

FROM VULNERABILITY TO SELFHOOD
THE PAIN-FILLED AFFIRMATIONS OF JEAN RHYS

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As the feminist movement has altered the social landscape, so feminist criticism has altered the literary landscape. Yet old assumptions die hard, and the new configurations are still in the process of evolving. The insistence that the woman writer is not a freak phenomenon and that women do have "a literature of their own" yields valuable new perspectives at the risk of foreclosing further illuminations. Specifically, both the traditional male versions of literary history and the new feminine counter-histories are alike in their separatism, their conviction that women's experience is "other." The corollary of such separatism is the assumption that the vision of life offered by a woman is necessarily limited in its range and antagonistic in its posture. We have yet to be at ease with the idea that women artists are no less able than their male counterparts to address and illuminate our common humanity.

The novels of Jean Rhys provide a particularly apt illustration of this difficulty. Though their artistic distinction is generally acknowledged, the nature of the vision conveyed by that art has been harder to pin down. Indeed, for all of the apparent narrowness of its range, the variety of interpretations recalls the fable of the blind men and the elephant. Moreover, it is not simply a matter of different readers grasping at different features: what they grasp at and how they interpret it is closely correlated with the reader's sex. For instance, one of her earliest interpreters, Elgin Mallow, views her from the perspective of a man at home with the traditional patriarchal arrangements. Perturbed by her discomfort with the social norms that seem so satisfactory to him, he wards off the challenge of her admitted "originality" with a dismissive allusion to her "solipsistic philosophy." More appreciatively, Thomas Staley sees that originality as precociously modern pinpointing of the flawed social arrangements that doom the relationships between the sexes to failure, but the amount of attention he devotes to the men in her novels is disproportionate to their actual role. The undeniable truth of the matter is that the principal story Jean Rhys has to tell is a woman's story.

On the other hand, though women readers see this readily, they too are liable to lapse into sex-based reductivism. Judith Thurman finds the key to Rhys's bleak narratives in their heroines' emotional dependence on masculine approval. And Helen Nebeker, who has probably grasped the underlying motivation of Rhys's fiction better than any previous critic, forecloses on her perception by taking too narrow a view. Recognizing the struggle for self-awareness and self-acceptance as the driving impulse behind Rhys's successive reworkings of her limited material, Nebeker unfortunately goes on to suggest that the "self" achieved is not an individual person but the embodiment of an abstract feminine principle, the potent Mother Goddess long vanquished by a patriarchal society.

Invariably too, Rhys is only compared to other women writers, although her novels make uncomfortable reading for men and women alike. And it has been only too easy to take the first four as a fictionalized autobiography akin to Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest* novels or Antonia White's tetralogy, despite the fact that their chronology is anything but straightforward. Yet, as their individuated names imply, the heroines of these novels are separate creatures because their author's purpose was not to write the history of a single human being, but rather to grapple with a personally compelling theme. Like the successive creations of Eugene O'Neill or Tennessee Williams, Rhys's novels are the products of an obsessive struggle to come to terms with a persistently troubling condition. Indeed, in its largest dimensions, it was the same condition for all three: a sense of alienation and vulnerability. But Jean Rhys was to offer a woman's variation on that theme. And the difference matters.

To begin with, it accounts for the apparent limitations of Rhys's range. No less than any male artist, Rhys draws upon her own experience in elaborating her themes, but social forces dictated that only certain areas of experience would be available to her.

Specifically, her novels involve a triad of concerns: sexuality, money, and social position, each a potential source of power and consequently of vulnerability. In the world into which she was born, men were almost invariably in control of money and status. Only in the third area, sex, was there a more even balance of power, though the inherent drawback of this historical dispensation was that it betrayed both sexes into the view that women's bodies were a purchasable commodity - for some women their only bargaining chip in the power game.

Even so, it would be an oversimplification to see Rhys as a champion of women's causes. The Jean Rhys heroine is not Everywoman, and her problems are only partly the consequence of being relegated to a woman's place in a male-dominated society. Rather it is her peculiar distinction that she is incapable of playing power games, and as a result she inevitably becomes a social outcast, the prey of men and women alike. She is doomed as much by her temperament as by her circumstances. Many readers have emphasized the characteristic passivity of the Jean Rhys heroine. Yet it is just as important to recognize an equally fateful streak of reckless defiance.

However, if we wish to understand the power and authority of Rhys's aesthetic vision, we must look not to the features shared by all her novels, but rather to the way in which her successive reworkings of the theme of the heroine as vulnerable outcast become more and more resonant with implications that transcend any narrow sex-based dichotomies to speak to a universal human condition. The history that we must trace is not the life history of a fictional surrogate self, but rather the history of Rhys's struggle to make her art the vehicle by which to come to terms with both herself and a world whose aspect seemed almost unremittingly hostile.

At first Jean Rhys scarcely recognized the extent of her alienation. In her earliest novel, *Quartet*, she seems to be as bewildered as her naive heroine as to the cause of the latter's shabby fate. Indeed, external evidence confirms what the novel's epigraph, "Beware of Good Samaritans," implies: namely, that Rhys's original motive for writing this story was a sense of outrage about an episode in her own life. In its fictional version, it becomes the story of Marya Zelli's victimization by a couple who take her in after her husband is jailed for shady business dealings. Soon her male "benefactor" is making sexual advances, and his wife is more than willing to abet him in order to maintain the smooth façade that is what she most values in the marital relationship. Though Marya wishes to remain loyal to her husband, she is eventually roused to responsiveness by the force of her seducer's urgent passion. Torn by her conflicting attachments, she is eventually scorned and abandoned by both men, her husband because he is outraged by her faithlessness, her lover because he refuses to share her.

Yet this brief plot summary is misleading. As Rhys shaped her material, self-centered indignation was succeeded by a sincere effort to understand the motives and the needs of all four parties in the squalid affair. If the shift in intention makes for a blurred focus, it also testifies to Rhys's intellectual candor. She makes no attempt to disguise Marya's childishness; she recognizes the element of pathos in Stephan Zelli's need to conceal his ineffectuality by wrapping himself up in the mantle of offended honor; and she even allows us to glimpse the vein of authentic passion that marginally extenuates his rival's domineering egotism. Only the wife is depicted as an unmitigated villain, treating Marya as a commodity to be purchased and exploited even as she invokes their shared feminine condition of dependency.

Aesthetic as well as intellectual considerations justify Rhys's instinctive rejection of Marya as the focus of her narrative. More a pathetic waif than a heroine, she offers only the most minimal resistance to the manipulations of others, and her self-esteem is all too dependent on outside approval. But by the time Rhys came to write her second novel, her heroine had done some painful growing. After *Leaving Mr Mackenzie* is an even bleaker work than *Quartet*. For its protagonist, Julia Martin, the dependency of a kept woman replaces the dependency of a wife, and the novel's design unsparingly displays the costs of that exchange. Socially, she is more alienated, her family barely tolerating her presence

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at her dying mother's bedside and warning her off from future contacts. Psychically, she has reached a state of torpor and self-doubt more draining than the bewilderment of the besieged Marya. Yet there is a new note in the woman's character, a reckless ferocity which is at once a source of practical grief and a sign of her growing urge towards self-determination. Thus, the novel's slight action is precipitated by Julia's return of her last lover's farewell settlement, an angry gesture made the more satisfying because she also dares to slap his face. The rest of the narrative serves to demonstrate how meager and ineffectual that satisfaction must be. Julia must swallow the bitter pill of recognizing that she not only has no other economic resource than her sexuality, but also that she is singularly inept in the exploitation of that resource. Her prickly sensitivity alienates the one man tender enough to respect her gameness; her fading looks portend financial disaster; and the novel ends with an explicit act of surrender, as she crawls back to tap Mr. Mackenzie for a loan that he gladly gives just in order to shake her off.

For many readers, the grim pessimism of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* is the hallmark of her work. Yet for Rhys herself, its bleak conclusion turned out to be the starting point for a wholly new approach to her central theme. Accepting the temperamental as well as the social vulnerability of her representative heroine, she determined to permit her to be more than a victim. In the last two "autobiographical" novels, the author's quest for understanding would become her heroine's as well. And the sign of this altered aim was the shift from the third to the first person narrative voice, a shift accompanied by a greatly expanded concern with the processing of the contents of the narrator's mind: her memories, her dreams, her obscure intuitions, and her flashes of insight.

The deliberately ambiguous title of Rhys's next novel, *Voyage in the Dark*, signals this shift in intention. On the one hand, the voyage referred to is the progression of external events which carry the adolescent chorus girl Anna Morgan inexorably towards her fate as a fallen woman. --("She's had a fall," is the resonantly ambiguous excuse offered to the doctor who attends her in the aftermath of a botched abortion.) On the other, the voyage is an inner journey from a condition of innocent incomprehension even more extreme than Marya Zelli's to a stark recognition that the forces that have made her what she is have also thrust her beyond the defensive barriers of the human herd. This journey starts with a bland acceptance of the surface features of both her motherlands, the West Indian world of her childhood and the English "mother country" whose norms of gentility and class consciousness have been transplanted into and transmuted by the uncongenial air of the sensuous tropics. It ends with the culminating realization that she has arrived at "a place full of stones where nobody is."

In chronicling Anna's downfall, Rhys does not attempt to disguise the girl's practical folly or her willful blindness. Surrendering herself wholly to her first lover, Anna resists the recognition that he sees her as only one of a long line of temporary attachments to be bought and bought off. And her reckless indifference to the cult of virginity is matched by an equally reckless lack of financial prudence, an aristocratic disdain that inevitably runs afoul of the realities of a commercial society.

But *Voyage in the Dark* is not designed simply to repeat the bitter lessons of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*. As Anna discovers her alienation and vulnerability, we readers come to see the characteristic flaws and failings of all those who still have their footing on the social ladder. Anna's folly, like Quixote's, becomes the standard by which to measure the sensible people: the prudent, respectable, managing English types, who make sure that the claims of passion never overtax their pocketbooks or their appointment books, not so much villains as inadequate human beings armoring themselves against intimacy and involvement; the shiftier specimens who plant one foot in the ranks of respectability to gain a purchase on the claims of self-righteous superiority while, by a nimble adjustment, they accommodate themselves (either as exploiters or self-indulgers) to the frailties of the flesh; the wistful hangers-on, with their pathetic hope that a bit of money and a bit of "swank" will gain them the security of a respectable marriage; the blacks of the islands, allowed their measure of guarded insolence provided that they don't venture too far out of line.

Though Jean Rhys paints these characters with an almost Dickensian flair for caricature, Anna herself is slow to know their nature and incapable of blaming them. Discounting the single impotent blow she delivers to rebuke her patronizing lover, the one person she turns against is herself. Smashing the picture of the dog "Loyal Heart" in a drunken rage, she symbolically castigates the folly of her indulgence in a dream of fidelity. And it is a final commentary on the venality of the world Anna flounders in that the one person who does offer her loyal support is a defiant social outlaw, a slut in the world's eyes, more prudent than Anna in the management of her financial resources but at heart as bewildered and forlorn.

Yet Rhys knew that there was a degree of alienation even more extreme than Anna's. In the last of her "autobiographical" novels, she went on to depict a heroine whose very psyche has been invaded and corroded by the world's contempt. Sasha Jensen, in *Good Morning, Midnight*, is an amalgam of all three earlier heroines. Like Marya, she has been married to a feckless husband whose lack of worldly success has made him all the more lordly in his assumptions about woman's place. Like Anna, she has experienced the depths of social degradation as a streetwalker (in her case after her husband has abandoned her). Like both Anna and Julia, she has been disowned by her family as well. And she shares all three predecessors' bitterness of spirit, though a new ingredient has been added to that compound of weary passivity and sporadic defiance: a quivering alertness to the possibility of new blows from a world whose hostility she takes for granted.

Yet, amazingly, bitter experience has failed to destroy a green core of hopefulness. Reviewing the past, Sasha retrieves moments of pleasure as well as pain. And the crucial agon of the novel is the internal warfare between this vestigial vitality and the numb death-in-life resignation that wisdom seems to dictate, a war in which death has a new and powerful ally, the inexorable aging process which must necessarily rob her of the physical attractiveness that has always been woman's ambiguously valuable resource. On the other hand, Sasha's situation also includes a new - but limited - resource. Unlike any of Rhys's previous heroines, she has a small but steady independent income, not enough to purchase much pleasure but enough to educate her in the use of money and to give her a taste for autonomy.

Sasha ventures into the world of the living half reluctantly, launched by the generous intervention of an old friend. Yet no sooner has she arrived in her beloved Paris than the contest begins. Her prudent "English" self courts anonymity, but some irrepressible impulse keeps sending her to the "unsafe" haunts of memory. She shrinks from the decorous gallantries of a pair of Russians, but is stirred nonetheless to outfit herself anew for the perilous lists of sexual encounter. And as a result she meets her most formidable challenge, a young man who is, disconcertingly, both her antagonist and her counterpart. Like her earlier avatars, he is a penniless social desperado whose only resource is the sale of his sexual favors. But now she is in the unaccustomed position of potential buyer - and dupe; she knows too well that what she really wants - the confirmation of her innate desirability - is just what cannot be purchased. Earlier, a meeting with a free-spirited artist has given her a taste of the happiness possible when two individuals reach out to each other with a sympathy unconstrained by social forms and open in its understanding of what money can and cannot buy. But though the young gigolo seems similarly candid, his motives remain tantalizingly ambiguous, and Sasha is caught up in a tumult of conflicting emotions: yearning and fear and, most damaging of all, a malicious scorn that spills over to wound both herself and her young pursuer.

The subtlety of Rhys's recreation of the play of Sasha's emotions defies summarization, but its brilliance is just the prelude to an even more stunning dénouement. Sasha's final acquiescence in the risk-taking that life requires brings to her door a seedy and sinister figure. Literally he is just a fellow tenant of her hotel who has long been annoying her with his attentions. But as the embodiment of cringing importunity and shabby decline, he is also herself. And Sasha's embrace of this "poor devil" with his "mean flickering eyes" is self-acceptance at last - and also the acceptance of both life and death. The hideousness she embraces is less important than her willingness to embrace.

Like the lyric by Emily Dickinson which provides both its epigraph and its apt title, *Morning, Midnight* is a gallant salute to the inevitable coming of darkness which nonetheless refuses to deny the joys of daylight. As such, it speaks with an austere gaiety to the essence of our human condition of vulnerability and need.

Born in the last decade of the nineteenth century, Rhys depicts a world whose social terms have largely vanished. The accommodations of the patriarchal order are no longer taken for granted. Women's quest for self-determination, which had seemed so doomed an enterprise in her reading of experience, is now a commonplace. The aches that beset our generation are of a different sort, as we struggle to establish a new basis for an imperative that women's striving for autonomy cannot wish away: the need for intimacy between oneself and others. The armor that both sexes have learned to wear purchases at the cost of generosity of spirit. As we follow Jean Rhys's painful explorations of lessons of her own vulnerability, we may come to understand how great that cost can be.

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ON BECOMING A BUTTERFLY
ISSUES OF IDENTITY IN JEAN RHY'S *AFTER LEAVING MR MACKENZIE*

Nancy Hemond Brown

Near the end of the second section of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, Julia Martin spends a day by herself in her hotel room, thinking about her childhood. She recalls what it is like to be

really happy - happy about nothing.[...] You ran as if you were flying, without feeling your feet. And all the time you ran, you were thinking, with a tight feeling in your throat: "I'm happy - happy - happy...."¹

She also remembers the time she spent catching butterflies in a sunlit glade, confident that her intentions were benevolent, and secure in the knowledge that her environment was friendly, or at least not hostile (p. 158). She persisted in trying to imprison the butterflies even in the face of criticism: "You're a cruel, horrid child, and I'm surprised at you" (p. 160), although she acknowledged the damage she was causing: "Of course, what always happened was that it broke its wings.[...] Sometimes it was too badly hurt to be able to fly properly" (p. 160). With a child's singleness of mind, she considered that the pain she was causing the butterflies was insignificant compared with the possibility of achieving her goal, a live, captive butterfly:

You knew that what you had hoped had been to keep the butterfly in a comfortable cardboard-box and to give it the things it liked to eat. And if the idiot broke its own wings, that wasn't your fault, and the only thing to do was to chuck it away and try again. If people didn't understand that, you couldn't help it. (p. 160)

But the memory which provokes this sequence is not, in fact, the "real happiness" which she had first recalled; it is instead the recollection that catching butterflies was to be "the first time you were afraid.[...] You were not afraid in the shadow, but you were afraid in the sun" (pp. 159-160). A crucial shift in the child's sense of her own identity has occurred: in the sunlight, associated with the butterflies ("something that a minute before had been flying around in the sun" [pp. 159-160]), the young Julia has suddenly seen herself as a butterfly. She, too, is defenceless in the "glare of the white sunlight" (p. 159), where