KEY WOMEN WRITERS

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Key Women Writers

The *Key Women Writers* series has developed in a spirit of challenge, exploration and interrogation. Looking again at the work of women writers with established places in the mainstream of the literary tradition, the series asks, in what way can such writers be regarded as feminist? Does their status as canonical writers ignore the notion that there are ways of writing and thinking which are specific to women? Or is it the case that such writers have integrated within their writing a feminist perspective which so subtly maintains its place that these are writers who have, hitherto, been largely misread?

In answering these questions, each volume in the series is attentive to aspects of composition such as style and voice, as well as to the ideas and issues to emerge out of women's writing practice. For while recent developments in literary and feminist theory have played a significant part in the creation of the series, feminist theory represents no specific methodology, but rather an opportunity to broaden our range of responses to the issues of history, psychology and gender which have always engaged women writers. A new and creative dynamics between a woman critic and her female subject has been made possible by recent developments in feminist theory, and the series seeks

to reflect the important critical insights which have emerged out of this new, essentially feminist, style of engagement.

It is not always the case that literary theory can be directly transposed from its sources in other disciplines to the practice of reading writing by women. The series investigates the possibility that a distinction may need to be made between feminist politics and the literary criticism of women's writing which has not, up to now, been sufficiently emphasised. Feminist reading, as well as feminist writing, still needs to be constantly interpreted and reinterpreted. The complexity and range of choice implicit in this procedure are represented throughout the series. As works of criticism, all the volumes in the series represent wide-ranging and creative styles of discourse, seeking at all times to express the particular resonances and perspectives of individual women writers.

Sue Roe

By a flicker in Mrs Sawyer's eyes I knew that worse than men who wrote books were women who wrote books – infinitely worse.

('The Day They Burned the Books')

Sometimes it was as if I were back there and as if England were a dream. Other times England was the real thing and out there was the dream, but I could never fit them together.

(*Voyage in the Dark*)

I know that to write as well as I can is my truth and why I was born, though the Lord knows I wish I hadn't been!

(*Letters*, 1959)

Meek!!! When I long to slaughter for a week or more. All over the place.

(*Letters*, 1959)

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Introduction

Jean Rhys's career may be read as a cautionary tale about the difficulties and dangers of a woman writing. As a white Creole girl from the small Caribbean island of Dominica she came to England in 1907 at the age of sixteen and lived as an expatriate in England and Europe till her death in 1979. She began writing in Paris in the 1920s under the patronage of Ford Madox Ford, and four of her five novels and one short story collection were published during the high modernist period of the 1920s and 30s. She then disappeared and her fiction went out of print. Only in the 1960s did her literary resurrection occur, and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, her best known novel and the one from which most readers gain their first impressions, was published in 1966 when she was seventy-six. That pattern of publication, disappearance and reissue of her fiction all within her own lifetime offers an emblematic account of what not infrequently happens to a woman writer's work and reputation after she is dead. The Rhys narrative containing the legend of her death and resurrection, to which she returns in her letters time and again with rueful glee ('so tactless of me to be still alive'), relates her personal case to a more general one. We are still celebrating her resurrection with the increasing attention

being paid to her work, which is now seen as politically charged both in terms of the power politics of gender and the power politics of colonialism.

At the centre of our attention is the alienated Rhys heroine, but how do we 'read' this condition of alienation as Rhys describes it, and how do we identify Rhys's distinctive version of the feminine constructed in fiction that stretches – with a gap – over forty years? These are the questions I shall try to answer by reading Rhys through a critical framework which pays attention to the three intermeshing elements by which her writing was determined: the elements of gender, colonialism and modernism. In order to put together this version of the Rhys narrative, I have drawn on the insights of contemporary feminist theory, theories of colonial and post-colonial discourse, and revisionist studies of modernism which take gender into account.[1] The choice of such a multidimensional approach where three different perspectives all offer themselves as possible ways into reading Rhys is itself a comment on her fiction, just as it reflects the diversity of current critical attitudes to it.

Rhys's critics are of very different persuasions, highlighting very different aspects of her work.[2] The first three books on Rhys, all written at the end of her lifetime, lay out between them the directions that all subsequent criticism has taken. Louis James's *Jean Rhys*[3] unambiguously situated her as a novelist within the developing tradition of Caribbean writing and read her life as that of a colonial exile in Europe. James was following signposts already marked out by Caribbean critics like Wally Look Lai, V.S.Naipaul and John Hearne, all of whom saw *Wide Sargasso Sea* as an 'audacious metaphor' for the West Indian predicament with its tragic inheritance of colonialism.[4]

If, however, more attention was paid to her European novels, the Rhys narrative might be read very differently, as it was by Thomas F.Staley[5] (who incidentally was the first critic to make use of the Jean Rhys Collection at the University of Tulsa, to which only a preliminary catalogue was available at that stage). The focus of Staley's study was Rhys's female aesthetic, and, like the reviewers of the 1930s, he privileges the view of the Rhys heroine as passive victim. As a male critic, Staley appears to subscribe to traditionalist views of women as emotional,

apolitical and helpless, and it seems that this attitude allows him, in common with Rhys's male protagonists, to be seduced by her women's images of dependence. Yet it must be said that Staley offers the first sustained criticism of her distinctive narrative techniques, astutely identifying both her relatedness to the modernist tradition and the kind of complicity between reader and text which her fictions solicit:

> Between the concentrated interiority of the text and the novel's brittle surface emerges a vision and a consistent tension which forms the basis for deep engagement between the reader and the work of art . . . The process for the reader becomes more a sense of shared discovery as the implications of the plot and narrative are embraced through a spatial, thematic and formal ordering, thus affording an aesthetic whole and creating a far richer potential text for the reader.[6]

Staley's views were challenged by Rhys's first feminist critic, Helen Nebeker,[7] who resists the reductiveness of a composite 'Rhys heroine' arguing instead for an archetypal reading centred on female myths and focused through Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytic models. While Nebeker locates the significance of Rhys's fiction in its portrayal of the obscured realities of women's experience, she has no clear feminist methodology nor does she write out of a coherent ideological framework. Her failure to recognise Rhys's colonial status, for example, leads her to misappropriate Rhys's sympathies in *Wide Sargasso Sea*:

> In Brontë's Jane is Rhys's almost archetypal woman-woman independent, freed from internal, cultural, economic pressures, so that she stands complete, psychically whole, absolutely in control of that feminine reality which is hers uniquely (symbolically, all that is ascribed to the realm of the unconscious).[8]

Later critics like Gayatri Spivak and Helen Tiffin have identified Rhys's position as the opposite of this in their discussions of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as 'post-colonial counterdiscourse'[9] and Teresa F. O'Connor[10] presents the subtlest study to date of the West Indian elements in Rhys's two novels that deal explicitly with Dominican experience, *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. O'Connor's achievement lies in her linkage of the colonial vision of alienation with the theme of gender in Rhys's

personal mythology 'that unites the experiences of the child, the woman, and the colonial in one voice'.[11]

It is a disadvantage that O'Connor's attention is so directed to the autobiographical elements in Rhys that she avoids or treats obliquely what might be seen as the central issue in Rhys's fiction: the challenge of constructing a female speaking subjectivity for her heroines. That challenge is taken up by Nancy R. Harrison and Deborah Kelly Kloepfer, both of whom explore Rhys's feminist poetics while relegating Caribbean elements to the subtext.[12] Harrison's interest in the rhetorical situation of twentieth century women writers leads her to focus, in her scrupulously detailed analysis of Rhys's writing practice, on what she calls the 'emphatic subjectivity' of Rhys's narratives:

> Rhys's 'unprecedented' world is a world of women's speech, of women talking back, saying what they want to say, in the interstices of the 'real' dialogue. It is this presentation, integral to the basic technical achievement of the novels, for which Rhys sets the precedent. It matters not if what her heroine-narrators want to say is unsuitable for today's more 'liberated' woman: the recording of a woman's unspoken responses within the set framework of masculine speech or discourse is the point.[13]

Where Harrison and Kloepfer differ is not over the question of Rhys's female speaking subjects, but over what the subject speaks. Whereas for Harrison it is a speaking back to a dominant masculine idiom, for Kloepfer it is a speaking back to the voices of absent mother figures. Unlike many feminist studies on women and language, Kloepfer does not locate women's difficultes exclusively in relation to patriarchal discourse, but shifts emphasis to the suppressed mother languages within women's texts and to Rhys's investigation of a feminine economy of loss in her stories of women's pain and silencing.

Kloepfer's book might be read as a valuable contribution to the study of modernist women's writing with its centring on daughters' relations to mothers rather than to fathers in an interesting reversal of traditional anxieties of influence. Her study of female modernist aesthetics is rather more accommodating of Rhys than the social and literary

documentaries of Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900–1940*[14] and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*.[15] In these massive feminist revisionist studies Rhys is no more than a marginal figure, but there are simple explanations for this. Though she lived in Paris in the 1920s she did not belong to the social network of American and British expatriate women writers and artists in Paris, so that she is not a substantial presence in Benstock's narrative about the 'feminine' identity of the Left Bank, and only her late 1930s novel *Good Morning, Midnight* figures at all. Nor does Rhys's fiction fit easily into Gilbert and Gubar's argument about the 'transformative nature of feminism' and she is mentioned only once. Rhys was a modernist writer by any criterion, and Bonnie Kime Scott's splendid anthology *The Gender of Modernism*[16] does manage to accommodate Rhys's complicitous critique of sexual and cultural politics within a more heterogeneous narrative about the female modernist condition.

Arguably these different perspectives highlight important issues of subjectivity not only within the fictions themselves but within the area of critical response. In what sense is Rhys's fiction so multiple, so secretive, that it constitutes a kind of blankness on to which critics can project their own ideological interests? In what sense are the fictions, like Rhys's heroines, at the mercy of their interpreters, objects of the gaze and transformed by that gaze, though themselves remaining other and always elusive? It seems that by a curious paradox Rhys's silenced heroines have been given multiple voices to state their condition of marginality and dispossession by Rhys's critics, though of course we need to put this proposition the other way around. Rhys's texts are themselves the site of these multiple voices which the critics hear and interpret through their different ideological frameworks.

What Rhys constructs through her fiction is, I would argue, a feminine colonial sensibility becoming aware of itself in a modernist European context, where a sense of colonial dispossession and displacement is focused on and translated into gendered terms, so that all these conditions coalesce, transformed into her particular version of feminine pain. Her texts are all versions of a fragmented female subjectivity, as

Rhys shows her heroines trying to construct an identity for themselves in radically unstable situations where traditions and social conventions prescribe certain rituals but are emptied of meaning. In this Waste Land, the discourse of her silenced protagonists is the field of multiple and contradictory voices: the voices of others through which the Rhys heroine has allowed her self-image to be constituted, and the insistent interruptions to these authoritative voices by her resistant inner voice which speaks out of secret knowledge of her own difference. Though about betrayal, disablement and the dispersal of identity, these are frequently fictions of precarious survival. Not surprisingly, the question with Rhys becomes a literary one: the survival of the fragmented woman as text, with fiction providing the only space where her dissident voice may be heard.