

Implicitly Political: The Aesthetics of Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark*

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In *Voyage in the Dark*,¹ the story of the downward spiral of a culturally displaced and socially debased young woman, Jean Rhys draws from real events that occurred in her life in the 1910s (Angier 1985, p.11-12). I begin by hypothesizing that the time gap between Rhys's writing of the novel (it was published in 1934) and the actual events that inspired it allowed her to disconnect herself from and depersonalize, to a degree, her own experiences without aestheticizing them and defusing their intensity. This time gap can instead be seen to enrich the ideology critique achieved in the novel: Rhys is looking back to and writing about English metropolitan society in the mid-1910s from the point of view of a literary writer in 1930s England, a time and place associated with urgent callings for politically committed writing, as will be discussed below. I view Rhys's resistance to literature's turn to politics at the time she was writing *Voyage* as a pivotal fact that, far from signalling an apolitical or asocial writing, actually promotes an exploration of the unique interpenetrations of aesthetics, ideology reproduction and ideology critique, as an exploration, in all, of an implicitly political aesthetics.

The social poignancy of the Rhysian heroine has been emphasized by Judith Kegan Gardiner. With regard to Rhys's work in general, she has remarked:

¹ *Voyage in the Dark* will be referred to as *Voyage* for the rest of this essay.

[Rhys] does not treat alienation as an existential fact but as the specific historical result of social polarizations about sex, class, and morality. Her heroes are women alienated from others and themselves because they are female, poor, and sexually active. They are also misdefined by a language and literary heritage that belong primarily to propertied men. (1982-1983, p.246)

The above description I regard as applying to the protagonist of *Voyage* with great accuracy. In alignment with Gardiner's observation above, I view Anna's alienation and marginalization in *Voyage* as causally linked to 'social polarizations about sex, class, and morality' which, in their turn, are inseparable from the mentalities that capitalist patriarchal societies authorize and disseminate. Agreeing also with Gardiner's premise that Rhys's writing taps into the structures of capitalist patriarchy and the corollary relegation of linguistic and cultural power to the hands of men (1982-1983, p.249), I will attempt to extend this point and discuss the specific ways in which Rhys exposes this state of affairs and, moreover, challenges it. I view the particular style in which Anna delivers her story, and by extension Rhys's aesthetic choices, as disseminating dissent against, precisely, the 'language and literary heritage' of capitalist patriarchy.

According to Deborah Kelly Kloepfer, *Voyage* is a text 'constituted of dreams, memories, and gaps' (1985, p.444). In particular, memories and affect can be seen to play a major role in the narrative of *Voyage*, functioning collaboratively, possessing social resonance and critical force, and forming a language of dispossessed dissent. My identification of the importance of affect in Rhys's language in terms of its social resonance has been inspired by Isobel Armstrong's compelling reinstatement of the vital (and yet underrepresented) role of emotion in literature and literary criticism. Armstrong calls for a renewal of critical attentiveness to emotion,

‘[...] particularly as the poverty of modernity’s accounts of [it] is so striking’ (2000, p.17) and sets out to reconsider and challenge this state of affairs by

[reading] the –mostly male- history of new criticism since the 1930s as a partly politically inspired but deeply gendered resistance to affect. This modernist literary critical tradition, exemplified by I.A. Richards, William Empson and de Man, had cause to invoke a “hard” rationality whenever a “soft” reading of experience, such as the somatic and affective states affiliated with the aesthetic, threatened to come too near. Fascism’s manipulation of mass feeling may have been reason enough for this. (2000, p.18)

Against this widespread and partly historically justified suspicion of affect in literary Britain in the 1930s and against the devaluation of emotion by the ‘modernist literary tradition’ at that time, Armstrong sets out to argue for a view of emotion not as the opposite pole but as a kind of knowledge that is socially significant. Taking off from Armstrong’s revaluation of its knowledge value and sociopolitical significance, I argue that the language of affect can be seen in *Voyage* to both reproduce and criticize ideology. On the one hand, ideology is being presented as an inescapable and all-encompassing force that determines Anna’s and, by extension, the underprivileged socio-cultural Other’s way of expression and overall position in society but, on the other, this ideology is also confronted and criticized by the oppositional language of affect and memory.² An alternative is thereby offered to the “hard” rationality’ of male-centred capitalism: a non-authoritative and non-dominative language with a veiled critical edge.

To view, in other words, Anna’s language as an alternative way for

² On literature’s ability to both reproduce and criticize ideology see Raymond Williams’s ‘Crisis in English Studies’ chapter in *Writing in Society*. (1983, pp. 207-208 in particular)

a socio-culturally marginalized and dispossessed person to express herself is to view it as an alternative to the language of power, produced by and for capitalist patriarchy, and emblematic of Anna's exclusion. An example of the poignancy of the language of affect is evinced in the following example. In part 3, chapter 1, Anna is listening to her landlady, Ethel, who tries to assert her ladylike respectability. 'A lady - some words have a long, thin neck that you'd like to strangle' (Rhys 2000, p. 120), Anna comments, expressing her disbelief and repulsion in strong figurative language, and in the ferocity of her emotion lies her instinctual understanding of the self-righteousness and exclusionism that certain words carry. The vigour and violence of her language can be seen to both mirror and attempt to counteract the ideological violence at work when words like 'lady' are being used with elitist intent, when they are attached only to respectable and dignified women – or, in Ethel's case, to women who designate themselves as such – so as to set them off from their disreputable counterparts. Anna's expression seems to contain in a condensed, encrypted form the same knowledge she has already been seen to possess in part 1, chapter 6 with regard to the things that can be communicated via a person's tone of voice. Back then, in reference to her stepmother's tone of voice, Anna had commented that it was

[...] 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 you can realize that I'm an English gentlewoman. I have my doubts about you. Speak up and I will place you at once. Speak up, for I fear the worst. That sort of voice. (Rhys 2000, p.50)

Compared to that earlier, more sober formulation where she is analyzing a lady's tone of voice and its connotations of class, social and moral superiority, Anna's expression in part 3 where again the

word 'lady' becomes central appears more striking from an aesthetic perspective but it would seem that snobbery, complacency and exclusionary/elitist intent are addressed and criticized in both styles.

Moving on in the discussion of Rhys's linguistic strategies, the language of memory and its ability to encrypt dissent and communicate the otherwise inarticulate can be seen at work in the following example. Chapter 7 of part 1 ends with Anna receiving a letter from an as-yet unidentified sender. Chapter 8 begins with Anna being haunted by a memory from her childhood in Dominica; she recalls the fright she experienced when she saw for the first time her uncle's false teeth:

I got up to the table where the magazine was and Uncle Bo moved and sighted and long yellow tusks like fangs came out of his mouth and protruded down to his chin- you don't scream when you are frightened because you can't and you don't move either because you can't- [...] (Rhys 2000, p.79)

Back in the present, she asserts her inability to understand why reading the letter conjured up that particular memory. She then discloses the contents of the letter and it transpires that Vincent, a friend of her lover's, has written to her to announce the latter's decision to leave her. Anna then comments yet again on her failure to see why she suddenly recalled her uncle's false teeth. The connection can be easily established, however, and Anna's denial can equally easily be exposed as a temporary defence mechanism in the face of an uncomfortable truth. In the present, her shock at being betrayed by Walter (with whom she was in love) leaves her inarticulate, bereft of words to communicate her pain. Her distress is effectively and strikingly communicated, instead, via a deeply unsettling memory in which the falsity of appearances gets unceremoniously exposed, leaving her paralyzed, bereft of the

ability to speak or even move. Vincent's complacent, light-hearted words, written on Walter's behalf, prove to be an inadequate mask for cruelty. Stricken with abandonment, Anna perceives what accompanies it (the flimsy consolation, the lukewarm concern expressed by Vincent) as false, fake, and ineffectual in warding off the shock of pain. Both Walter and Vincent have been putting up a facade of appropriateness, kindness, and concern for Anna, with Walter having also hidden his exploitation of Anna's naiveté behind an additional pretence, that of love. With all the masks having now slid off and her worst suspicions having been proven true, both Anna's fright and her covert censure are wordlessly channelled through the recollection of a childhood memory.

On the subject of Rhysian heroines' inarticulate speech, Kloepfer remarks that '[w]omen who have no space in a male linguistic system [...] cannot adequately articulate their exclusion' (1985, p.447-448). Anna's inarticulateness about such a socio-linguistic exclusion can be seen to express her dispossession all the more corroboratively, to highlight her inability to access the patriarchal realm of dominant linguistic expression, and to indict patriarchy itself. On the other hand, what does become articulated through Anna's memories, as seen above, does not merely indicate deprivation of other types of expression, but can be taken to constitute a peculiar type of revolt, betraying a profound distrust of the rational language of cognition and a predilection for a different kind of language (of affect, of memory) instead. We witness in *Voyage* Anna's exposure to the whole spectrum of social hypocrisy (from the smug light-heartedness of Vincent to the rampant spitefulness of Ethel) that is lurking under everyday communication. Her turn to the extremely private, insular language of memories and emotion is perhaps not merely a necessity imposed on her but also a

radical, alternative way of expression, carrying in it the seeds of dissent against the language of power, the language of patriarchy, which is accustomed to writing the story of people like Anna on their behalf, in the unchallengeable diction of the privileged majority. Anna's story is told in her own words, in her own voice. It might be the only voice she is allowed to have, but it is also a voice of opposition against the hypocrisy of the people she meets, against the limitations imposed on her by her socio-culturally vulnerable position: a young woman descended from white slave-owners and a Creole mother; someone born and raised in Dominica wishing she were Black; a chorus girl turned prostitute.

There is a point in Anna's narrative at which she is talking about the Dominican Caribs' resistance to British colonialism. Her language style suddenly becomes erudite and formal, markedly dissimilar to her usual unadorned diction. The fact that Rhys chooses to present historical facts as historical facts, instead of offering a subjective version of them in the whimsical language of Anna's memory, is intriguing. Even if it is assumed that Anna is quoting from her own memory out of a book she once read, the shift to a different language style can be seen to represent a historical barrier between her own fate and that of the Dominican Caribs. The latter's resistance has gone down in history: 'The Caribs indigenous to the island were a warlike tribe and their resistance to white domination, though spasmodic, was fierce' (Rhys 2000, p.91). At the same time, however, such resistance belongs to the past: 'They are now practically exterminated' (Rhys 2000, p.91), we learn, and their intransigence seems far removed from Anna's present situation. Thus opens the first chapter of part 2 in *Voyage*, at which point Anna is deeply depressed on account of Walter's treatment of her. Perhaps it is against her own unhappiness that the Dominican

Caribs in her memory seem, indeed, to be ‘[o]ceans away from despair...’ (Rhys 2000, p.91). Both their vehement resistance to colonial power and their woes belong to the past, however, whereas Anna’s troubles and her limited, morose dissent are a thing of the present. In reference to this part of the novel, Mary Lou Emery has made the following observations:

Anna associates her personal situation with the history of the Caribs, portraying her sense of an individual past and identity within the context of a wider social and cultural past. [...] Anna links her exploited situation with that of other oppressed people, not in slave-like submission this time, but in resistance to it, no matter what the odds. (1982, p.422)

In contrast to Emery’s view, I believe it is not through identification but through juxtaposition with Anna’s situation that this point in the narrative can be seen to confront the oppressive, dominative order and ideology of colonial power. Instead of suggesting, as Emery does, that Anna is associating her situation with that of resisting constituencies like in this case the Dominican Caribs, I argue that Rhys’s protagonist can be seen instead to feel alienated, by comparison, from them and the example they set. Anna can be seen, in other words, to experience her subjugation and exploitation within a patriarchal colonial society all the more acutely because of and in contrast to the Caribs’ victorious resistance, which to her is nothing but a memory from a long- gone past shining against the bleakness of her present.

I have been viewing Anna’s recourse to a language of affect and memory as a way to counteract the language proper to her social context and its underlying logic. As her biographer Carole Angier has put it, ‘Jean Rhys was a writer who distrusted words’ (2000, p.viii); she suggests that we read *Voyage* ‘[...] attending to “looks” and “feelings”, not to the words, which belong to the powerful, like

the laws (and that, of course, is why Jean Rhys distrusts them)' (2000, p.ix). By creating for Anna an alternative language to that of 'the powerful', Rhys shows how words can be used in critical distrust. It could be maintained that Rhys opposes what Deleuze and Guattari have identified as the authoritative language 'of masters' (1990, cited in Ferguson et al., p.67) which in the case of *Voyage* could also be taken to apply to the deliberately opaque, highbrow linguistic aspect of Modernism as well as to language in the mouths of the powerful: the patriarchs, and the bourgeois ladies and gentlemen of English metropolitan society. Rhys decides instead to explore a language better equipped to narrate marginalized Otherness: a language of affect brought about by disaffect. Her literary aesthetics seems to be very carefully thought out and more complex than it might appear at first glance or by comparison to the deliberate obscurity, to the difficulty with which high modernism is often associated. When it came to a writer's integration in the modernist canon, as Leonard Diepeveen observes in *The Difficulties of Modernism*, simplicity was not deemed 'an effective counter to the ways in which difficulty was valorized, and it eventually became incomprehensible as a way of understanding significant aesthetic experience' (2003, p.178-179). Rhys, however, chose to '[...] put her meaning behind the words', as Angier has put it (2000, p.ix), and the loaded language of affect she used was one of the ways to achieve this. The language of affect, however, to return to Armstrong and link her views to Diepeveen's, was traditionally devalued in literary and theoretical circles as insignificant and/or irrelevant. Armstrong maintains that '[a] long tradition associates women with the emotions and with a devalued affective experience [...]' (2000, p.20); also, when addressing the male-centred, inimical-to-affect literary criticism of the 1930s, she argues that '[s]exuality,

feeling and emotion are associated with a language of affect which is deemed to be non-cognitive and non-rational. Affect falls outside what is legitimately discussable' (2000, p.87). In the same vein, Diepeveen observes that '[...] difficulty's promoters often directed at nondifficult writing stereotypes frequently aimed against women: simplicity, weakness, lightness, and triviality' (2003, p.174). In his discussion of literary criticism in the 1920s he concludes that critics at that time 'were putting into play a standard dichotomy—that between emotion and thought—and allying the second half of that dichotomy with difficulty' (2003, p.181).

In this light, it might not come as a complete surprise that Rhys's early work did not receive sufficient attention and recognition; within the literary context just described, it would have been easy to belittle the intricacy of her language, rich in meanings encrypted in recollections and emotive experiences. Perhaps it is not accidental that Rhys became established as a dominant literary figure within the high modernist canon only in the late 1960s, after she wrote the difficult *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a novel critically acclaimed a masterpiece. It was as if her earlier work was deemed to provide a lesser kind of aesthetic experience, and it might be the case that this view is directly linked to the ways an emotion-bound style of covert complexity used to be viewed in the literary circles of that time. From the perspective of the advocates of overt difficulty in literature as the only way to adequately render the incomprehensible turmoil of modern life, Rhys's style could have been judged as unsophisticated, naïve and inattentive to the changes in people's lifestyles in the modern era. It would arguably be interesting to highlight instead the intricacy of *Voyage's* aesthetics and their intimate relation to socio-political concerns. Rhys's stylistic choices can be seen to reproduce and criticize her heroine's

reception of the turmoil of modern metropolitan life, a social turmoil she was too innocent to defend herself against at the beginning of the novel and too weary to fight off at the end. It appears, however, that even if Rhys's language style in *Voyage* evaded being labelled irrelevant from an aesthetic perspective (according to the literary standards of high modernism) it would have been rejected from a socio-political one. This leads to a discussion of committed literature in the 1930s, another tendency Rhys did not follow.

Shari Benstock has remarked in *Women of the Left Bank* that Rhys's work in the 1930s reacted 'against the call to social and political involvement in the period' (1987, p.424). She further argues that 'in a political climate that demanded social relevance in literature, [Rhys and certain other women writers] experienced difficulties in finding a reading public because their fictions seemed to exploit an entirely private, even secret, female experience' (1987, p.424). In this light, Anna's diction would have been judged as obscurely feminine, insular and apolitical. From the point of view of 1930s literary criticism, as we have already seen in Armstrong's analysis, Rhys's writing would have further been associated with the non-rational, the non-cognitive, the non-critical, in a word, with the trivial. Indeed, we see Anna immersing herself in the world of emotion, yielding to the affective influence of memories of the past. Anna's expression might appear less private if regarded as a corollary of and challenge towards disaffect, i.e. her estrangement and marginalization within London society. One of the things Rhys achieves in *Voyage* is, arguably, to use the language of affect and memory as an alternative to what Armstrong calls "'hard" rationality', the sense of ownership, awareness and (male) power the language of metropolitan patriarchy stands for, by questioning the ideological implications behind the domination of the latter and

pointing towards a different kind of critical, oppositional rationality embedded in the former. Anna's expression can be seen to attain, in its unsophisticated, instinctual and unaware-of-itself dissension, its own oppositional rationality and critical edge. In all, the style of *Voyage* can be seen to depart both from the paradigmatic difficulty of Modernism and the overt socio-political commitment of 1930s British writing without being aesthetically undemanding or asocial/apolitical. Moreover, it evades coming across as sentimental. The tone of the novel, however extensively Anna might narrate in the language of affect and anamnesis, and as bleak as her lot might be, somehow never becomes maudlin or self-indulgent. Referring to another novel by Rhys, *Good Morning, Midnight*, Benstock has made an observation which I find to be pertinent to *Voyage*. She understands Rhys's 'spare, almost clinical treatment' of her female character to actually constitute 'an indictment of contemporary society all the more devastating for its understatement' (1987, p.441). In *Voyage* I see Rhys as treating Anna in a similar way. Moreover, by attending to the innuendos of the word 'understatement' one may discover the way in which Rhys achieves such 'indictment': by sweeping meanings under the words, as it were; by inscribing dissent in emotional, anamnestic expression; by understating Anna's unacceptance of the status quo.

Discussing the British literary scene in the 1930s, Orwell argues that '[t]o accept civilization as it is practically means accepting decay' (2001, p.18). Certain critics have highlighted passivity and acceptance of things as they are as defining features of Rhys's heroines. Alicia Borinsky has discussed *Voyage* in terms of Anna's 'unquestioned, passive acceptance of things as they are even to the point of constituting her own appearance from the images of mannequins in display windows' (1985, p.240). Such an

assessment, however, does not acknowledge Anna's restricted yet sharp-edged dissent and the peculiar ways in which it insinuates itself. Anna is indeed, as Borinsky argues, a victim of the mentality prevalent in early 20th century Western metropolitan societies that requires of women to construct and preserve an image of aesthetic correctness and appropriateness so as to be accepted in society. An unquestioning victim, however, she is not.

Borinsky refers to women like Anna as 'petites femmes': women weak, unquestioning and passive, fixated on outer appearances and prefabricated images in order to survive in a world that demands of them to look a certain way or else go unnoticed. And being noticed is the requisite around which these women's existence revolves, the requisite upon which their survival depends. Not only do they 'dress and act for the male gaze that will, inevitably, humiliate them in the end' but, moreover, '[w]ithout clothes, without the tension generated by the interest in being observed, these petites femmes would not exist. They are the aesthetic hope of the streets, an objectionable poetry produced by the weak loving chance money' (1985, p.242-243). Dependent, needy and desperate, these women also seem to be aware of the all-importance of aesthetic appropriateness in their efforts to get attention and financial support from powerful male figures. Seeking to uncover in my reading of *Voyage* the reproduction (as Borinsky has done) and also the critique of ideology, I see Anna as critically acknowledging the reality women in her position have to face and thus deviating, slightly but perhaps critically, from the unquestioning type suggested by Borinsky. After she has been betrayed by Walter, Anna ruminates bitterly on the hope of aesthetic/social correctness, displayed and sold in shop windows:

The clothes of most of the women who passed were like

caricatures of the clothes in the shop-windows, but when they stopped to look you saw that their eyes were fixed on the future. "If I could buy this, then of course I'd be quite different." Keep hope alive and you can do anything, and that's the way the world goes round, that's the way they keep the world rolling. So much hope for each person. And damned cleverly done too. But what happens if you don't hope any more, if your back is broken? What happens then? (Rhys 2000, p.111-112)

Here Anna displays awareness of the mechanisms that lead women to invest in their outer appearance in order to hope for a better future for themselves. She has come to understand that the image of aesthetic correctness women are led to aspire to is prefabricated and imposed on them. In the phrase 'that's the way they keep the world rolling', her cryptic phrasing does not reveal who 'they' might be. Her choice, however, of the third person plural instead of the first betrays someone aware of the polarization that exists between certain individuals who are powerful enough to formulate images of social correctness in society and people like herself who are simply trying to conform to those hope-infused images. 'So much hope for each person', Anna continues, and the bitter sarcasm in this phrase is to be revealed in the following one: 'And damned cleverly done too', which implies that society cunningly prefabricates ideals for women to buy and buy into, namely aesthetic make-believes promising happy endings. The society Anna knows is consumerist and image-obsessed; in it, a woman's worth is estimated according to carefully constructed images/identities on display and for sale, marketable and purchasable simulacra of aesthetic correctness. Anna wonders if such social rules and requisites could apply to a 'broken' person. She is now literally questioning, in the form of two consecutive interrogative sentences, whether such beliefs and ideals could ever be realistic for all members of society: 'But what

happens if you don't hope anymore, if your back is broken? What happens then?', she wonders, implying that certain people, 'broken' people, are likely to be excluded from the purchasable hope of acceptance and integration into a materialistic society. Because social and linguistic power seem to be so inextricably bound in *Voyage*, Anna's dissent cannot articulate itself as such and insinuates itself instead in the intensity of her emotional outbursts, in the veiled criticism contained in her anamneses, or in private meditations like the one just discussed. Anna turns inwards to the only choice left to discerning but dispossessed individuals like her: language internalized, seemingly insular, a language of both affect and disaffection.

The social resonance of seemingly solipsistic literary language has been argued for by Fredric Jameson. Jameson identifies and emphasizes the value of the 'subjectivized untruth' (1988, p.131) of literature's private, insular language. He addresses the phenomenon of modern literary writers trapped in their subjectivity, unable to generalize their private experiences, and yet, he argues, what can be experienced and judged as insular language artistry can also be regarded as socially relevant. The type of social relevance identified below by Jameson can be also applied to *Voyage* as a modernist work written against the literary requisites of its socio-historical moment:

So little by little the writer is reduced to so private a speech that it is henceforth bereft of any public consequences or resonances, so that only symbolic recoding holds out the hope of saying something meaningful to a wider and more heterogeneous audience. [...] But in this wholly subjectivized untruth, the modern writer nonetheless in another sense remains profoundly true and profoundly representative: for everyone else is equally locked into his or her private language, imprisoned in those serried ranks of monads

that are the ultimate result of the social fragmentation inherent in our system. (1988, p.131-132)

Jameson here suggests that literary language does not have to de-subjectivize itself in order to be more ideologically potent; instead, he considers literature's 'subjectivized untruth' to be able to criticize, as well as reproduce and reflect, the 'social fragmentation' brought about by the ideological structures of 'our system', Western capitalism. From Jameson's perspective, the social criticism of Anna's language in *Voyage* can be seen to reside covertly in her recourse to anamnesis and immersion in emotion; her expression testifies to her exclusion from dominant social discourse and simultaneously constitutes a way of disseminating dissent within a fragmented social locus inimical to collective forms of expression.

It is within a society of such fragmented facelessness and estrangement that women like Anna are treated as commodities, as exchangeable goods that the money-possessing males can use, then dispense with and finally replace. This is exactly what Anna experiences with Walter. By presenting such a state of affairs, it could be argued, Rhys is essentially presenting the darker side of modernity whereby patriarchal and capitalist mentalities prevail to the detriment of dispossessed individuals and especially women. Capitalist values, in particular, are seen to transgress the borders of commerce and permeate social life, allowing for the treatment of people as interchangeable commodities circulating in the free market. The interweavement of patriarchal and capitalist mentalities is illustrated in *Voyage* when Anna's friend, Maudie, recounts her male companion's comment: 'It's funny, he said, have you ever thought that a girl's clothes cost more than the girl inside them?' Against these words the realist Maudie initially protests, but finally resigns to their truth, light-heartedly: 'and then I had to laugh,

because after all it's true, isn't it? People are much cheaper than things.' Anna, however, cannot bear this assumption and tells her friend to 'shut up' (Rhys 2000, p.40). Rhys is, then, suggesting a disquieting truth about modernity: that women like Maudie and Anna have exchange value, that they too circulate in the social market just like commodities do in the commercial domain; moreover, that the value of a human being in the capitalist socioeconomic system—and particularly of a woman following certain disreputable lifestyles in a patriarchal society—is often smaller than that of an expensive object's.

Another disquieting truth about modernity Anna can be seen to represent is that of heterogeneity in terms of cultural identity. Such heterogeneity in *Voyage* is never addressed in a celebratory or liberating manner. We learn (early on in the novel) that growing up in the West Indies Anna felt alienated because she was not black; as a young adult in London she feels alienated once again, this time because she is not typically English. Anna finds herself perpetually adrift between white Englishness (and the negative qualities she comes to associate with it) and Dominican identity/culture (and the nostalgia-bound virtues she has come to ascribe to it). Being a mixture of the English and the Dominican, Anna finds it impossible to feel like she belongs to either of the two ethnicities/races³ and instead remains suspended in the void separating them, gazing back to an idealized image of the latter and recoiling from the harsh reality of the former. She is, in all, unable to belong to either; she is exiled in a gap, in a void. In 'Reflections on Exile', Edward Said has discussed the enabling, liberating aspect of the exile's position in

³ In Rhys's works, race and ethnicity are viewed and treated as indistinguishable. See Delia Kaparoso Konzett, *Ethnic Modernisms: Anzia Yezierska, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetics of Dislocation* (2002, p. 129)

terms of the particular kind of awareness he ascribes to it:

Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to [...] an awareness that [...] is *contrapuntal*. For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. (1990, cited in Ferguson *et al.*, p.366)

Set against this backdrop, the exilic experience that Anna represents seems to be of a different kind. Discussing the exile's 'contrapuntal' kind of awareness, Said is describing an ideal situation whereby new and old elements coexist in a fertile manner. In Anna's story it is the old (memories of the Caribbean) that is 'vivid, actual', whereas the new (metropolitan modern society of London), instead of being equally lifelike and intense, seems to be deadened, still, grey and dull by comparison. By depicting the past as more alive than the present, Rhys manages to make her novel a stage for a power struggle between the old and the new; the antagonism and tension this power struggle entails in *Voyage* leaves Anna perpetually torn and achingly lost between two worlds forever incompatible with one another. For her, an enabling 'contrapuntal' awareness arising out of the coexistence of 'old' and 'new', such as the one Said is describing, is not achievable. In *Voyage* the melody of the past never harmonizes with that of the present; together, they form a disquieting cacophony that cannot be silenced. Anna could be viewed as the carrier of an uneasy, frictional, dissonant coexistence of past and present, home and exile, old and new. The pain of displacement, the frustration of not belonging to either the 'old' or the 'new' environment, the disconcertment that ensues when the past usurps the life of the present: those are the elements that make

up Anna's story as it is recounted in *Voyage*. Still, *Voyage* does present exilic experience as 'an alternative to the mass institutions that dominate modern life' (Said 1990, cited in Ferguson et al., p.365), on account of its criticism of English cultural and social structures. A polyvalent kind of awareness insinuates itself in the language of affect and anamnesis, in the interpenetrations of ideology reproduction and ideology critique, and defines, in all, a text tied to perennial questions regarding social and cultural identity, marginality and survival in an inhospitable world like the one in which Rhys situates her heroine.

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