

MARY LOU EMERY: JEAN RHYS AT "WORLD'S END": NOVELS OF COLONIAL & SEXUAL EXILE
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As a female writer who constructs stories of women devalued by oppressive hierarchies of gender and class, Jean Rhys is a natural focus of feminist criticism. Apart from form, the thematic content of each of Rhys's novels reveals extraordinarily fruitful ground for various feminist approaches. In her five novels are five female protagonists, five differently aged women who live on the fringes of society or sanity, five seemingly passive, or indifferent, victims of a patriarchally-based, class-divided hierarchal structure. Books by Nancy R. Harrison (*Jean Rhys and the Novel as Women's Text*, University of North Carolina, 1988), Deborah Kelly Kloefer (*The Unspeakable Mother: Forbidden Discourse in Jean Rhys and H.D.*, Cornell University Press, 1989), Judith Kegan Gardiner (*Rhys, Stead, Lessing, and the Politics of Empathy*, Indiana University Press, 1989), and Paula Le Gallez (*The Rhys Woman*, St. Martin's, 1990) approach the Rhys canon from a variety of feminist perspectives and attest to the degree to which Rhys is perceived as an indispensable feminist author.

By far the most comprehensive feminist critical study on Rhys to date is Mary Lou Emery's *Jean Rhys at "World's End: Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile*. Just as Emery defines two different types of Rhysian exile - as a colonial and as a woman - the "World's End" of her title has a dual meaning as well. World's End was a down-at-the-heels area of London where then-chorus girl Rhys surfaced prior to the twenties, as well as the West Indian site where Columbus disembarked in 1492, considered by European geographers and historians as an "unknown land" where "a part of our habitable earth ends" (xiv). This duality of peripheralized locations leads to Emery's first use of a term employed many times throughout her text. "As title," writes Emery, "'World's End' works in an overdetermined way" (xiii; my emphasis). Emery's contention, valid if repetitive, is that the combination of Rhys's doubled exile within Europe, by country and gender, and an additional exile within her birth country because she is white in a British-controlled West Indian colony, makes her an "overdetermined Other."

High Modernism, the central literary background against which Rhys published four of her novels and one of her short story collections, is not a subject which Emery explores in much detail. For Emery, modernism is a patriarchal, elitist club that would admit few members, let alone a bohemian island girl who trod the boards. In a chapter called "Modernist Crosscurrents," Emery posits the view that modernism is a tripartite concept consisting of female and Third World modernisms in addition to traditional European (and largely male) definitions of the phenomenon. Rhys, she contends, is at crosscurrents with such traditional and abstract patterns of European modernism; and, besides, Emery is far more engaged by what she sees as social modernization, seeking to read particular passages in Rhys's novels against the cultural and social context of the times. Emery is interested in the "broader delineations of the social spaces in between cultures and in between what the Victorians perceived as public (masculine) and private (feminine) spheres" (xiv). Here is the heart of Emery's argument vis-à-vis the still vexing question of Rhys's relation to modernism:

Within European discourse, these two different kinds of in-between spaces are linked through codings of mass culture as feminine, associations of the feminine with the "primitive," and perceptions of the colonial native as always part of a mass or crowd. Rhys's fiction responds to the constitution of the colonial woman as over-determined Other through experimental narrative styles that question colonial and sexual ideologies and explore the political implications of modernism. (xiv)

Thus Emery's approach is transacted as a sociohistorical study which, while not defined as such by her, reveals New Historicist goals and methodological premises which seek to refute previous critical categorizations of Rhys as an ahistorical, apolitical writer.

To these ends, Emery provides a number of useful historical and theoretical contexts for Rhys's work. She begins her study with *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Voyage in the Dark*, reading these novels against the historical backdrop of West Indian colonialization and obeah rituals practiced by the natives. Drawing upon certain critical insights developed by Bakhtin, Emery cites darkly humorous or subtly satirical passages along with carnivalesque elements in both novels to reveal the rebellious potential implicit in the subversive topsy-turvy world of the Caribbean carnival. She also finds in *Quartet* a similar carnival consciousness, as well as the presence of *soucriant* or zombie-like states in which Rhys's protagonists often find themselves.

In addition to Caribbean motifs, Emery turns to other historical and cultural contexts for thinking about Rhys's novels. In a chapter called "The Other Great War," for example, she links *Voyage in the Dark* with metaphorical themes arising from the World War I era: the war waged over women's bodies by men - husbands, lovers, doctors. Another chapter, on *After Leaving Mr MacKenzie*, relies upon John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* to analyze how Julia Martin is defined in relation to other actual and representational mistresses, roles derived, as Berger has shown, from conventional and stereotypical artistic renderings, particularly in oil painting.

Emery's last chapter, on *Good Morning, Midnight*, is an imaginative and suggestive reading of Sasha Jansen's story, set in 1937 Paris against the background of the Exhibition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques Appliqués à la Vie Moderne, or Paris Exhibition, which took place that year. Emery points out that *Midnight* begins and ends with Sasha's references to the Exhibition. In the initial sequence Sasha describes the setting as a dream and notices signs which point her towards entrances to the Exhibition, but not to exits. In Emery's reading it is not surprising that Sasha searches for a way out, hypersensitive even in her dreamlike state, for Emery's historical research reveals the connection between the Exhibit and the increasingly unsettled political climate of the period Auden called that "low dishonest decade." The Thirties were, in Emery's words,

symbolized best perhaps by the two major buildings of the exposition which confronted one another directly on each side of the Champs de Mars - that of the Soviet Union, topped by giant figures of a marching man and woman with hammer and sickle held high, and that of Nazi Germany, crowned by an immense gold eagle grasping a swastika in its claws. (144)

Here, incidentally, is an interesting example of New Historicist modes in that the novel contains no references to these buildings and includes few direct mentions of the Thirties as setting for the story. Nonetheless, Emery's interpretation, buttressed by old-fashioned historical research, is intriguing.

All in all, *Jean Rhys at "World's End"* is useful for its many insights into particular moments of historical resonance in Rhys's fiction, if somewhat marred by its own historical situation, a late '80s infatuation with the opacities and obscurities of academic critical jargon.