

Fashioning the Self in Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Morning, Midnight*

Jean Rhys'in *Karanlıkta Yolculuk ve Günaydın, Gece Yarısı* Romanlarında Benliği Biçimlendirmek

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Abstract

Jean Rhys held a deep passion for fashion and stylish attire. Her perspective on fashion, as an instrument of adopting "a second skin" finds expression in her focus on fashioning the self, a recurring motif in Rhys's oeuvre. The physical difficulty Rhys's female characters, whose lives bear strong similarities to her own, have in obtaining fashionable clothes represents the broader struggles they go through as the objects of the patriarchal and colonial gaze, in their voyages through the physical and metaphorical darkness of urban spaces like Paris and London in the early 1900s. Focusing on two of these women, Anna of *Voyage in the Dark* and Sasha in *Good Morning, Midnight*, for whom fashionable clothing appears to be the only way of navigating the modern society which marginalizes them, this study explores Rhys's multi-layered portrayal of fashion as a reflection of the near impossibility of attaining a cohesive sense of self, mirroring the characters' struggles in fashioning their inner and outer selves.

Keywords: fashion, self, Jean Rhys, clothing, identity

"Everything makes you want pretty clothes like hell"

Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*

Introduction: Jean Rhys and Fashion

In Virginia Woolf's gender bending fantasy, *Orlando*, the protagonist Orlando notes that "vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us" as she dons herself with a woman's clothes following her change of sex (1928, p. 92). Clothes, as stated by Woolf, gain functions which extend beyond covering the body and providing warmth, they convey historical and societal notions such as gender, race, social rank and financial status (Jens & Hoffman, 2020, p. 9). In this framework, dress/clothing as an emblem of material culture, as Joanne Entwistle (2000a) holds, is an "embodied practice, a *situated bodily practice*" (p. 325, original emphasis) in which body and dress "operate dialectically: dress works on the body, imbuing it with social meaning while the body is a dynamic field which gives life and fullness to dress" (p. 327), justifying Woolf (1982) in her remark that it is often the "clothes that wear us and not we them" (p. 92). In Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939)¹ clothes represent the protagonists' hopes, dreams and yearnings. Epitomized in Anna's cry, "Everything makes you want pretty clothes like hell" and "I'd do anything for good clothes," (Rhys, 1985, p. 14) possessing fashionable clothes becomes a symbol of empowerment for woman oppressed by capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. Thus, prospect of having fashionable clothing functions as a beacon of hope for Anna and Sasha. This aspiration serves as the anchor to

¹ The dates in parentheses are the original publication dates of the novels, but the citations in the rest of the article are taken from The Norton Edition, Rhys, J. (1985). *The complete novels of Jean Rhys*. W.W. Norton & Company.

which they hold onto during moments of despair. Consequently, their endeavour to acquire fashionable clothing is emblematic of the deprivation, marginalization, and alienation experienced by Rhys's female characters, echoing Rhys's own life experiences.

Rhys's unfinished autobiography *Smile Please* (1981) lays bare the difficulty Rhys herself had with feeling at home in the various identity positions she inhabited. Rhys was born as Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams, yet she was known with a few different names throughout her life, including the pen name Jean Rhys. In this context, Rhys's life was a constant struggle to "fashion" an identity to hold onto. Scholarly work on Rhys's life often delineates her as an "adrift in the world from the start" (Simpson, 2016, p. 2), and her oeuvre is distinctly characterized by "the sense of disorientation and the uncertain identity of those who live the ambivalent, uncentred, dislocated existence" (Carr, 1996, p. 28). In Rhys's fiction, this sense of disorientation often finds expression in the clothing imagery and the protagonists' relation to fashion. As Bender (1990) states, starting with her first book, *The Left Bank* (1927), Rhys's fiction depicts women confined to the roles imposed on them, exemplified by the figures of mannequins or chorus girls (p. 82). Centrality of fashion to Rhys's fiction mostly derives from Rhys's own experience of the world of fashion in its heyday in Paris both as a fashion modal and also a fashion consumer, as she often noted in her interviews. For example, she told Parkin (1973) that ever since she arrived in Paris, she developed an admiration of clothes and thought of them as "a second skin" (p. 33). In another interview, she described happiness in terms of the pleasure and satisfaction derived from possessing fashionable clothes: "For one thing it would mean clothes. A really pretty suit or dress would mean a lot to me" (Frickey, 1990, p. 25). In parallel to this renowned interest, Rhys's novels include numerous scenes where she portrays the disillusionment arising from being deprived of "a beautiful dress" that would mean "a lot" to her characters. Hence, clothing serves a twofold role in Rhys's fiction; first, clothes embody the material cultural backdrop of modernity, and secondly, by portraying the material circumstances under which Rhysian women are being oppressed through the imagery of the quest for the unattainable perfect dress, her fiction explores broader questions of identity Rhys had always struggled with.

Jean Rhys's fiction has been comprehensively studied from various perspectives such as postcolonial criticism, gender studies and trauma studies; however, the role fashion played in Rhys's life often went relatively unacknowledged, as also noted by Maroula Joannou (2012) in her article "All right, I'll do anything for good clothes': Jean Rhys and Fashion," where she scrutinizes how avant-garde in literature and fashion converge in Rhys's work. A more recent contribution was provided by Sophie Oliver (2016a) who in her "Fashion in Jean Rhys/Jean Rhys in Fashion" examines how Rhys's interwar fiction became "fashionable" again around 1960s, by drawing an analogy between recycling old fashions, and how in this respect fiction is also susceptible to "fashion." In their readings, both Joannou and Oliver link Rhys's fiction to that of Virginia Woolf's to lay bare the intersections of fashion and the search for identity in modernist literature. These readings propose that the struggle Rhys's women in the early decades of 20th century go through to "make it new" or to "choose the right hat" in Sasha's words is not coincidental. The attempts to "fashion the self" are reflections of the changes taking place in the human character around 1910s as Woolf (2009, p. 38) famously announced. However, for the women who are pushed to the peripheries of the governing discourse, it is twice difficult to achieve a unified sense of identity and belonging compared to their European counterparts, as shall be demonstrated in the following analysis. In view of this, this study aims to contribute to existing literature by reading *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Morning, Midnight* in terms of the ways representation of fashion and clothing highlight the difficulty, even near impossibility, of forming a unified identity for Anna and Sasha. Bearing autobiographical traces from Rhys's

own life, the voyages of Anna and Sasha across discrimination, poverty and decay paint a bleak picture where the self is in constant need of “fashioning” for a better “tomorrow,” which never comes.

Fashioning the Alienated Bodies in *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Morning, Midnight*

Addressing intersections of colonialism and patriarchy, *Voyage in the Dark*, which was Rhys’s first novel to be written, yet made it to print much later than others, portrays a young Creole girl’s physical and symbolic voyage through the “darkness” of England, where she finds herself following the death of her father. Anna refers to her being sent to England as the “fall” of a “curtain” (Rhys, 1985, p. 9), which points to the drastic and irreversible change, ending her previous life. Anna sketches a gloomy picture of England, evidenced in her referring to English streets as places where “dark houses all alike frowning down one after the other all alike all stuck together” (Rhys, 1985, p. 9). Embarking on the second “act” of her life in England, Anna starts to work as a chorus girl to earn her living. She meets Walter, with whom she becomes sexually involved, and for some time, Walter supports Anna financially. However, when Walter leaves her, Anna descends further into melancholy, drifting from one dark room to the other. The novel ends on an ambiguous note, depicting Anna thinking about “starting all over again” (Rhys, 1985, p. 115) as she lays sick in bed following a botched abortion.

Good Morning, Midnight depicts the interwar period through the consciousness of Sophia Jensen, who changed her name to Sasha hoping it would bring her luck, wandering across the streets of Paris, to which she returns after many years. Troubled by the memories of her traumatic past marked by the loss of her son, rejection by immediate family, poverty and aging, she struggles with forming a meaningful connection with the present moment. Sasha drifts between various rooms and cafes in Paris, has casual conversations with random men, whom she believes mistake her for a rich lady and try to take advantage of her. Similar to *Voyage in the Dark*, *Good Morning, Midnight* has an elusive ending since the closing scene depicting Sasha’s rejection of the gigolo while welcoming the commis voyageur to her bed, might be interpreted both as a new beginning, and also a tragic end, culminating in Sasha’s self-destruction.

Both novels open with journeys the protagonists undertake. Life as a journey, albeit a downward one, is a recurrent theme in both novels. Compared to the dark imagery at the beginning of *Voyage in the Dark*, *Good Morning, Midnight* has a more positive, vibrant view of the city for young Sasha. Paris, which, in Joannou’s (2012) words, “was not only the undisputed fashion capital of the world, but also the meeting place where avant-garde artists and intellectuals congregated in their pursuit of the new” (p. 473), promises hope to Sasha and her husband Enno, who dream of travelling there in pursuit of “new” to escape poverty of London. For example, when Enno asks Sasha why she is crying, noticeably, she laments their poverty by complaining about the lack of a proper dress: “It’s my dress. I feel so awful. I feel so dirty. I want to have a bath. I want another dress. I want clean underclothes”. Enno’s answer to this plea accentuates the optimism he has for a future in Paris, the land of the “new”: “I’ll get you another dress as soon as we get to Paris... You’ll see, when we get to Paris it’ll be all right” (Rhys, 1985, p. 417, original emphasis). The association of Paris with novelty, luxury and prosperity continues in the present time of the novel. Sasha’s return to Paris, with which the novel opens, is encouraged by a friend who convinces Sasha that shopping in Paris will do her good. Unfortunately, the glamorous city never provides Sasha with the comfort she sought. Even if Sasha nostalgically remembers her younger self by the desire, she had to be different from the rest of the people, as the dream recounted at the beginning of the novel suggests, she is just another object in the

show. In this context, her failure to find her way out of the exhibition in which she is trapped symbolizes her predicament: “Everywhere there are placards printed in red letters: This Way to the Exhibition, This Way to the Exhibition. But I don’t want the way to the exhibition—I want the way out. There are passages to the right and passages to the left, but no exit sign” (Rhys, 1985, p. 349, original emphasis). Her words foreshadow her experiences in Paris, where she drifts between various passages, cafes and bars, without finding the way out. This sense of disorientation hence underscores Sasha’s confinement. Just as Sasha struggles to find a way out in the physical maze of passages, cafes, and bars, she is also metaphorically trapped in her circumstances, unable to break free from societal constraints and expectations.

Jean Rhys saw writing as the only “way out” of the “exhibition” she was stranded in. Athill (1981) recounts Rhys’s strong belief in the power of writing as follows: “Once something had been written out, she said, it was done with and one could start again from the beginning” (p. 6). Writing became the only medium through which Rhys imparted form and structure to her tumultuous life, as highlighted in her confessional remarks: “I must write. If I stop writing my life will have been an abject failure” (Rhys, 1981, p. 191). In this context, it is possible to read Rhys’s fiction as an attempt she makes to “fashion” her life through writing, which allowed Rhys to reflect on past events by reinterpreting them from an authorial distance, an endeavour that undoubtedly necessitated constant self-fashioning. Oliver (2016b) draws attention to this self-fashioning Rhys engaged in within the context of her disappearance from the public view until the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and reminds how Jean Rhys endorsed a public image where she self-identified as “outside the machine” both in her work and life (para. 3). The sense of being outside the machine, displacement and unbelonging are felt all throughout Rhys’s autobiography *Smile Please*, where she marks, “I would never be part of anything. I would never really belong anywhere, and I knew it, and all my life would be the same, trying to belong, and failing. Always something would go wrong. I am a stranger and I always will be” (Rhys, 1981, p. 124).

As a Creole, Rhys’s relation to any cultural or national identity was always partial. Calling herself a stranger, she never felt at home, as can be discerned from her self-questioning “[a]m I an expatriate? Expatriate from where?” (as cited in Gregg, 1987, p. 32). In parallel to this, her fictional works often portray “an absence rather than loss of identity and the homelessness of one who never had a home” (Emery, 1990, p. 14). Sasha’s thoughts “I have no pride - no pride, no name, no face, no country. I don’t belong anywhere” (Rhys, 1985, p. 370) voice the lack of home Rhys suffered from. Given their homelessness in the way Rhys herself noted, Anna and Sasha are “outsiders among outsiders,” like Rhys herself, and compared to other female figures of European modernist literature, such as Lily Briscoe, for example, Anna and Sasha do not have the same sense of selfhood in European terms (Emery, 1990, p. 11). Hence, Anna and Sasha represent the female subaltern, who is a “double outsider, condemned to self-consciousness, homelessness, a sense of inescapable difference and even deformity in the two societies by whose judgements she always condemns herself” (Tiffin, 1978, p. 328). Anna, a Creole girl, is at home neither back in the West Indies nor England; she is called “Hottentot” by her friends in the chorus, and looked down upon. Sasha hears the voices asking her why she did not drown herself in the river, implying her being rejected by her family, and in Paris she is the “Anglaise.” In parallel to their lack of a homeland, neither Anna nor Sasha has a home to return to; all they have is a rented room, and the other places available to them are the momentary habitations of cafes, dress shops, bars where nobody is really acquainted with them (Emery, 1990, p. 11).

Emery (1990) also draws attention to how the invisibility of Rhys’s women allows them to join “anonymity of mass culture as they consume its manufactured clothes, movies and

world exhibitions” (p. 11). However, this participation is constrained by gender and colonial heritage, obstructing a full participation. Most of the time, Anna and Sasha remain outsiders to dominant culture, and fail to forge a unified, stable identity for themselves. Due to this repetitive cycle, Rhys’s characters are frequently criticized for their professed passivity, and self-victimization. This passivity could perhaps be better understood when explained by the internalization of the colonial and patriarchal gaze. Regarding alienation which leads to passivity in Rhys’s female characters, a holistic view, in line with Gardiner’s (1982) argument “[Rhys] does not treat alienation as an existential fact but as the specific historical result of social polarizations about sex, class, and morality” (p. 246), could provide more insight into the marginalization of Rhys’s heroines. Almost all Rhysian women, including Anna and Sasha – one might also remember Antoinette of *Wide Sargasso Sea* here – are subjugated by several oppressive forces including colonialism, patriarchy and capitalism, and such systematic oppression leaves no room for agency. Just as they do not have a permanent home to return to, they do not have a stable identity and selfhood to hold onto.

Situated at the peripheries of the social world they participate in, Anna and Sasha often realize how streets expose the women’s marginalization and subordination most profoundly. For women whose gendered bodies are subjected to public regulation in the street, fashion becomes an emblem of the struggle epitomized in Judith Butler’s (1986) retake on Simone De Beauvoir: “to become a woman is a purposive and appropriate set of acts, the gradual acquisition of a skill” (p. 36), or to learn to “swank a bit” (Rhys, 1985, p. 5) as Anna’s friend Maudie puts it. Anna and Sasha endeavour to acquire repertoire of skills essential for their survival as women, engaging in unrelenting performances. In addition to performativity they already engage in as female subjects, Anna’s role as a chorus girl and Sasha’s previous occupation as a saleswoman in a fashion house further necessitate them to “perform.” This two-sided performance compels them both to perform for the male gaze, and conform to the generic expectations of womanhood dictated by their sex and gender at the same time, through adhering to societal norms and act in line with the discursively produced category of a “lady.”

For Anna and Sasha, survival depends on performance. Trying to make a living, Anna refashions herself from a chorus girl to Walter’s kept woman. Sasha, who replaces her real name Sophia with the adapted name Sasha, returns to Paris in pursuit of “fashion,” which will boost her mood and alleviate the trauma of her suicide attempts. Moreover, for Anna and Sasha, obtaining fashionable clothes is a material requirement of being a modern subject in an urban setting. As Sasha tries to fashion herself, she moves from one shop to the other, in search of the new perfect hat, but the hat eludes her: “The hats now are very difficult, very difficult. All my clients say that the hats now are very difficult to wear” (Rhys, 1985, p. 386). Likewise, some colours for the hair are more “difficult” to apply than others, as the hairdresser reveals to Sasha as she ponders over the right colour to dye her hair. “But blond cendre, madame, is the most difficult of colours ... First it must be bleached, that is to say, its own colour must be taken out of it – and then it must be dyed, that is to say, another colour must be imposed on it” (Rhys, 1985, p. 375). Sasha’s experience at the hairdresser’s accounts for the arduous battle Sasha fights, as she tries to refashion herself. The act of bleaching alludes to eradicating one’s original colour, one’s self in other words, and dying it with another colour which must be imposed pertains to the ways bodies are “dressed” in discursively produced identities. Thus, fashioning an identity is portrayed as a performance, a masquerade, a “transformation act” one must “get on with” in Sasha’s words (Rhys, 1985, p. 383). Even though both women earn their living through performances –

Anna performs as a chorus girl in theatre companies, and Sasha used to work in fashion houses –, they are often inefficient in their performances as fashioned bodies.

According to Ian King (2015), rather than just being the pieces that cover our bodies, clothes have “layers of meaning that emerge from the ‘body’ outwards and toward the experience of ‘being-in-the-world’” (p. 60). In both novels, the street as the meeting place of the public and private, the English and the other, lady and the tart, emerges as the site where Anna and Sasha’s dressed bodies acquire those meanings with the experience of being in the world. For example, at the beginning of the novel, when Maudie, Anna’s friend who is more experienced than Anna herself in terms of the ways of the world, advises Anna that a woman should always look lady like in public, Anna scorns her: “Oh God, who wants to look ladylike?” (Rhys, 1985, p. 5). However, as she refashions herself as Walter’s love object, she realizes she has to comply with the code of conduct laid out for a “lady.” Consequently, at a later scene, preparing to leave the house, Anna thinks, “a lady always puts on her gloves before going into the street” (Rhys, 1985, p. 20), simultaneously realizing her own liminality as a woman engaging in behaviour which is not considered lady like by the hypocritical society which forces women into prostitution. The physical act of wearing the glove makes Anna conscious of her current position, in terms of how she adapts the second skin in Rhys’s words, and discrepancy between appearance and reality.

Adopting a new skin is a challenging undertaking in many respects. It is dependent on money in the first place. Money ensures the presence of dresses through which “bodies are made ‘decent’, appropriate and acceptable” (Entwistle, 2000a, p. 323). The incongruity Anna referred to earlier between lady like behaviour and clothes is evoked once more when Maudie comments on Anna’s new clothes: “very lady-like. I call that one very ladylike indeed. And you’ve got a fur coat. Well, if a girl has a lot of good clothes and a fur coat she has something, there’s no getting away from that” (Rhys, 1985, p. 28). All Anna has at this stage is the money she received from Walter, which is hard to account for, as indicated by the uneasiness Anna feels when she meets her stepmother Hester, lest she might inquire what she is living on.

The representative status of fur coat as “having something” recurs in *Good Morning, Midnight*. A sign of money, Sasha’s fur coat conveys messages, albeit false ones, about her financial and social status. The men surrounding her such as the gigolo Rene, mistake her for a rich lady, and her faux fur coat becomes a burden she cannot shrug off her shoulders just like she cannot get rid of her past. Hence Sasha’s old fur coat “on top of everything else – the last idiocy, the last incongruity” (Rhys, 1985, p. 351), manifests the effects clothes have in shaping the perceptions of the body and the self.

Possessing a fur coat, a second skin, requires sacrifice, and subsequently this sacrifice alienates women from their true selves. For instance, upon her arrival in Paris, Sasha tries to convince herself to be happy because this is the general expectation from a woman in her position: “I am very happy, very comfortable, quite rich enough, and that I am over here for two weeks to buy a lot of clothes to startle my friends - my many friends” (Rhys, 1985, p. 372). Yet illusion is soon replaced by melancholia as the memories from the past and her time in Paris with her husband Enno haunt Sasha. Memories of a suicide attempt unveil an opposing portrait of Sasha, differing from the one she forces herself to be. Even if she tries to break free from her past, her hat which “shouts Anglaise” (Rhys, 1985, p. 351) lurks there as a constant reminder of her difference. The use of French word instead of English represents the internalization of the gaze on Sasha’s part, which is further evidenced in Sasha’s thoughts regarding how other people perceive her: “I have seen that in people’s eyes all my life. I am asking myself all the time what the devil I am doing here. All the time”

(Rhys, 1985, p. 376). As an outsider she questions not just her estrangement as an English woman in France, but her own existence in the world, and “failure” to fit in, in spite of all the effort she makes:

Please, please, monsieur et madame, mister, missis and miss, I am trying so hard to be like you. I know I don't succeed, but look how hard I try. Three hours to choose a hat; every morning an hour and a half trying to make myself look like everybody else. I know that with all this I don't succeed. (Rhys, 1939, p. 409)

Anna, too, sees clothes as the only way of being like everybody else. She laments the fact that “[a]bout clothes, it's awful. Everything makes you want pretty clothes like hell. People laugh at girls who are badly dressed” (Rhys, 1985, p. 25). While luxurious, fashionable, “lady” clothes allow women to be a part of society, lack of fashionable clothes deteriorates their marginalization. Wishing to have decent clothes is not enough as Anna reveals:

As if it isn't enough that you want to be beautiful, that you want to have pretty clothes, that you want it like hell. As if that isn't enough. But no, it's jaw, jaw and sneer, sneer all the time. And then the shop-windows sneering and smiling in your face. And then you look at the skirt of your costume, all crumpled at the back. And your hideous underclothes. You look at your hideous underclothes and you think, 'All right, I'll do anything for good clothes. Anything – anything for clothes'. (Rhys, 1985, p. 15)

Similar to Sasha's self-consciousness about her clothes and performative functions of fashion in terms of public identity, Anna's self-perception demonstrates the internalization of the gaze and the double consciousness arising from this position. She meticulously scrutinizes herself from head to toe, extending her examination even to her underclothes. With each glance in the mirror, she hears the voice of the patriarchy judging her for failing to be like them.

As women pushed to peripheries, Anna, her friends Maudie and Laura, and Sasha really have to do “anything” for good clothes, and they have to “dress up” for the world where the “spectacle” is a constant requirement. In order to be able to buy “fashion,” a symbol of empowerment, Anna brings herself to admit her relationship with Walter by doing “anything” she can. Even if his kiss irritates her, she convinces herself that she likes him, as she sees adjusting to her position as Walter's kept woman as the only possible way out: “Soon he'll come in again and kiss me, but differently. He'll be different and so I'll be different. It'll be different. I thought, 'It'll be different, different. It must be different' ” (Rhys, 1985, p. 14). Portrayal of Anna's decision as a must, rather than a choice, lays bare the circumstances of Anna's predicament, as well as pointing to her estrangement and alienation from her own self. The ease with which she got accustomed to having money in this way during the course of her relationship with Walter startles her, which is yet another sign of her alienation from her own self. The nature of the relationship between the two can be discerned in the note Walter sends Anna along with five-five pound notes, with specific instructions enclosed: “My dear Anna, I wish I could tell you how sweet you are. I'm worried about you. Will you buy yourself some stockings with this? And don't look so anxious when you are buying them, please. Always yours, Walter Jeffries” (Rhys, 1985, p. 15). In spite of Walter's “comforting” words, his drawing attention to Anna's anxiousness when she buys a small piece of clothing only serves to foreground Anna's poverty as opposed to his superiority. Even though Anna initially grapples with the idea of accepting the money, the desire for fashion triumphs over her concerns. Exhilaration envelops her as she envisions the clothes she will be able to purchase with it: “All the time I was dressing I was thinking what clothes I would buy. I didn't think of anything else at all, and I forgot about feeling ill. ... *A dress and a hat and underclothes*” (Rhys, 1985, p. 16, original emphasis). The joy Anna

feels when she tries on the dark blue dress and the coat she sees in the shop window, illustrates how money and clothes help Anna foster her optimistic look towards the future: “*This is a beginning. Out of this warm room that smells of fur I’ll go to all the lovely places I’ve ever dreamt of. This is the beginning*” (Rhys, 1985, p. 16, original emphasis).

In *The Fashioned Body*, Entwistle argues that the act of dressing, is “a subjective act of attending to one’s body and making the body an object of consciousness and is also an act of attention *with* the body” (2000b, p. 30, original emphasis). As a “fashioned body” now, Anna invests great hope in the transformative potential of the dress, a symbol of empowerment for Anna. Endowed with the money she receives from Walter, Anna crosses the street with newfound self-esteem, noting how the streets looked different that day, just like the looking glasses which make one look different as she tells Walter. Street becomes a looking glass on which Anna sees two different reflections of herself, the image altering depending on the amount of money she possesses. This second, empowered self, is more confident than the one lamenting the shabbiness of her clothes; however, this second self is portrayed to be an illusion, sustained as long as there is money to keep it alive. Similar to Anna, money renders Sasha reassured, hopeful about the future. Sasha regards clothes as “protective armour” (Rhys, 1985, p. 406) forged out of money. She can wear this armour as long as there is money to continue the transformation act she engages in: “Now, money, for the night is coming. Money for my hair, money for my teeth, money for shoes that won’t deform my feet (it’s not so easy now to walk around in cheap shoes with very high heels), money for good clothes, money, money. The night is coming” (Rhys, 1985, p. 433). Acquisition of money creates an illusionary self, which Sasha aspires to unite with, in order to enjoy the satisfaction derived from having enough money to spend on cosmetics and jewellery:

Tomorrow I’ll go to the Galleries Lafayette, choose a dress, go along to the Printemps, buy gloves, buy scent, buy lipstick, buy things costing fcs.6.25 and fcs.19.50, buy anything cheap. Just the sensation of spending, that’s the point. I’ll look at bracelets studded with artificial jewels, red, green and blue, necklaces of imitation pearls, cigarette-cases, jeweled tortoiseshells. (Rhys, 1985, p. 434)

Zimring (2000) reads the pursuit of adornment by Sasha depicted here, as an act of banishing time, the effects of which are visible on Sasha (p. 216). In fact, the continued interest Anna and Sasha have in fashion and adornment extend beyond leisure time activities when one remembers Rhys’s view of clothes as a second skin. Just as Anna’s focused attention on the dresses she plans to purchase symbolizes her aspirational future self, Sasha’s longing for the black dress signifies her idealized self, as elucidated in her description of the garment: “In this fitting-room there is a dress in one of the cupboards which has been worn a lot by the mannequins and is going to be sold off for four hundred francs” (Rhys, 1985, p. 359). She cannot pay for the dress, but makes the saleswoman keep it for her. The dress becomes an object-petit-a, as evidenced by Sasha’s determination to find the money; transforming into an obsession from which Sasha cannot recover: “Then I start thinking about the black dress, longing for it, madly, furiously. If I could get it everything would be different. Supposing I ask So-and-so to ask So-and-so to ask Madame Perron to keep it for me? ... I’ll get the money. I’ll get it” (Rhys, 1985, p. 362, original emphasis). The dress holds the promise of uniting with the ideal self-image. As Joannu (2015) maintains “the ubiquitous ‘little black dress’ that speaks eloquently of modern times, of the break with the Victorian and the modernist ‘moment’, is the sartorial preference of Rhys’s stylish fashion-conscious women” (p. 242). The parts depicting Sasha imagining herself in the dress unveil another self she longed to be. This idealized self is a confident, modern woman: “I have tried it on; I have seen myself in it. It is a black dress with

wide sleeves embroidered in vivid colours – red, green, blue, purple. It is my dress. If I had been wearing it, I should never have stammered or been stupid” (Rhys, 1985, p. 359). The transformative potential Sasha invests in the dress is so strong that, upon realizing she will never obtain the dress, Sasha considers herself forever “defeated” (Rhys, 1985, p. 359).

The motif of the search/longing for the ideal dress and the hope invested in life changing, transformative potential of that idealized dress is further delineated in *Voyage* through the image of the shop window. The image of a woman looking at the clothes in the shop window and becoming conscious of her own clothes epitomizes the discrepancy between the clothes women in the street can afford and those displayed in the shops which they aspire to have:

The clothes of most of the women who passed were like caricatures of the clothes in the shop-windows, but when they stopped to look you saw that their eyes were fixed on the future. ‘If I could buy this, then of course I’d be quite different.’ Keep hope alive and you can do anything ... But what happens if you don’t hope any more, if your back’s broken? What happens then? (Rhys, 1985, p. 81)

One stops hoping as Anna does. As Rhys’s women painfully experience, fashion is expensive, often beyond their reach. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha hopes that she can buy the black dress she is obsessing over for 400 francs which equals to her monthly salary: “You, who represent Society, have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month. That’s my market value, for I am an inefficient member of Society, slow in the uptake, uncertain, slightly damaged in the fray, there’s no denying it” (Rhys, 1985, p. 360). This is the amount Sasha appraises for herself, which she reassesses through the course of the narrative as she becomes increasingly aware of the effects of time on her body. In this respect, *Good Morning, Midnight* also foregrounds “heroine’s dread of female aging as ‘an economy of loss’ which requires constant funding of an investment that will inevitably lose value” (Fu, 2019). In *Voyage in the Dark*, Walter’s characterization of Germanie as old, despite Anna’s objection that Germanie is no older than Vincent, highlights the gender inequality, evident in Walter’s assertion that “[w]ell, that is old for a woman. Besides, she’ll be blowsy in another year” (Rhys, 1985, p. 75). His remark lays bare how women are expected to comply with gender roles. Aging constitutes a problem only for women, who are subjected to constant judgement, even belittlement, constantly being measured in terms of their “worth.”

Another example of women’s worth being measured in accordance with clothing is reported by Maudie. She recounts to Anna, the conversation she had with a man earlier, where the man in question invited Maudie to contemplate whether she has ever realized that a “girl’s clothes cost more than the girl inside them” (Rhys, 1985, p. 28). Maudie continues to share details from the man’s derogatory speech: “You can get a very nice girl for five pounds, a very nice girl indeed; you can even get a very nice girl for nothing if you know how to go about it. But you can’t get a very nice costume for her for five pounds. To say nothing of underclothes, shoes, etcetera and so on” (p. 28). Maudie finds herself agreeing with the degrading remark, “people are much cheaper than things” (p. 28), painstakingly laying bare her own “worth,” or unfortunately lack of it.

Anna, too, often feels worthless under the patriarchal gaze. In Walter’s presence, she feels ashamed of her clothes, comforted only by the fact that at least she wore black. While Anna’s choice to wear black stems from the belief that men find delight in the lack of colour, this preference becomes a point of inquiry for Walter, who notes Anna’s steady adherence to black: “I remember you were wearing a black dress when I saw you before” (Rhys, 1985, p. 11). She longs to be liberated from this prison house of always having to think about how she looks: “I was so nervous about how I looked that three-quarters of me was in a prison, wandering round and round in a circle. If he had said that I looked all right or that I was

pretty, it would have set me free. But he just looked me up and down and smiled” (Rhys, 1985, p. 47). Anna, as Walter’s kept woman is a love object, whom Walter embellishes and adorns with stockings for example, like a doll. When she walks into the shop to buy some clothes with the money Walter sent, she mentions how the shop assistants dressed her as if she “were a doll” (Rhys, 1985, p. 16). The references to the dolls foreshadow the subsequent distressing dream Anna had, in which she saw herself drowned within a “doll’s sea” (Rhys, 1985, p. 101) further alluding to the abortion she goes through at the end of the novel.

Dolls surface once more in *Good Morning, Midnight*. In the dress house she works, Sasha often finds herself watching the mannequins: “I would feel as if I were drugged, sitting there, watching those damned dolls, thinking what a success they would have made of their lives if they had been women. Satin skin, silk hair, velvet eyes, sawdust heart – all complete” (Rhys, 1985, p. 353). By exposing their artificiality, fit only for mannequins, she critiques the beauty standards imposed on women, which traps them into cycles of consumption in which they are both the buyer and the product. Indeed, Prabhu draws an analogy between the fur coat and fashion consumption by foregrounding the act of having the fur of an animal as a symbol of women’s oppression: “Representing the life of security and luxury that the young women cannot have without a rich male patron, the fur coat, or even the aspiration for it, becomes a trap” (Prabhu, 2014, p. 42). It culminates in a perpetual pattern of self-destruction, discernible in the ambivalent endings of both novels. Neither Anna’s “starting all over again” nor Sasha’s welcoming the commis voyageur to her bed with a “Yes, yes, yes,” promises hope for the future. For Anna and Sasha, the future, as Moran (2007) notes, “does not exist or if it does exist, it exists as a set of meaningless repetitions” (p. 123).

Conclusion

Rhys’s exploration of fashion as a means of donning a second skin emerges as a central theme in her fiction, with fashion, a part of material culture, functioning as a metonymic extension of the profound lack and alienation experienced by Anna and Sasha in *Voyage in the Dark* and *Good Morning, Midnight*. By analysing instances of self-fashioning within the context of characters’ relation to fashion, this study explored how Rhys appropriates fashionable clothing as a symbolic tool for negotiating identity positions at a time when the hats are very difficult to wear, as Sasha realized.

Amidst the uncertainties of modernity, the search for the right hat or the perfect dress, also symbolizes an existential crisis. Still, by detailing the circumstances of Anna and Sasha’s alienation, both novels underline that in Rhys’s case, dissolution of subjectivity, isolation, and estrangement from one’s own self and alienation occur as a result of the oppression caused jointly by patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism as epitomized in Anna’s cry “Everything makes you want pretty clothes like hell.” Fashionable clothing promises hope towards a better future, which however is only a fleeting one, entertained briefly, since the ideal represented by the fashionable lady is not within the reach of those whose “backs are broken”. In the absence of rank, nobility, and money to sustain the glamorous appeal of fashion, the voyages of Anna and Sasha are only towards the dark, where the time always strikes midnight. Condemned to darkness, with bright mornings only a far-fetched dream, all that await Anna and Sasha tomorrow are death and decay.

Acknowledgement

This study is an extended and revised version of the paper presented at 10th International Conference on Language, Literature & Culture, 15- 16 September 2023, Gümüşhane University.

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