

Sentimental and Counter-Sentimental Discourses in Jean Rhys' Version of the Popular Romance

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RESUMEN

La ficción de Jean Rhys pertenece tanto a la literatura crítica y experimental de la avant-garde del modernismo feminista como a la literatura convencional y patrilineal de la cultura popular. Mi análisis de sus textos híbridos se centra en los discursos conflictivos que surgen de la consciencia dividida de sus heroínas: "la prosopopeya de la jiminidad", es decir, el discurso sentimental y masoquista de los clásicos del romance popular, y un discurso contra-romántico donde las heroínas articulan la crítica de su complicidad en la fantasía romántica de la dominación masculina y la sumisión femenina que constituye el fondo de la retórica de la sentimentalidad en la cultura popular.

PALABRAS CLAVE: amor, crítica, marginal, popular, romance, sadomasoquismo, sentimental, subjetividad.

ABSTRACT

Jean Rhys' fiction belongs both to the critical and experimental literature of the feminist modernism of the avant-garde and to the conventional patrilineal literature of popular culture. My analysis of her hybrid texts is centred on the ideologically conflicting discourses that spring from her heroines' split consciousness: "the prosopopeia of femininity", that is, the sentimental and masochistic discourse of the classics of popular romance, and a counter-romantic discourse where the heroines articulate a critique of their own complicity in the sadomasochistic fantasy of male mastery and female submission that is at the core of popular culture's rhetoric of sentimentality.

KEY WORDS: critical, love, marginal, popular, romance, sadomasochism, sentimental, subjectivity.

I prefer to study ... the everyday, the so-called banal, the supposedly un- or non-experimental, asking not "why does it fall short of modernism?" but "how do classical theories of modernism fall short of women's modernity?" (Meaghan Morris quoted by Felski, 1995:11)

Women, of course, have a privileged (or fatal) relationship with the sentimental (Clark, 1991:2)

I. INTRODUCTION

Feminist criticism has recently drawn attention to the fact that classical theories of modernism are male-centred, paying insufficient attention to the specificity of women's representation of their lives and experiences. Much of women's writing at the high point of modernism -between about 1890 and 1940- has been seen as not experimental enough by literary history, for, as Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace note, the question that has dominated the academy for decades, privileging some texts as modernist and rendering others invisible, has been whether their form was radically experimental, not whether their content was (1994:15).

There are a few canonical texts of women's modernist literature. The works of Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein have long been regarded as exemplary of women's modernist writing. Woolf's and Stein's texts were produced in the context of the upper-middle class bohemian communities of Bloomsbury and The Left Bank in the 1920s and 1930s, the context that literary history has canonized as the birthplace of literary modernism. But, being a contextually-specific modernism, it leaves unrepresented other aspects of modernity that shaped the texts of women with different socio-cultural circumstances, outside the intellectual and artistic elite of the period. Women like Jean Rhys, for whom the new fashion in the modern department stores and popular music were much more relevant and significant than the new artistic manifestoes that sprang from communities where she was an outsider.

Jean Rhys, a poorly educated white West-Indian, whose longest-paid job was as a chorus girl, could not belong to the category of avant-garde feminist writers, with their "high" modernism openly defiant of «linguistic and social conventions and their transgressive questioning of femininity» (Felski, 1995:28), but neither did she belong to the category of conventional feminine writers of the regressive sentimental texts of popular culture. Her fiction was rather a hybrid product, with a rich mixture of elements belonging to both the radical literature of the avant-garde and the conformist literature of popular culture. The short story "Let Them Call it Jazz" is an emblematic example of Jean Rhys' "uncategorisable" style and subject-matter (Wheeler, 1994:102). This story combines the ideologically subversive critique of the «coloured. white question» (Rhys' words) with a pure culture of traditional sentimentality. Rhys herself avowedly felt «uneasy about that story», an uneasiness which she explained in terms of its radically cynical title: «I wish I'd gone over it with more care, and found a better title - "A sentimental Story" perhaps ... For it is sentimental and I should not have tried to hide that» (1985:202).

The modernist art that developed out of high culture -although critical of certain high-culture values- «quickly achieved canonical status in universities» (Naremore and Brantlinger, 1991:9-10). Jean Rhys' fiction, partly rooted in popular culture, stigmatized by intellectuals as sentimental and kitsch, was excluded from the academia for decades. Rhys' attraction to popular art was not merely the result of her low social status and poor formal education. She trained and worked as a music-hall artist, one of the classic popular arts. In her autobiographical writings, there is an almost total absence of references to the work of her contemporary modernist writers. What she mentions repeatedly is her love for popular songs. She occasionally incorporated them into her fiction, and, what is more relevant, she reproduced their discourse -the sentimental, pathetic and masochistic discourse of women for whom the loss of man amounts to the loss of life- in the speech of her heroines, drawn from the proletarian mass that formed the audience of popular culture.

Paradoxically, her work was also excluded from the market-place of mass culture, for its scandalous effect on the mass reading public that, at the time and till recently, wanted the suave emotions and thrills of romance and melodrama, not the moral shocks that Rhys' fiction offered in the guise of old romantic plots: her proletarian sentimental women-in-love do not often behave *comme il faut*. Contemporary reviews of Rhys' books show a distinct moral bias against her "sordid" subject matter. For example, *The Times Literary Supplement's* review of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1931) called it «a sordid little story». *The Nottingham Journal* wrote «We can do without the sordid and vulgar side of life». In America her books fared no better: *The Boston Transcript* sardonically

remarked that «Unless you are absorbingly thrilled by knowing what kind of existence ladies like Julia lead ... you wonder where the brilliance comes in» (quoted by Angier, 1992:279). There were, of course, other modernist writers - James Joyce, Hemingway- representing "sordid" dimensions of life, but Jean Rhys was a woman, writing about women, therefore the "sordid" content in her fiction had a greater shocking effect. And the marginal world Rhys depicted was harsher than than represented by any other modernist writer.

The harsh world inhabited by "ladies like Julia", who are either on the border of respectability or, more often, far away from it, a world characterised by the reality of sex and money, of drink and depression, was either ignored or rejected by both the mass reading public and the intellectual elite of the time. In fact, in the 1920s and 1930s, the period when Rhys did most of her writing, she was not read either as a high modernist or as a popular writer for similar reasons: although her lean prose style was praised, her content was reviled as either too shocking or too irrelevant. A prostitute having an abortion -Anna in *Voyage in the Dark* (1934)-, an alcoholic ageing woman having an affair with a gigolo -Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939)- was not the stuff of which either the high or the popular literature before the second world war was made of. Consequently her books were out of print by 1940 and were not reprinted until the 1970s. One critic said of her first novel, *Quartet* (1929) what many would repeat about the following ones, that Rhys would enter the literary pantheon «if you don't mind the plot and do care for style» (quoted by Angier, 1992:177).

According to Shari Benstock, Jean Rhys could not find a reading public because her fictions, like other modernist women writers', explored an «entirely private, even secret, female experience» (1988:242). But, if that had been the reason, no modernist female writer would have found a reading public. And some, such as Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, did. Rhys was not read because she only represented the experience of women who were social rejects. Thus, whereas Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) was relatively successful commercially, and soon became a classic modernist text, Rhys' *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) was a total failure, out of print for thirty years, and never included in any standard course on modernist literature. Yet both novels are centred on the subjectivity of a woman who is facing the internal and external effects of ageing, and both are produced with sophisticated modernist techniques. The difference is that Mrs Dalloway belongs to the English upper-middle class; her properly serene mind is employed in the leisurely task of remembering her decisive "moments of being", whereas Sasha, in Rhys' novel, is a desperate angry woman whose ageing means, above all, that she is obsessed about losing her only means of survival and self-esteem. her beauty. Both heroines feel a sense of exile. but while Mrs Dalloway's feeling of not belonging, based on her sophisticated

awareness of living in a culture that is mostly masculine, does not stop her from adapting herself to the ideal image of femininity mandated by such culture, from being exquisitely good and happy, without the bitterness that marginalization breeds: «And of course she enjoyed life immensely ... Anyhow there was no bitterness in her; none of that sense of moral virtue which is so repulsive in good women» (1986:70), Sasha's sense of exile is the result of her socio-economic marginality and of her inability to conform to standard models of femininity, to be «a respectable woman, une femme convenable ... Faites comme les autres, damn you» (1987a:88). She is not at all exquisite, happy or good. Her complaints and worries, in a drunken voice embittered and hardened by the circumstances of precarious survival, were a lot less comfortable to read than Mrs Dalloway's less pressing worries.

Ford Madox Ford, Rhys' first critic and the only modernist writer with whom she had any contact, saw that Rhys' fictional world is characterised, above all, by being on the margins of culture. In his Preface to *The Left Bank* (1927), Rhys' first collection of short stories, Ford Madox Ford wrote of Rhys' «passion for stating the case of the underdog» (1987b:138). The Left Bank symbolized for her the place for the dislocated and dispossessed. Such marginal people populate not only the stories of *The Left Bank* but the whole of her fiction. Rhys was particularly concerned with those women who, like herself, were on the periphery of society, young women dependent on the commerce of sex, and old women scarred by such lives.

Rhys' life in *The Left Bank* was hardly "literary". She was much more concerned about the means of existence and her love-affairs than about exciting artistic revolutions. She was, therefore, far more radically displaced than most modernist writers. As a result, as Loma Sage notes, she wrote more and more as someone who is excluded from the conventional culture (1992:49), which, for her, included the high culture of artistic revolution. The Paris Rhys represented, where women's lives were desperate and embittered, was either ignored or unknown by her contemporary modernists (Benstock, 1988:449).

Bonnie Kime Scott, in her introduction to *The Gender of Modernism*, notes that the «experimental, audience challenging, and language-focused» writing that used to be regarded as modernism is seen now by many critics as a gendered subcategory, a limited and insufficient definition of modernism. She suggests another subcategory of modernism, what Woolf called the "outsider's society", a group that «speaks to the marginalities of gender, class, economics and exile» (1990:4). Jean Rhys belongs within this "outsider's society" in the heterogeneous aesthetics of modernism, although critical recognition of her as a modernist has

been long delayed. It is only now with the redefinitions of modernism, under revisionary pressures from postmodernism and feminism, that she has been appropriated as a modernist.

II. THE SENTIMENTAL DISCOURSE: «THE PROSOPOPEIA OF FEMININITY»

In recent feminist criticism a rehabilitation of the category of "the sentimental" has taken place: the devaluation of the sentimental as regressive and conformist, it is argued, coincides with the devaluation of many aspects of women's characteristic experience (Sedgwick, 1990:144). Classical theories of modernism emphasized rapture and innovation rather than the conventional appeals of the sentimental. but, as Suzanne Clark argues, the sentimental can also evoke a sense of transgression, linked to the representation of consciousness (1991:7).

Canonical modernist women writers -Woolf, Richardson, Stein- represented the consciousness of articulate middle-class women whose discourse could follow the values of high culture, even as they were being critical towards such culture, whose self-image could be as sophisticated as the linguistic experiments their authors were carrying out with extreme artistic self-consciousness. Rhys represented the consciousness of women whose words and self-image followed the old sentimental discourse and self-representation more adequate to the music-hall and low-market theatre than to high modernist art. But it was only by using the rhetoric of sentimentality, complicit with patriarchy, that Rhys could give a voice to the female outsiders doubly silenced by patriarchy. As Suzanne Clark observes, the marginal speaker has difficulty in separating from the sentimental because s/he «must do something familiar. Difference is different if you're in danger of never being listened to in the first place» (1991:71). Through their mostly sentimental discourse, Rhys represented the consciousness of prostitutes, alcoholics, exiles, mad or nearly mad women, always poor and always dependent on men for their survival. The central project in Rhys' fiction, the construction of «a female speaking subjectivity» (Howells, 1991:4), is no less challenging than "the revolution of the word" of classic modernists, if we consider that her heroines speak outside the socially acceptable and articulate world.

Rhys' heroines' most recurrent discourse is the familiar "Love's Litany" that belongs to the patriarchal sentimental literature, a product of popular culture. Although her heroines are at odds with society, their "Love's Litany" is conformist. What André Gide wrote about homosexuals can be extended to all

marginal silenced people: «we are accepted if we are plaintive; but if we cease to be pitiable we are at once accused of arrogance» (quoted by Dollimore, 1995:12). This is what happens to Rhys' characters when they stop using the rhetoric of the passive weakling totally dependent on men's love. Their plaintive, pitiable female lover's discourse does occasionally disappear, and, in its place, we hear the arrogant, socially unacceptable discourse of an outcast's resentful self.

Patriarchal discourses of sexuality and power often take the form of romantic fantasies of female love as a state of self-abandonment to the powerful figure of man as hero-rescuer. These fantasies are written into popular literature -from Gothic novels to Harlequin romances- and popular music. Colette summed up this fantasy: «Perfect love tells its story in three lines: He loved me, I loved Him, His presence effaced all other presences; we were happy, then He stopped loving me and I suffered» (quoted by Belsey, 1994:IX). As Colette so succinctly put it, one of the most traditional love-plots in Western culture tells the story of a woman who experiences the love of man as an absolute, as the only true path to happiness and wholeness, as a drug that, by inducing blissful forgetfulness, including self-forgetfulness, makes her see *la vie en rose*, in the words of one of Rhys' favourite love songs. It is a story that often ends with abandonment and female suffering. This well-known story is accepted by Rhys. Most of her fiction is a new version of this story of the classics of popular romance.

Rhys' heroines' romantic fantasy of female self-abandonment to the idealized powerful man has an autobiographical origin. In her diary -"The Black Exercise Book"- Rhys tells a sexual narrative of love and female submission. It is a narrative told by an old Englishman, Mr Howard, a family friend who would take the young girl for walks. Critics call it "the Mr Howard story", for it is indeed a man's story, in which the woman participates as the accomplice of his desire. Mr Howard's pornographic fantasy of male mastery and female submission was fictionalized in the short story "Good-bye Marcus, Good-bye Rose", which omits the sexual details and highlights the girl's passive complicity in the man's active desire: «Captain Cardew talked of love and Phoebe listened, shocked and fascinated» (1984:27). The sexual details are depicted in a short paragraph (a day-dream) in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1987a:147):

I am in a little white washed room. The sun is hot outside. A man is standing with his back to me, whistling that tune and cleaning his shoes. I am wearing a black dress, very short, and heel-less slippers. My legs are bare. I am watching for the expression on the man's face when he turns around. Now he ill-treats me, now he betrays me. He often brings home other women and I have to wait

on them, and I don't like that. But as long as he is alive and near me I am not unhappy. If he were to die I should kill myself.

Most of Rhys' fiction is a sexually mild version of Mr Howard's sadomasochistic love story.

Sadomasochism is often encountered! in several degrees, in adult ideal love, when woman gives herself completely to her idol, hoping that «he will give her at once possession of herself and of the universe he represents» (Simone de Beauvoir quoted by Benjamin, 1990:86). His desire, she hopes, will give her life, and so she will give herself totally in exchange for love, which, according to psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, forms the basis for «the master-slave couple», where her subjectivity is entirely dependent on his desire, for she masochistically identifies with the master to whom she gives herself up (1990:116).

A discursive effect of woman's sadomasochistic relation to her lover is what L emoine-Luccioni calls "the prosopopeia of femininity", which goes like this: «I am weak; the slightest thing ruffles me. I am gift made woman. I don't belong to myself. Without you I am nothing. I expect everything from you. Please do not go away. When you are not here, I don't exist ... » (1987:145).

The "prosopopeia of femininity" is a recurrent mode of sentimental discourse in Rhys' fiction. For example, in *Quartet*, Mado thinks (when her sadistic lover, Heidler, takes her in her arms): «how gentle he is. I was lost before I knew him. All my life before I knew him was like being lost on a cold dark night ... » (1988:66).

Man is always, for Rhys' heroines, the rescuer or saviour: «Heidler, save me. I'm afraid. Save me» (1988:86). Against all evidence of getting the hoped for reward, Rhys' woman keeps giving herself up entirely, in exchange for a little -it never amounts to much- love, to any man, however implausible he may be as Prince Rescuer. For almost any man «you do all they tell you because they take the trouble from your heart and make you think you're safe. It's nothing they say or do. It's a feeling they can give you», explains the narrator in "Let Them Call it Jazz" (1987b:48).

The "short step from love to hypnotism" (Freud quoted by Benjamin, 1990:281) always marks the fate of Rhys' heroines, who compulsively step into "master-slave" relationships with their idealized men: «He was a sort of god to me and everything he did was right», says Julia in *After Leuving Mr Mackenzie* (1982:125).

The almost inevitable end of this type of story, where the woman wants to find her identity by identifying with the powerful man, with his desire and subjectivity, is abandonment. Men always leave their female lovers in Rhys' love stories. Predictably, the loss of man is always experienced as a tragedy; it

amounts to the loss of life: «I only want to see you sometimes, but if I never see you again I'll die», says Anna in *Voyage in the Dark* (1980:83). Even when, after being abandoned, the heroine acknowledges that her lover was far from being an "ideal" man, and that their relationship was far from "ideal" love -she was «for sleeping with, not for talking to» (1982:125)- she still feels she cannot live without him.

This recurrent pattern in Rhys' fiction, a sadomasochistic love-affair where the woman always loses (in the form of self-alienation and even self-hatred) and yet she feels that to be abandoned amounts to her death, culminates, like all other important themes in Rhys' narrative, in her last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), where the heroine, Antoinette, really dies. Antoinette, whose emotionally deprived childhood turns her into the ideal prey to the romantic fantasy of man as Prince Saviour, gives herself up to her lover, putting her life in his hands: «I never wished to live before I knew you ... Why did you make me want to live? ... If one day you didn't wish it, what should I do then? ... Say die and I will die» (1987c:76). Instead of giving life to her by healing the self-split induced by her traumatic childhood, he will increase her self-alienation, which eventually leads her to madness and suicide. As Margaret Higonnet notes, the representation of women whose suicidal death is the effect of their doomed amorous relationships endorses the traditional assumption that «woman lives for love, man for himself» (1986:71).

Yet, except for Antoinette, no other heroine dies in Rhys' love-stories. They prefer to wait for the next man. They keep hoping, against all odds, that the next man will heal the intolerable split that divides her from herself. As Catherine Belsey observes (1994:23), in the classic stories of popular romances, love «dissolves the anxiety of division in the subject, and replaces it with a utopian wholeness», which explains the optimism that many readers of popular romances feel -romances help readers «to believe in the possibility of transcending the divided self» (Modleski, 1990:37)- and the optimism that seems to keep Rhys' heroines half-alive.

III. THE COUNTER-SENTIMENTAL DISCOURSE: THE CRITICAL SUBTEXT

Rhys retells the old romantic plot, where the heroine, like Snowwhite or Sleeping Beauty, waits for the kiss of life of a Prince Charming, but, as for other modernist writers, the romantic plot is, for Rhys, a major site for the critique and transformation of the old fantasy of ideal love (DuPlessis, 1985:5). The critique in Rhys' fiction does not lie in «writing beyond the romantic ending», in writing an unhappy ending in which Cinderella and the Prince do not live happily ever

after, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues for other modernist women writers (1985:4). This alternative unhappy predicament in romantic plots is also a classic narrative of patrilineal descent in the tradition of the "Ophelia complex", where the woman's self-destructive unhappiness is caused by *le mal d'amour*.

Jean Rhys' fiction belongs to the feminized fiction whose fundamental trope is, in Nancy Miller's words, that of a «penultimate masochism, the always renewable figure of feminine suffering» (1988:70). Yet her representation of «female suffering around the male» does not at all imply its sentimental «glamorization» (1988:70). She retells the old patriarchal love story with an unhappy ending from a perspective outside the canon of sentimental literature through two deglamorizing strategies. One of them is the reinscription of the patrilineal discourse of suffering women-in-love in a context that deglamorizes it. The loss of the man is central in the heroine's discourse of female suffering, but the heroine is shown to be in a pain-ridden psychological state well before she is abandoned: her sense of personal and social dispossession and unbelonging relativizes her *mal d'amour*. The self-destructive effects for the woman of her unhappy love-affair are contextualized in a destructive environment. Her defeated love-affairs represent the culmination of a history of socio-cultural rejection and deprivation, and of a history of loss of other kinds of love -maternal love and self-love. Although this deglamorizing contextualization of the heroine's unhappy love stories is present in most of Rhys' narrative, it is only in *Wide Sargasso Sea* where the heroine's sexual victimization is explicitly linked to personal and socio-cultural circumstances that overdetermine the romantically doomed love-affair. The most tragic of Rhys' romances, this novel ends with the suicidal death of the heroine. But the narrative makes clear that the woman's loss of the man's love is fatal only because it reproduces earlier losses: Antoinette projects on to Rochester's abandonment the return of her maternal and social rejection, narrated in the first part of the novel.

The other strategy is the creation of a female speaking subjectivity that is radically split, a split where the self that believes in the sadomasochistic romantic fantasy of male mastery and female submission, with its conformist sentimental discourse, is set against a critical self with a mocking cynical discourse.

Many commentators on female identity have foregrounded the fact that women's consciousness is often divided against itself. Sheila Rowbotham describes this self-division with words that define accurately Rhys' heroines' divided consciousness and double discourse: «One part of ourselves mocked another. we joined in the ridicule of our own aspirations» (1976:30). Rhys wrote about women who speak as stereotyped victims in romantic love-affairs. Yet she also recorded these women's muted articulation of their occasional insights into the real self-destructive nature of their ideal love relationships, and their own

critique of their submissive role within the sadomasochistic relationships they compulsively step into.

The inquiry into the concept of self was a crucial feature of literary modernism by both men and women, and, within that inquiry, the questioning of the concept of a unified stable self. Many modernist women writers - Woolf, Richardson, Mansfield. Rhys, among others- used the ideological displacement of the old humanist concept of self to define the confusions of a deeply split female psyche. It can, of course, be argued that the split self is pervasive in all types of female literature, since the fragmentation of the self seems to be «woman's historical condition» (Braidotti, 1989:236). Women's fragmented subjectivity is often depicted in women's literature as the split between a public socially acceptable self and a private unacceptable self. The public persona is represented as false -it involves deception, masquerading- whereas the private self of hidden impulses and desires is portrayed as true, as essential (see Heilbrun, 1988:22; Showalter, 1985:62).

Modernist women writers reproduce differently this traditional division between public and private aspects of female identity. Their perspectives or "stories" of the divided self subvert the essentialist-humanist opposition between false and true selves. Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary: «People have any number of states of consciousness (second selves is what I mean), and I should like to investigate the party consciousness, the frock consciousness, etc.» (1985:41). The same idea of the impossibility of a unified essential self was repeatedly expressed by Katherine Mansfield in her fiction and autobiographical writings (Judy Simons, 1990:149). This vision of identity as a plurality of "second selves", of "states of consciousness", none of which has pride of place, was shared by Jean Rhys. Her representation of the heroines' divided consciousness, articulated in two clearly differentiated discourses, does not at all suggest that one is more "true" than the other. The stereotyped and repetitive voice of suffering womanhood, dwelling continually on feminine amorous vulnerability and joyous passive submission to the mastery of the male lover is no less true than the far more original but rare voice that mimicks the heroine's own sentimentality, a voice that speaks thus: «Anything might happen. Happiness ... After all, why give up hope when so many people had loved her? ... "My darling ... My lovely girl ... *Mon amour* ... *Mon petit amour* ...» (Rhys, 1982: 131). French words in Rhys' prose always suggest the heroine's self-directed irony. To reinforce Julia's disbelief in her own sentimental discourse the narrative voice comments: «But when the men who passed glanced at her, she looked away with a contracted face» (1982:131).

Rhys' heroines' double-voiced discourse powerfully articulates both women's complicity in patriarchal discourses of sexuality and power, and their

resistance against their own complicity. There is no glamour in Rhys' heroines' masochistic discourse of romantic ideal love because masochism and powerlessness, subjugation and submission are balanced by self-criticism -often self-mocking- and rage against sexual injustice. This double discourse repeats the movement between complicity and critique -the critique of the heroine's own consciousness. saturated with the discourse of male dominance and female submission- which Rachel Blau DuPlessis considers characteristic of many twentieth-century women writers, particularly modernist ones (1985:32-33).

Although in regressive popular romances there is, as Tania Modleski notes, a large amount of anger expressed by the woman, of rebellion against the male authority figure (1990:44), this anger is «sabotaged by the woman herself» (1990:83). The heroine's anger and resentment is «constantly turned into a way of pleasing men, of keeping them, like Rochester. "entertained". Rebellion may be futile, but it can at least be cute; women can still be "beautiful when they are angry", if not effective» (1990:47). Like in popular romances, Rhys' heroines' anger is not at all effective, since it is usually muted and directed against herself, but it is never neutralized into a "cute" loveable feature. And whereas most popular romances are concerned with the heroines "outgrowing" their anger (Moddleski, 1990:45), Rhys' heroines' anger not only does not subside with time but, on the contrary, increases as the heroine grows experientially.

Quanet is Rhys' first full-length representation of sadomasochistic ideal love. Mado is the classic female victim, wounded by the men to whom she gives herself up. She is presented as a collaborator in her own sexual victimization. This story would be told in every one of her fictional works. Yet, despite Mado's passive submission and complicity, she develops an inner muted discourse of resistance and mockery, which functions as a kind of dissident subtext where the heroine dismantles and contradicts her own romantic fantasy. In the critical subtext, Rhys shows the other side of the well-known plot of romantic ideal love.

The other side of the plot of romantic ideal love is a counter-discourse to the "prosopopeia of femininity" where the heroine voices her awareness that what her lover does is the opposite of saving her from her fear of being lost to herself in the black melancholy of her self-alienation. What he does, the heroine knows and resents -feeling angry both with him for his domination and with herself for her submission- is to lead her further down the path of self-alienation:

He was forcing her to be nothing but the little woman who lived in the Hotel du Bosphore for the express purpose of being made love to. *A petite femme* ... she, miserable weakling that she was, found herself trying to live up to his idea of her. She lived up to it. And she had her reward (1988:92)

Mado realizes in her crises of self-awareness that the man can victimize her only as long as she lets herself become the accomplice of his desire. Like all the other heroines in Rhys' fiction, she is aware of the impossible dilemma for women in sadomasochistic love relationships: «either you leave me and I die; or you don't leave me and I lose myself» (Lémoine-Luccioni, 1987:73).

The beginning of a new love-affair has, for Rhys' heroines, the effects of a strong drug -the renewal of hope, the forgetting of her fears and even of her own negative self-image. and a sense of wholeness- but these effects never last long. The male lover does not turn out to be the magical salvation the female lover expected, and her romantic fantasy deteriorates at the same speed as her love-affair. Thus, Mado, in *Quartet*, projects on the pattern of the wall-paper of her hotel-room her cynicism about romantic love: the wallpaper seems to mock with its «vaguely erotic» flowers the *petite femme* she has become for her lover. The romantic colour of the flowers, mauve, contrasts realistically with the «black ground» which they are set against (1988:87). The black background for the mauve flowers reflects the deep hopelessness underlying her «hope of happiness» through romantic love. Towards the end of her love-affair with Heidler, the pattern of the wallpaper does not even mock her romantic fantasy any more; she sees it as being purely frightening, threatening, with «flowers which crawled like spiders over the black walls» (1988:91), «mauve flowers crawling over black walls» (1988:93).

In *Good Morning, Midnighr*, the critical subtext, the counter-sentimental discourse, becomes part of the main narrative. Sasha constantly mocks the discourse of the "prosopopeia of femininity", which she undermines or dismantles with a radically cynical discourse that expresses her insight into the cultural lie of the promises of ideal love. Sasha is self-consciously «double-headed, double-faced», like the banjo player in the painting with which she identifies (1987a:91). Like the rest of Rhys' heroines she lets herself believe in the fantasy: «I stand there hugging him. so terribly happy. Now everything is in my arms on this dark landing -love, youth, spring, happiness» (1987a:148). but her self-deception lasts much less than that of most Rhys' heroines: «We kiss each other fervently, but already something has gone wrong. I am uneasy, half of myself somewhere else. Did anybody here me. was anybody listening just now» (1987a:148). This rhetorical question -the whole speech is an internal monologue- conveys her shame at her own romantic naivety. Sasha's disbelief in the magical salvation promised by romantic love makes her reject self-mockingly the quintessentially feminine *chanson d'amour* of popular culture: «I watch the little grimacing devil in my head. He wears a top-hat and a cache-sexe and he sings a sentimental song» (1987a:146); «I mustn't sing any more -there you are. Finie la chanson. The song is ended» (1987a:155).

The end of this novel means the critical exposure of the self-destruction in sadomasochistic ideal love. Sasha gives herself up totally to a male lover, but her action is empty of romantic significance. Her self-abandonment to her next-door nameless neighbour, a feared and despised man, is the most explicit representation in Rhys' fiction of the self-loss or self-alienation of female submission to the mastery of man. Significantly, her only moment of absolute complicity with the sadomasochistic fantasy of romantic love is not a real occurrence, but the day-dream based on the Mr Howard story.

The short story "La Grosse Fifi" is the best example of Rhys' representation of the grotesque side of the "prosopopeia of femininity". In Fifi's tale of fatal ideal love for an unscrupulous gigolo, she is presented as a sentimental fool who is victimized by her own romantic fantasies. She voices her feelings by quoting a French poem, a woman's song of joyous submission to her idealized man:

I can walk lightly for I have laid my life in the hands of my lover.

...

Chante, chante ma vie, aux mains de mon amant!

«And so on, and so on», Roseau, the young woman narrator, also dependent on the romantic fantasy, comments in a kind of dry footnote that ironically undermines the sentimental rhetoric to which she herself is addicted (1987b:181).

The irony often present in the heroine's counter-sentimental discourse is sometimes achieved by self-consciousness of the process of narration -a modernist gesture that, as Kathleen Wheeler notes, characterizes much of Rhys' fiction (1994:112). For example, early in *Voyage in the Dark*, when Ama is a romantic young girl in love with pleasure-seeking Walter, she is shown reading a book, *Nana*, a reference to Zola's fictional tart, which suggests that the heroine is unwillingly aware of the commerce of sex shaping her ideal love-affair. Anna refuses to read any more books because she cannot bear to see in them the reflection of the unromantic reality of her love-affair with Walter: «Everybody says the man's bound to get tired and you read it in all the books. But I never read now, so they can't get at me like that, anyway. ("My darling Walter...")» (1980:64). Through a self-referential narrative gesture, Ama's fantasising of her own romance -"My darling Walter..."- is ironically pictured as an unsuccessful attempt at self-deception.

IV. CONCLUSION

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) is famous in the history of feminist literary theory for, among other reasons, the introduction of the concept of "a woman's sentence" (1992a:100). As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest, this utopian (not empirically observable) woman's sentence seems to convey Woolf's desire not for a new lexico-grammatical unit, but for a change of woman's relation to language, for the overturning of «the sentence-as-decree-or-interdiction, by which woman has been kept from feeling that she can be in full command of language» (1988:230). Indeed, trying to define her linguistic fantasy through the analysis of the fictional Mary Carmichael's novel, Woolf looks for the representation of what had previously been «left out, unattempted», in a culture that forces women to «concealment and suppression» (1992a:110). It is a sentence that records not only women's relation to men but also «those unsaid or half-said words» spoken when women are alone (1992a:110).

The first time that Woolf referred to "a woman's sentence" was in "Romance and the Heart" (1923), a review of *Revolving Lights* (Pilgrimage) by her contemporary Dorothy Richardson, where "a woman's sentence" is explicitly linked to the representation of women's subjectivity:

She has invented, or, if she has not invented, developed and applied to her own uses, a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender ... It is a woman's sentence, but only in the sense that it is used to describe a woman's mind by a writer who is neither afraid nor proud of anything that she might discover in the psychology of her sex ... [Miriam] adds an element to her perception of things which had not been noticed before, or, if noticed, had been guiltily suppressed (1992b:51)

Thus Woolf defined the feminist project in her own work and that of other contemporary modernist writers (real or imagined) as a transgressive literary practice that attempts to undo the cultural suppression of many aspects of women's subjectivity. Unknown to Woolf, her contemporary Jean Rhys was also trying to «light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been» (Woolf, 1992a:109), except that Rhys' "vast chamber" did not contain the speaking subjectivity ("a woman's sentence") of highly articulate women like Miriam -the feminist protagonist of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*- or Chloe and Olivia in Mary Carmichael's novel -modern professional women with two children- for whom their amorous relation to men occupy a small space in their consciousness; on the contrary, the space newly lit by Rhys was filled with the subjectivity of

desperate female outcasts totally dependent on men's love and money. Yet Rhys represented the subjectivity and the relation to language of these women as «various and complicated» (Woolf, 1992:108) as Woolf and Richardson did with very different kinds of women.

The variety and complication, the rhetorical power of Rhys' heroines' "woman's sentence" -their speaking subjectivity- rests on the ideological conflict between two different discourses. Jean Rhys used popular culture's sentimental rhetoric but at the same time challenged it by showing "the other side" (one of her pet expressions): the self-critical subjectivity that is excluded in the representation of conventional love-stories. The unabashed sentimentality and masochism of the female lover's discourse is counterpointed by her own critique of the rhetoric of pathos and sentimentality. Her unprecedented recording of the complicated speaking subjectivity of socially marginal women-in-love was as transgressive and innovative as the classics of modernist feminist writing.

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