



Sexuality as Degeneration within Modernist Writing of Empire

Rosaleen Keehan

August 2022

“I wanted to be black. I always wanted to be black. . . Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad” (Rhys 23-24)

The modernist writing of Empire appears to encapsulate an obsession with sexuality; a preoccupation which is utilized in conveying broader social commentary relating to topics such as sexual violence, objectification and the breakdown of binary gender roles, particularly in relation to maternity, domesticity, and the degeneration of associated colonial values. This paper will explore the obsession with sexuality evident in Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* by Jean Rhys, and Katherine Mansfield's 'The Woman at the Store', discussing the function of domesticity, reproduction and motherhood within an imperial apparatus, as well as the significance of sexuality and the absence of domesticity as a form of perceived degeneration within a colonial context. The unique position of the white settler, or the Creole woman within colonial ideals of domesticity is also explored within this analysis, as well as the portrayal of sexual violence as a form of social injustice. Finally, this paper will examine the theme of sexuality in association with the colonial landscape, discussing the body and sexuality as a manifestation of settler Gothic, and consider the role each text plays in obscuring the dichotomous stereotyping of the virtuous, sexually constrained white settler woman versus the sexually licentious, degenerate indigenous woman.

In *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna's sexuality represents a means to claim power, both social and financial, as well as identity, within the colonial context of a patriarchal society that affords her little beyond what she can claim through her own objectification. Anna is, as Palko claims, "dependent on her own resources in an atmosphere that is openly hostile to impoverished single women", and the attitudes towards objectification and the male, patriarchal gaze are outlined early in the novel, as Angier describes how Rhys tells the reader through a direct reference to Flaubert's *Nana*, "in cold external words ... how we should read it"; "It's about a tart. I think it's disgusting. I bet you a man writing a book about a tart tells a lot of lies one way and another" (Palko 93; Angier 164; Rhys 5). The reader is encouraged

therefore, to view themes of sexuality and objectification through the identity of the protagonist, within a “faltering Bildungsroman” (Parsons 133) demonstrating Anna’s movement “from hurt child to vengeful woman” (Angier 164). The geographical significance of the novel’s colonial setting is also expressed in the initial chapters; “This is England, and I’m in a nice, clean English room with all the dirt swept under the bed” (Rhys 23), with the euphemistic ‘bed’ in which ‘the dirt’ is ‘swept under’ acting as a double entendre and metaphor highlighting the conservative attitudes held towards sex in an English colonial context. Sexuality in ‘The Woman at the Store’ is represented in rich modernist realism through an arguably more Gothic lens, as a feature of the woman’s femininity that leaves her vulnerable to sexual violence. A once beautiful woman is, as Lohead describes, “ravaged by the harsh conditions of settler life”, being subjected to “extreme vulnerability in a remote place” (117), subsequently falling victim to acute sexual violence, utilized by Mansfield in depicting a breakdown of domesticity and a subverted representation of domestic colonial ideals.

Issues such as motherhood, domesticity and gender roles are explored through the obsession with sexuality evident in both *Voyage in the Dark* and ‘The Woman at the Store’. As described by Tiffin, reproduction (“of bodies or ideas”), formed a crucial aspect to the imperial project, with reproduction being “focal in colonization” (219). Indeed, W. Tyler Smith’s nineteenth century manual of obstetrics, considered one of the “most popular and influential nineteenth-century textbooks on midwifery”, claims “The uterus is to the Race what the heart is to the Individual: it is the organ of circulation of the species” (Poovey 34-35). In this analogy, “individual women dissolve into one enormous, universal uterus – a disembodied, faintly threatening womb” (Poovey 35), which appears extraordinarily apt in

the context of the usage of “Modernist devices of defamiliarization and dissociation” (Boehmer and Matthews 286).

Indeed, Anna’s pregnancy in *Voyage in the Dark*, which is ominously foreshadowed (“I stretched, and watched my swollen shadow on the wall stretching too”) (Rhys 92) falls neatly into place within this analogy, as her pregnancy marks the climax of her loss of identity through her promiscuous sexuality. This loss of identity through pregnancy is exemplified in Anna’s verbal exchange with the abortionist, whom she claims replies “as if she were talking to a child” (Rhys 147) (presumably, the foetus Anna carries). Loss of identity, portrayed in *Voyage in the Dark* through sexuality and reproduction corresponds to the novel’s modernist literary features consisting of a “preoccupation with alienation and disoriented or displaced identity” (Boehmer and Matthews 287).

The sexual violence and breakdown of domesticity in ‘The Woman at the Store’, is similarly foreshadowed, utilising an Edenic Biblical allegory manifesting in the oppressive landscape, as the harsh winds “rooted among the tussock grass – slithered along the road” (Mansfield 10) in serpentine fashion, in which the breakdown of domesticity and subversion of binary colonial gender roles is likened to the Fall of Man in Genesis 3. The characters of Jo and Jim, occupying the predominant position of the male gaze in the story, objectify the woman as being “pretty as a wax doll” and claiming, “at any rate, my buck, she’s female flesh!” (Mansfield 14). These biblical connotations are furthered by Mansfield by likening Jim to a serpent, described as having glistening “black eyes” and “shooting out his tongue” (Mansfield 10). This usage of biblical intertextuality appears particularly relevant within the story’s colonial context, considering the expansion of “British Protestant Christianity in the nineteenth century ... in both missionary and migrant forms”, particularly in New Zealand (Davidson 146). These biblical elements are juxtaposed against elements of degenerate

sexuality, as Jim discloses he had once been told in a “confidential moment” that the woman “knew one hundred and twenty-five different ways of kissing” (Mansfield 14).

In *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna’s capability of reproduction subverts colonial values of domesticity and motherhood in a culmination of the text’s obsession with sexuality, with Anna representing, as Palko describes, “a thwarted maternal identity”, as colonial strictures have deemed her “incapable of fulfilling imperial maternal imperatives” (89). Anna’s pregnancy, and by extension her reproductive abilities, are regarded instead as an unfortunate and inevitable price she must pay for her sexuality, symbolised by Anna’s fur coat, a representation of the fruits of her sexuality. Anna once claims “I’ll do anything for good clothes. Anything – anything for clothes” (Rhys 19), which is sold to cover the price of her abortion. Anna’s pregnancy is even regarded as an illness; as Vincent learns of Anna’s pregnancy, he declares that he is “awfully sorry to hear [she hasn’t] been well” (Rhys 142).

This thwarted maternal identity is similarly evident in ‘The Woman at the Store’, in which sexual violence has rendered the woman’s body also incapable of fulfilling “imperial maternal imperatives” (Palko 89), as the woman declares, “It’s six years since I was married, and four miscarriages”, claiming that she should have had her husband “lynched for child murder” (Mansfield 16). Indeed, in a Gothic subversion of social justice, the woman herself lynches her husband “for child murder” (Mansfield 16), revealed through her daughter’s drawing “of the woman shooting at a man with a rook rifle and then digging a hole to bury him in” (Mansfield 19). This body, as Lohead describes, reveals “the web of social injustice and misery that has strangled the life and snapped the sanity of [the woman]” (116), representing the effects and consequence of acute sexual violence, whilst also highlighting “the damage caused to the psyche by the isolation of colonial life” (Lohead 117). contemporary attitudes towards such social injustice are also highlighted by the Gothic image

of the body, represented by the travellers, who, as “the buried body exposes social disease ... turn their backs on those who suffer” (Lohead 124).

Indeed, in ‘The Woman at the Store’, the woman’s body and sexuality, and by extension her capability of reproduction, vulnerability to sexual violence, and even her offspring, seem to form an organic, biological equivalent to “the crumbling edifices of the past— castles, abbeys, crypts [that] provide the sites in which hauntings, strange events and violence occur ... in European Gothic” – the “ancient architecture [that is] lacking ... in Australian and New Zealand Gothic”, reflected in “Mansfield’s Gothic register of the horrors of childbirth and motherhood” (Mercer 86-89). This is advanced through elements of settler Gothic portrayed in a more traditional sense, where “Australian and New Zealand Gothic ... frequently locate the macabre and occult in the natural landscape” (Mercer 89), with Lohead describing the wilderness in ‘The Woman at the Store’ as “an enduring signpost of the Gothic Remote” (Lohead 116). The woman’s body, as a result of sexual violence, is rendered a hostile environment, much like her geographic surroundings. Aside from the six miscarriages the woman has suffered, she describes the “trouble” she had following the birth of her daughter: “I ad’nt any milk til a month after she was born and she sickened like a cow” (Mansfield 14).

The child in ‘The Woman at the Store’, as well as representing the physical, biological evidence of the woman’s sexuality, also illustrates a subversion of colonial ideals of domesticity and motherhood, as she forms the product of sexual violence. Indeed, Tiffin writes on the importance of the settler child within an imperial context, stating that “a positive presentation of parenting and parenthood lay at the heart of the rhetoric of empire” (219), with children representing the furthering of the imperial project and the hope for the future. The child in ‘The Woman at the Store’, however, is described as “a mean, undersized brat,

with whitish hair, and weak eyes” (Mansfield 15) who, with a “diseased mind”, creates “extraordinary and repulsively vulgar” drawings, described as “the creations of a lunatic with a lunatic’s cleverness” (Mansfield 17), and is simultaneously represented as a “victim just as her mother is” (Lothead 118).

Anna’s unique position as a white Caribbean Creole woman is also relevant to her character’s sexuality and subsequent subversion of colonial maternal ideals, with her pregnancy representing, as Palko describes, a “dangerous specter within maternal imperialism” (92). The ambiguous position of the white settler woman, simultaneously subjected to patriarchal ideals and regarded as the inferior sex, whilst upholding colonial values as part of the settler-invader apparatus, is further complicated for Anna by her Creole heritage, and estrangement from any living relatives, oscillating “between identifying herself as a poor white woman of British descent, a white female Creole, and a black colonized woman” (Hinnov et al. 97). Anna herself claims “I wanted to be black. I always wanted to be black. . . Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad” (Rhys 23-24) and her step-mother, Hester, described by Clarke as “a signifier of Englishness” (Clarke 7), exclaims at one point in exasperation “I tried to teach you to talk like a lady and behave like a lady and not like a nigger and of course I couldn’t do it” (Rhys 52).

Anna expresses her desire to be black to Walter, which contributes to the novel’s, sometimes problematic, blurring of the colonial dichotomy between the indigenous woman of colour perceived as promiscuous and sexually licentious, versus the white woman, perceived as sexually restrained, and in girlhood – virginal. Early on in the novel, Maudie explains to Walter of Anna, “She was born in the West Indies or somewhere . . . The girls call her the Hottentot”, seemingly referring to the historical figure of Sarah Baartman, an indigenous Khoikhoi woman exhibited as a colonial freak show attraction under the name of Hottentot

Venus, who's "breasts, buttocks and hypertrophied labia aroused considerable interest, prurient and scientific" (Qureshi 8). Maudie further exclaims "isn't it a shame?"— shame here occupying a double-meaning, simultaneously insinuating negative connotations surrounding the Hottentot, and shame associated with promiscuous sexuality (Rhys 8). These negative connotations of the Hottentot (and presumably by extension, black female sexuality more widely) are further confirmed by Walter's reply; "I hope you call them something worse back" (Rhys 8). Although initially Walter does not appear to objectify Anna in comparison with racist connotations of the Hottentot ("He didn't look at my breasts or my legs, as they usually do"), it becomes clear, as Savory describes, that the relationship, or "transaction" between them, becomes to be seen by Walter as "a promise of sexual excitement from a white woman whom he perceives as having an extra thrill presumably from association with racist constructions of black females in his culture" (Rhys 8; Savory 95). Interestingly, Anna holds negative connotations towards virginity, and even regards it as an artificial social construction – something which Walter vehemently disagrees on. "I'm not a virgin if that's what's worrying you' ... 'but it doesn't matter anyway', I said. 'People have made all that up' / 'Oh yes it matters. It's the only thing that matters'" (Rhys 28).

Anna, being sexually withdrawn from Walter, on one occasion, "lying down with [her] arms down [by her] sides and [her] eyes shut" (Rhys 44) while making love, "problematically, appropriates the identity of a young slave woman" (Savory 95): "Maillotte Boyd, aged 18 ... But I like it like this. I don't want it any other way but this" (Rhys 44). Despite being obviously problematic, as she veers dangerously close to, as Savory describes, "justifying acceptance of sexual predation, and extending this to all women, regardless of race or class", this identification, along with Anna's desire to be black, allows her character to

occupy both, and simultaneously evade, her space within the stereotyped dichotomy of white and indigenous woman (95).

The boundaries of this stereotype are also blurred in ‘The Woman at the Store’, although admittedly this is achieved by the effacement and relegation of indigenous peoples to the natural landscape. This landscape with its “slate colour” sky, and “tussock grass patched with purple orchids and manuka bushes covered with thick spider webs”, and oppressive climate with its “terrible” heat (Mansfield 10), forms, as Tomalin describes, Mansfield’s “first deliberate portrayal of her native country” with an “ignorance of the people settled there” (Tomalin 95), through which “the savage spirit of the country [walks] abroad and [sneers] and what it [sees]” (Mansfield 13). Here, however, the portrayal of landscape, as an extension of indigenous peoples, successfully reverses, as Tiffin describes, “the destruction of indigenous peoples [through] ... the very *production* of (white) children ... within the framework of imperial ideology”, which she describes as “the intersection of two powerful imperial and patriarchal technologies” (219). In ‘The Woman at the Store’, the oppressive climate and landscape, if taken to be representative of the effaced and vanishing native, is successful in subverting colonial settled ideals of blissful domesticity, as the woman is ravaged not only by male sexual violence but also her surroundings; she is, as Lohead describes, “made inhuman by her inhumane environment” (120).

In conclusion, each texts’ obsession with sexuality demonstrates a wider social commentary that attempts to subvert colonial ideals of domesticity, and subsequently undermines the function of reproduction and motherhood within an imperial apparatus. In this way, both ‘The Woman at the Store’ and *Voyage in the Dark* may be read as anti-colonial texts, as they attempt to disrupt colonial ideas of degeneration whilst simultaneously subverting “the crucial technology of imperialism”, as well as destabilizing the imperial

dichotomy of the sexually restrained white woman versus the hyper-sexualised and promiscuous native or black woman (Tiffin 219).

Works Cited

- Angier, Carole. Afterword. *Voyage in the Dark*, by Jean Rhys, Penguin Classic, 2000, pp. 157–66.
- Boehmer, Elleke, and Steven Matthews. “Modernism and Colonialism.” *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, 2011, pp. 284–300,
<https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol9781107010635.014>.
- Clarke, Joseph. “Caribbean Modernism and the Postcolonial Social Contract in ‘Voyage in the Dark.’” *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 1–16,
<https://doi.org/http://www.jstor.org/stable/40986139>.
- Davidson, Allan K. “The Interaction of Missionary and Colonial Christianity in Nineteenth Century New Zealand.” *Studies in World Christianity*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1996, pp. 145–166,
https://doi.org/10.3366/swc.1996.2.part_2.145.
- Hinnov, Emily M., et al. “Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark*: Community, Race, and Empire.” *Communal Modernisms: Teaching Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture in the Twenty-First-Century Classroom*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 96–111.
- Lohead, Anne. “A Corpse Planted in the Garden: The Buried Body in Katherine Mansfield’s ‘The Woman at the Store’ and Elizabeth Knox’s *Dreamhunter* Duet.” *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2017, pp. 114–130.
- Mansfield, Katherine. “The Woman at the Store.” *Katherine Mansfield: Selected Stories*, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 10–19.
- Mercer, Erin. “Manuka Bushes Covered with Thick Spider Webs’: Katherine Mansfield and the Colonial Gothic Tradition.” *Journal of New Zealand Literature (JNZL)*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2014, pp. 85–105, www.jstor.org/stable/43198605.

Palko, Abigail. "Colonial Modernism's Thwarted Maternity: Elizabeth Bowen's 'The House in Paris' and Jean Rhys's 'Voyage in the Dark'." *Textual Practice*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2013, pp. 89–108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236x.2013.752220>.

Parsons, Deborah L. *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Poovey, Mary. *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Qureshi, Sadiya. "Displaying Sara Baartman, The 'Hottentot Venus'". *History Of Science*, vol 42, no. 2, 2004, pp. 233-257, doi:10.1177/007327530404200204.

Rhys, Jean. *Voyage in the Dark*. Penguin, 2019.

Savory, Elaine. "Writing Colour, Writing Caribbean: Voyage in the Dark and the Politics of Colour." *Jean Rhys*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 85–108.

Tiffin, Helen, and Hena Maes-Jelinek. "The Body in the Library: Identity, Opposition and the Settler-Invader Woman." *The Contact and the Culmination: Essays in Honour of Hena Maes-Jelinek*, edited by Marc Delrez and Bénédicte Ledent, L 3, Liège Language and Literature, English Dep., Univ. of Liège, 1997, pp. 213–228.

Tomalin, Claire. *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life*. Penguin, 2012.