or institution as ‘other’ is to place them outside the system of normality with the implication that how they are treated is irrelevant to humanity because they are ‘other’ and not, human (qt. in Mentese, 144).

One of the novel's key illustrations is “Exhibition” which represents the public/private separation of identities. Sasha sees the image in a dream in which she is stranded in a London subway station passageway and is surrounded by signs that read “This Way to the Exhibition”. Sasha tries for an exit while feeling regret for “wanting to be different from other people” (Rhys, 12). The issues brought on by the separation of the public and private spheres may be compared to those in the Exhibition. It is implied that although individuals are like objects on exhibit, they are unconcerned with this fact and do not try to escape. Sasha, in contrast to the bulk of people, wants to exit the tunnel, but signs keep directing her toward the exhibition. It is patriarchy that must be resisted, not the exhibition. She is enmeshed in the patriarchal Exhibition world. Patriarchy is symbolized by the wounded guy in the white nightshirt who claims to be Sasha's father. His cries of "Murder, murder" are directed at Sasha in an effort to expose her efforts to stop or destroy a system that both defines and exhibits people. She is entrapped in the patriarchal world of Exhibition, and she can't help but echo his calls, demonstrating her involvement with him. (Emery, 1990, 160). Rhys’s universal vision of oppression is represented by the image of “human misery”. The painting of “an old Jew with red nose” who is playing his banjo while standing in the gutter, “looking gentle, resigned, mocking, a little mad” (Rhys, 91). He has four arms, two heads, and two faces. The liberal humanism idea of a united subject is resisted by the recurring motif of doubleness. By this image, Rhys emphasizes the lack of a single self and the fact that multiplicity is a result of societal practices that work to stifle diversity and variety in order to preserve hegemonic power structures. Rhys highlights the core issue with modernism. (Kegan, 1982, 230).

The wonderful thing about Sasha is that she lives her narrative rather than just telling it. She ruminates on the past in her head. She combines what happened in the past with what is happening now. Rhys does an excellent job of capturing female mind and experiences. Sasha's life may be miserable, but she does have one positive trait, which is her sense of humor. Even in the most trying circumstances, she finds humor. She is aware of both the humor and sorrow in life. Due to her understanding of life's ironies, Sasha may not find the ending of the narrative to be particularly horrifying, especially after she meets Rene, a young gigolo who gives her hope. Despite how much she likes him, Sasha rejects his approaches due to her low self-esteem. As the novel comes to a close, Sasha is found seeking solace in the arms of her odd neighbor, who she hilariously despises. Rhys employs the first-person narrative style, which is characterized as the fictional character's internal monologue.

This method, which is regarded a bold invention, creates new opportunities for viewpoint beyond first- or third-person narrative and enables readers to explore emotional, moral, and intellectual thought from inside a character's head. (Ghent, 1961, 265)

To sum up “Good Morning, Midnight” It is an investigation on the symptoms of depression. It portrayed a marginal woman who is exiled culturally and sexually. It is intriguing and surprising in how well it captures the inner thoughts of a woman who is hopelessly depressed. Additionally, Rhys demonstrates how all totalizing systems just ideological frameworks are created by those in positions of authority to suit their own interests.

As Sash's focus changes, so does that of the book, causing us to reread events from years before and follow the chronology of emotion rather than time. Because of Rhys's brilliance as a writer, the apparent lack of structure and storyline are never confused. They are merely visible.

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