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Divided Self in Jean Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark*

Andrés Ibarra Cordero¹

This paper discusses the problems of identity, time and place in Jean Rhys' 1934 novel, *Voyage in the Dark*. It analyses Rhys' aesthetics concerns in the creation of a subjective construction of the imperial metropole and the colonial space. In doing, this paper suggests how Rhys builds a bridge between contemporary modernist narrative techniques and a preceding Post-colonial perspective. The constant juxtaposition of time and place makes of Rhys' protagonist, Anna Morgan, an elusive self. By means of this fragmented self, the author aims to reformulate colonial power relations and raise crucial questions about discourses of gender and national identity. As a result, this paper engages in a Post-colonial thought, arguing how issues about gender and race issues are articulated in Rhys' novel. Rhys creates the subjectivity of a marginalized woman showing the effects of colonization and creating a metropolitan female identity based on fragmented and juxtaposed memories.

KEYWORDS: IDENTITY, METROPOLE, COLONIALISM, RACE, JEAN RHYS, VOYAGE IN THE
DARK

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“What Rhys constructs through her fiction is a feminine colonial sensibility aware of itself in a modernist European context, where a sense of colonial dispossession and displacement is focused on and translated into gendered terms.”

Coral Ann Howells

Jean Rhys

In *Voyage in the Dark*, Jean Rhys gives us an impressionist account of the life of Anna Morgan. This heroine, a white Creole, voyages from the colonial periphery to the imperial metropole: from the Caribbean to London. In her urban experiences, Anna develops an intense crisis which interrupts the logical sequence of events. Throughout the narrative, the most meaningful episodes are often juxtaposed by intensely nostalgic memories of the Caribbean. As a result, Anna’s self is fragmented in time and place. Nevertheless, her crisis also entails a far more complex problem; one that has to do with her marginal position as a white Creole living in London.² Anna’s divided self alternates between how she perceives herself and how her identity is constructed under the colonial assumptions within the English metropole. This divided self embraces gender, race and social class. Taking into consideration modernist narrative techniques and post-colonial criticism, the aim of this essay is to show how Anna’s divided self overlaps dislocated time and space with imposed assumptions and constructions of gender and race in the context of a hierarchical society dominated by a patriarchal discourse. Defining Anna’s identity is a complex and continuous process throughout the narrative, and by the end of this personal voyage we would be able to see if there is light after the darkness.

For the purpose of this essay, the analysis is divided in two main parts. The first part analyzes Anna’s divided self in terms of gender and race; how she portrays her female identity and origins as a woman from the colonies. The second part analyzes Anna’s divided self in terms of dislocated narrative techniques and her deconstruction of the colonial discourse regarding the metropole/periphery dynamic.

The modernist narrative techniques present in *Voyage in the Dark* follow a trend in literature that, during the first half of the twentieth century, focused its attention on language and subjectivity.

² The term *Creole*, which originally meant native, was used to refer to a white person of European descent who was born and raised in the colonial territories.

Intellectual women, such as Virginia Woolf, welcomed this new literary avant-garde and were eager to take part in its fragmentation and language experimentation. After analyzing the literary work of several modern British women novelists, Sydney Kaplan maintains:

By shifting their focus from the outer world to the inner, from the confident omniscient narrator to the limited point of view, from plot to patterning, and from action to thinking and dreaming, they felt the need to consider consciousness not only as a means of organizing the novel but as a method for analyzing the minds of women and for attempting to define a specially “feminine consciousness” (2).

Rhys’ subjectivity and emphasis on the inner world of the narrator are essentially modernist. Nevertheless, the first wave of modern aestheticism and its experimentation reveal interesting contrasts to the more problematic world depicted in *Voyage in the Dark*. An outstanding example is Virginia Woolf, whose female characters inhabit a bourgeois society and take advantage of their prosperous economic position. Clarissa Dalloway is a well known example of it. The protagonist of *Voyage in the Dark*, on the contrary, lacks career ambitions and the education required in the metropole. Because of her gender, ambiguous racial origins and marginal social position, Anna is simply unable to survive in a hierarchical society designed by masculine values. When commenting on female aestheticism, Elaine Showalter observes: “female sensibility took on a sacred quality, and its exercise became a holy, exhausting, and ultimately self-destructive rite, since woman’s receptivity led inevitably to suicidal vulnerability” (33). However, Showalter paradoxically adds that, “the more female this literature became in the formal and theoretical sense, the farther it moved from exploring the physical experience of women” (34). On the contrary, Rhys is far more subversive: *Voyage in the Dark* explores the dilemmas of a subjective female consciousness and its conflict with a physical identity shaped by the discourse of power.³ This dominant discourse sustains ideas about the centrality of Europe, assumptions about the colonized and the relation between these two. It is a system of beliefs in which colonization is sustained and originates rules of exclusions that hinges on beliefs about the superiority of the colonizer’s culture. Anna’s subjectivity is quite complex, and it is determined by what Gayatri Spivak defines as “the politics of imperialism” (272). This means that Anna’s self contains imposed colonial assumptions about gender, race and social class which obey to the ideological context she was raised in. *Voyage in the Dark*, then, encompasses a whole range of

³ Edward Said brought up this term from Foucault’s conception of discourse in order to define that system that organizes social existence and reproduction in which the practices of the colony come into being.

oppressions, such as, colonial, racial, economic and sexual, and Anna, as a woman, experiences those oppressions in a more intense form.

In part, Anna's self is divided between her inability to fit into the discourse of the male-controlled imperial society and her frequent desires for nourishment originated in her peripheral childhood. As a result, Anna dives into her childhood memories and goes back to the image of Francine, the house servant when the protagonist was a child. Through her memories of Francine, Anna presents a recollection of her continuing desire to be black and to possess a racial heritage which seemed in natural harmony with life in the Caribbean: "I wanted to be black, I always wanted to be black... being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad" (31). The figure of Francine haunts the protagonist's memories. Anna remembers that when she had her first menstrual period, it was Francine who told her what it was about, "it seemed quite all right and I thought it was all in the day's work like eating or drinking" (42). Then, Hester, her English stepmother, lectures her on it, making her feel dirty and ashamed. Anna recalls, "I began to feel awfully miserable, as if everything were shutting up around me and I couldn't breathe" (42). After this painful encounter with her stepmother, Anna seeks consolation in Francine and thinks, "but I knew of course she disliked me too because I was white; and that I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white. Being White and getting like Hester and all things you get- old and sad and everything" (44). This passage suggests Anna's early crisis and lack of self-esteem. In part, Anna's divided self obeys to her nostalgic memories of an idyllic pre-sexual stage in her life; this is, when she lived in the Caribbean. As I explain below, this crisis and nostalgia for the past is a response of how her new sexualised identity is constructed in the metropole.

Anna's self is constructed as a blackened sexualized female and this helps to distinguish her subaltern position based on several colonial binaries such as master/slave, white/black and male/female. Post-colonial criticism claims that those binaries entail a violent hierarchy in which one opposite is always dominant over the other. Spivak characterizes the colonial subject as an "other" in order to establish the binary division of the colonizer and colonized and imposing the arbitrary primacy of the colonizing culture (274). In *Voyage in the Dark*, the past of her slave-owning family seems to haunt Anna and at times the self is mirrored in the other: the slaves. The looking-glass is used as a device for this mirroring process. When Anna is in Walter's room she comments, "I walked up to the looking-glass and put the lights on over it and stared at myself. It was as if I were looking at somebody else" (21). Anna is permanently confused about her racial origins. In England,

she is called ‘Hottentot’⁴ (21) and she suffers reveries about being black. In one occasion, she tells Walter about seeing a slave list at her mother’s family estate, and remembers a name from that list, ‘Maillotte Boyd, aged 18, mulatto, house servant’ (21). The connection is simple: Anna identifies herself with the slave girl. The mulatto’s mixed blood mirrors her own racial ambiguity reflected in her divided self. This inner conflict has left her culturally and emotionally detached from any racial heritages and unable to adapt in the dominant discourse of the metropole. When Anna is in Walter’s bed, she even associates Maillotte’s death with her own imaginary death. In this section, Anna identifies Walter with her dead father and herself with the unknown slave girl (49). Hence, Anna’s self incorporates conflicting issues between the historical and the social. Anna’s family history identifies her with the oppressors, the slave-owners. However, her private thoughts and her subconscious actions place her with those who are victimized, those whose bodies are bought and sold for money: the slaves.

The patriarchal discourse sets the norms of behaviour and defines the position of women regarding their sexuality. In one episode, Joe tells Anna that she should not meet with Laurie because “she’s a tart” (79). Later on, he criticizes Laurie’s appearance again as he looks at her photograph. These judgements echo Walter’s initial assertions to Anna that her virginity is “the only thing that matters” (22). Later, Walter’s opinion of virginity has a turning point as he buys Anna’s virginity. When Walter pays Anna for sex, she sees him putting the money in her purse through the looking-glass. Anna seems to be aware that the person she sees reflected in the looking-glass is not her, but a disfigured construction of herself; she says to Walter, “have you ever noticed how different some looking-glasses make you look?” (33). The self that is mirrored back at her comes to be a woman that is paid for sex, “when I went up to him instead of saying, ‘Don’t do that’, I said ‘All right, if you like- anything you like, any way you like’. And I kissed his hand. I felt miserable suddenly and utterly lost” (38). Anna’s initial refusal fails, and she reluctantly accepts this new self that has been imposed on her by most men she comes across. This episode seals Anna’s obedience to the patriarchal society and its gaze towards female sexuality. Thus, as explained above, Anna does not have agency and her sexuality is constructed by Walter’s arbitrary decisions.

⁴ The word ‘Hottentot’ is an offensive term originally coined by the Dutch and then adopted by other nations in the colonial period. The term refers to women from the Khoikhoi tribe, in South Africa, who were exhibited as freak show attractions in many European cities during the 19th Century.

There is an earlier episode which points out how female sexuality is defined under male gaze. Anna is reading Emile Zola's *Nana* and her friend Maudie comments, "I bet you a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies one way and another" (5). Maudie's apparently irrelevant comments are full of gender implications in a society in which women are represented from a patriarchal perspective. *Nana* tells the moral decadence of a woman who brings destruction to every man who pursues her. Zola's *Nana* is an example of how female sexuality is perceived as something dangerous and destructive under male gaze in canonical Western literature. Later on, when the two friends are walking in Hyde Park, they pass a Sunday speaker. When Maudie begins to laugh at the man, Anna notices, "he got wild and shrieked after us, 'Laugh' Your sins will find you out. Already the fear of death is like fire in your hearts" (29). Maudie angrily says, "[i]nsulting us just because we haven't got a man with us... He wouldn't have said a word if we'd have a man with us" (29). Anna does not respond to Maudie, but she meditates about her friend's sharp observation. In the same way, Anna brings together the voices of different women that populate the narrative. Other comments about gender and the sexual difference come from Germaine, Vincent's fiancée, who sarcastically comment on how "most Englishmen don't care a damn about women. They can't make women happy because they don't really like them" (51). As a result, Anna recollects female voices from a position of marginality and feminine disempowerment, and in doing so she undermines dominant patriarchal assumptions about gender.

Anna's fragmented self is also a consequence of the betrayal of the male figures that surround her. Walter's financial support symbolizes Anna's subordination and dependence to the male-controlled society. By the end of their relationship, Vincent, Walter's cousin, writes a patronizing letter informing Anna of Walter's decreasing love for her. In that letter, Walter offers money if she is able to manage it well. The affair ends on the same basis that it began; Anna has been used and is now being dismissed like a mere sexual object. The depth of Anna's reaction to Vincent's letter is conveyed through an image she recalls from her childhood. After reading the letter, she suddenly remembers coming upon her Uncle Bo when she was a young girl. In the dream, he is sleeping with his mouth open. When Anna approaches him, she sees that "long yellow tusks like fangs come out of his mouth and protruded down his chin" (92). Vincent's letter brings up this memory of her childhood again. She meditates, "But what's the matter with me? What's this letter got to do with false teeth" (92). Once more, the divided self brings together past and present. Anna associates this startling image with two different events. If we recall Uncle Bo's own letter that

Hester has read to Anna, where he rejects financing his niece, and that mask-like image that she remembers, we can see that the connection is based on the betrayal of those male figures. Therefore, drawing from her childhood memories, this image relates Walter's betrayal to Uncle's Bo rejection.

However, gender empathy is not something Anna can expect in the metropole. White women in London also contribute to reinforce Anna's 'blackened' colonial identity. Hester constantly underlines Anna's "unfortunate propensities" (55) alluding to her sexual promiscuity, and says that "everything considered" (56) her stepdaughter is much to be pitied. The implicit premise of Hester's argument is the supposed sexual promiscuity of the black female. Anna understands this implication and replies back, "you are trying to make that my mother was coloured. And she wasn't" (56). Hester denies such accusation, but replies, "I tried to teach you talk like a lady and behave like a lady and not like a nigger and of course I couldn't do it...That awful sing song voice you had! Exactly like a nigger you talked and still do" (57). Even as Anna asserts her biological whiteness, Hester swiftly counters by pointing out another example of racial discrimination: the language she speaks. Therefore, Hester considers Anna a "nigger" (56) because of a wide range of attributes, such as, her "unfortunate propensities", her proximity to black people, her relatives, her language and her unfortunate social condition in London. Another instance that alludes to Anna's oral language takes place when she is attacked by her landlady, who in a moment of rage shouts at her, "I won't 'ave you calling me liar [...] You and your drawly voice" (30). Hence, the construction of Anna's identity in London embraces aspects such as race and language.

Further on, Anna suffers other sorts of attacks. Ethel, for whom Anna works as a manicurist also attacks Anna, "you're enough to drive anybody crazy with that potty look of yours. You're not all there, you're a half-potty bastard" (124). Ethel's outburst implies a racist stance. What she means is that Anna is "potty" because she is a "bastard half-white and half-black" (124). It is also interesting how, through this statement, Ethel attributes madness as one of Anna's qualities. According to Ethel, Anna is able to "drive anybody crazy" and this is because she is "not all there." This idea of madness echoes Hester's account of the Caribbean, "And never seeing a white face from one week's end to the other and you growing up like a nigger every day. Enough to drive anybody mad" (54). Then, madness is perceived as a distinctive quality of the Caribbean identity; a geo-political construction of the other.

Anna makes her inner voyage from the periphery to the metropole the core of her divided self and the main thematic element of the narrative. As a migrant, her vision of the metropole deconstructs the public space of the empire and questions the colonial discourse of the colony as a place of permanent darkness. Anna's portrayal of the metropole is full of dark adjectives, and her constant observations of the "sameness" of the city reverts the colonial assumption that the colonized were "all the same." The result of the reversal at the centre of the previously peripheral and marginal is a metamorphosis of metropolitan space. Regarding this, Helen Carr affirms, "the modern metropolitan figure is the migrant: he and she are active formulators of metropolitan aesthetics and life styles, reinventing the languages and appropriating the streets of the master. This presence disturbs a previous order" (24). Thus, as Carr suggests, the migrant, whose marginality the metropole has defined but whose presence is transforming the public space, is the best formulator of the metropolitan/post-colonial aesthetics.

The vivid recall of life in the Caribbean is triggered and mediated by Anna's experiences in London. These two worlds interweave and overlap. While Anna experiences the present events of the plot, she is also the figure who ultimately narrates those events evoking dream-like unconscious memories from her childhood. At the beginning of the novel, the conflict of the self is manifested in the tension marked by the different places and their senses: "It was as if a curtain had fallen, hiding everything I had ever known. It was almost like being born again. The colours were different; the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different" (3). The curtain image suggests the fragmentation of the self based on the two settings. The strong sensorial images which dominate most of Anna's memories underscore the self of Anna's Caribbean experience and her rejection against the cold and darkness of England, "sometimes the earth trembles; sometimes you can feel it breath. The colours are red, purple, blue, gold, all shades of green" (47). On the contrary, the descriptions of London lack these features. The fields are "squares like pocket-handkerchiefs; a small tidy look it had, everywhere fenced off from everywhere else" (17). The few sensorial portraits of London express alienation in which the gendered perspective deconstructs the public spaces of the imperial metropole, "the streets like smooth shut-in ravines and the dark houses frowning down" (41). At the same time, Anna's depiction of London reflects her obsession with the claustrophobic darkness of the metropole and its lack of expansiveness: "loathsome London, vile and stinking hole" (41). Similarly, Anna communicates her inner feelings

almost with the same obscure adjectives she uses to depict the city, “I was always sad, with the same sort of hurt that the cold gave me in my chest” (15).

Anna’s description of London represents the other side of the British metropole. The protagonist distinguishes London as an imperial construction, from the London of her subjectivity, “this is England... I had read about England ever since I could read – smaller meaner everything is never mind – This is London – hundreds thousands of white people rushing along and the dark houses all alike frowning down one after the other all alike all stuck together” (17). The repetitive descriptions of the lodgings in which Anna dwells symbolize Anna’s psychological imprisonment, her alienation from society and the city she detests. Anna’s subjectivity reflects a discursive self possessing a textual authority to rewrite some of the dominant representations regarding the construction of the colonial space. Thus, in *Voyage in the Dark*, the other returns the gaze towards the imperial metropole.

Anna’s juxtaposition of the Caribbean and London suggests a lack of temporal referent in the self of the protagonist, “sometimes it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream. At other times England was the real thing and out there was the dream, but I could never fit them together” (8). Furthermore, the reference to the looking-glass appears also to project that otherness of the self mirrored in the city, “The streets looked different that day, just as a reflection in the looking glass is different from the real thing” (25). Anna’s description of her life in London is frequently vague and surreal. As a result, Anna experiences certain disorientation and fragmentation of those who live an ambivalent and dislocated existence which become paradigmatic in the modernist narrative.

The narrative’s tension between present/London and past/Caribbean stimulates the entire plot as the two opposed worlds meet in Anna’s experience, and the divided self attempts to draw meaning from her subjectivity. In the end of the novel, Anna recalls a long road she used to take as a little girl to her mother’s old homestead. The journey begins amid the lush forest of the Caribbean, “you ride in a sort of dream, the saddle creaks sometimes, and you smell the sea and the good smell of the horse” (151). Anna concludes, “it was as long as life sometimes. I was nearly twelve before I rode it by myself. There were bits in the road that I was afraid of. The turning where you came very suddenly out of the sun into the shadow; and the shadow was always the same shape” (152). This physical journey captures symbolically Anna’s inner journey. After all the natural beauty, the dark

reality shadows her at the end. The protagonist's life portrays a permanent cycle. In the last part of the novel, Anna's fragmented identity dies in an abortion and a new self emerges; she starts a new life, "and about mornings, and misty days, when anything might happen. And about starting all over again, all over again" (187). Parallel to the opening lines of the novel, in which Anna talks about being "born again" (7), these last lines refer unequivocally to the possibility of beginning "all over again."

Finally, the reflections into Anna's past provide a sense of movement that evokes the novel's central image of the voyage. Anna's childhood memories reveal an organic connection with the place that gave the self its identity in the past, and which is now fragmented in the urban context of the British metropole. The binary setting, London and the Caribbean, symbolize Anna's inner opposing desires. First, to be part and different from the rest of the British society, asserting her identity of as a white Creole without being marginalized. Second, to oppose the patriarchal discourse that authorizes imperial constructions of femininity. The juxtaposition of the two places symbolizes an inner search for an authentic female self, which opposes the authority of a patriarchal and materialistic society in which women are without agency. The novel provides many references to how race and sexuality indicate the various ways in which colonial discourse defines its subjects. Beside her apparent victimization and lack of agency, Anna is a subversive character; she creates her subjectivity as a subaltern woman showing the effects of colonization and creating a female identity based on senses and memories. Finally, *Voyage in the Dark* is a novel of exile, a recurrent theme in twentieth-century literature, and a vivid account of the colonial and modern experience of the migrant in the imperial metropole.

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