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**Between Conflicting Worlds: Female Exiles in Jean Rhys's
Voyage in the Dark and Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging***

Caribbean and "Black British" novels of exile tend to follow the general trend in Caribbean fiction. Even if things are currently changing, the majority of the novels published so far has been written by men and relatively few among them depict convincing and complex women characters. It would, of course, be unfair to assume that *all* Caribbean male novelists write men-centered novels in which female figures are confined to caricatural or stereotyped roles. Many of Wilson Harris's and some of George Lamming's novels, for instance, provide cogent examples to the contrary.¹ I should also mention here a recent novel, Caryl Phillips's *The Final Passage* (1985), which centers around a young Caribbean woman's move to Britain. These exceptions, however, do not prove the rule. And, by and large, one can say that novels of exile written by men only give women characters functional or symbolical roles without exploring their individual personality from the inside.

Not surprisingly, then, it is chiefly in novels written by women that the female displaced person's experience is rendered with greater depth and sensitivity. Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and Joan Riley's *The*

¹ Wilson Harris's *The Waiting Room* (1967) and *Tumatumari* (1968), for example, focus on female protagonists and George Lamming's *Natives of my Person* (1972) and *Water with Berries* (1971) represent women as a positive factor for the future.

Unbelonging (1985)² are enlightening illustrations of this. These two novels deal with exile in England and the ensuing alienation, a predicament often explored in Caribbean writing and post-colonial literatures in general. But there is something more in them. Indeed, to the cultural and racial estrangement usually brought about by the migratory experience is added the alienation of women exiled from their own female selves. In the same way as women from colonial societies have been said to be "doubly colonized,"³ so in their experience as expatriates can they be described as "doubly alienated."

On the face of it, *Voyage in the Dark* and *The Unbelonging*, written at nearly fifty years' interval, have not much in common, not much more, at least, than their writers' Caribbean origin and common gender. Even if both novels are stories of coming to adulthood in exile, their heroines appear to be separated by time, race and experience. In *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna Morgan, an 18 year-old white Dominican, leads a dissipated life in the 1910s in London where she has been sent following her father's death. After an unsuccessful affair with an Englishman, she drifts into prostitution and the novel ends with Anna's narrow escape after an abortion. Hyacinth Williams, the female protagonist of *The Unbelonging*, is a black Jamaican teenager of the late 1970s who has been brought over from Jamaica to live in England. Abused by her violent father at home and ostracized at school Hyacinth retreats into her dreams of an idealized Jamaica. After taking a degree she journeys back to her homeland and to the shattering realization that she does not belong there either. These seemingly irreconcilable differences between Anna and Hyacinth are, however, transcended by their common gender and Caribbean background and the unavoidable

² Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969, abbreviated to *V.D.* at the end of quotations. Joan Riley, *The Unbelonging*, London: The Women's Press, 1985, abbreviated to *U.* at the end of quotations. All references are to these editions and are given in the text.

³ See Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, eds., *A Double Colonization*, Mundelstrup, Dangaroo Press, 1986.

alienation these entail in England which they come to experience as a male-dominated world.

The similarity in imagery, symbolism and narrative devices used by both writers to render their heroines' perceptions of their surroundings and experiences points better than anything else to Anna's and Hyacinth's common identity. The textual devices combining in the two novels to convey the heroines' common sense of alienation display, appropriately enough, many of the characteristics that have been tentatively labelled by French feminists as *l'écriture féminine*: double or multiple focus, non-linear structures, repetition of central imagery, fluidity and open endings.⁴ Though not specifically used by female writers, this kind of writing, originated by Virginia Woolf, has a subversive quality that lends itself particularly well to the portrayal of women characters in culturally or sexually hostile surroundings. This is what the following discussion of *Voyage in the Dark* and *The Unbelonging* sets out to show.

Both novels open with contrastive sensory appraisals of England versus the Caribbean. To Anna England and the Caribbean are poles apart and can never be fitted together:

The colours were different, the smells different, the feeling things gave you right down inside yourself was different. Not just the difference between heat, cold; light, darkness; purple, grey. But a difference in the way I was frightened and the way I was happy. (*V.D.*, p. 7)

The Unbelonging highlights the same contrasts but is still more overtly nostalgic. Opening with a prefatory poem entitled "Memories" which

⁴ Ann Rosalind Jones, "Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine," in Gayle Green and Coppélia Kahn, eds., *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, London, Methuen, 1985, p.88.

celebrates an innocent childhood in an eden-like landscape, it goes on to one of Hyacinth's dreams about Jamaica:

Hyacinth felt the lazy warmth of the early afternoon air wrap her in well-being as she lay back in the cool grass ... It was safe in this little green cave, the recesses of the bushes laden with long-stemmed hibiscus and yellow trumpet-flowers and humming with insect activity (*U.*, p. 9)

But the dream is suddenly interrupted and Hyacinth has to revert to the bitter English reality:

Harsh and strident, the accent grated on her ears ... Coldness enveloped her ... Hyacinth struggled to sit up, eyes opening reluctantly to dingy grey walls, before moving blankly to the equally grey sky she could just glimpse through the ill-fitting curtains. (*U.*, p. 10)

Of course, that sort of dichotomy between the colourful and warm Caribbean and the drab and cold England is not specific to these two novels. In most Caribbean novels of exile, indeed, England strikes the Caribbean newcomers as a grim, grey and foggy place compared to the warm country they have just left. Yet few novels are as evocative as *Voyage in the Dark* and *The Unbelonging* of the fascinatingly beautiful landscape and what is remembered by Anna and Hyacinth as the secure life left behind.⁵ This evocative power derives partly from the sensory richness of Anna and Hyacinth's memories and observations, which is also an indirect statement on the two heroines' intense sensitivity. Here are two examples chosen among the many passages in which Anna and Hyacinth use the whole gamut of senses to give utterance to their impressions of the Caribbean and England:

⁵ This is true too, though to a lesser extent, of the evocation of the stifling bleakness of the English urban setting.

When I got into bed I lay awake, thinking about [home]. About how sad the sun can be ... And the way the bats fly out at sunset, two by two, very stately. And the smell of the store down on the Bay. ... And the smell of Francine — acrid-sweet. And that hibiscus once — it was so red, so proud, and its long gold tongue hung out. It was so red that even the sky was just a background for it. ... And the sound of the rain on the galvanized-iron roof. ... (*V.D.*, p. 49)

Her mind wandered off on her favourite daydream ... It was a good one, almost real, the smell of ripening mangoes, red- and yellow-coat plums slowly obscuring the rank smell of the cold playground. With her back against the kitchen wall, sheltered a little from the wind, it was almost warm enough to dream of green grass and bright sunshine. She imagined she was lying on the side of the long, deep gully, behind the tenement where her aunt lived, the long grass tickling her nose in the warm breeze, the clammy red and milk-white cherries rustling in the high trees above her head. (*U.*, p. 19)

These perceptions also abound in symbolic images. Colour imagery is one of the most obvious and recurring patterns of images used to contrast Anna's and Hyacinth's warm homeland with the gloomy country of their exile. In both novels the Caribbean is always associated with bright and life-evoking colours like yellow, green or red while England is invariably described in shades of grey, black or brown. These contrasting colours speak almost for themselves and their metaphorical meaning has been discussed by many critics of Jean Rhys. I shall therefore dwell on another set of images. Vegetation, or the absence of it, is also used in both novels, though more extensively in *Voyage in the Dark*, to convey Caribbean vitality as opposed to English lifelessness and rejection of all that is natural. Tropical flowers and fruit, for example, are appropriate symbols of life and fecundity that come up again and again in Anna's and Hyacinth's memories of home. Anna's reminiscences of Dominica are peopled with frangipani, mango trees or poinsettia. So are Hyacinth's memories of

Jamaica. In England, however, flowers and fruit are either totally absent among the stone and concrete buildings, or, if they are present at all, they are severed from the plant or tree from which they grew. Very much like Anna and Hyacinth, in fact, who have also been cut off from the Caribbean mother figures of Francine for Anna and Aunt Joyce for Hyacinth to be taken care of by their unfeeling stepmothers in the so called *Mother Country*. Vegetation is therefore linked to the need for sexual identification that was possible in the Caribbean but is denied in England. Examples of this use of vegetation are numerous; I shall only list the most significant ones. The fruit bowl is one of the things Hyacinth hates most in her father's shabby house in England. And Hyacinth herself, with her flower name, is the only one of her kind in the unwelcoming world she lives in, which underlines again the fact that she does not belong there. In *Voyage in the Dark* too Anna's attention is drawn by plates of fruit in the flat she is going to share with Ethel, a hypocritical and conceited English woman. She also notices a bunch of flowers in a vase in the sitting room of the flat where she is to have her abortion. Still more gruesome than cut-off fruit and flowers are the imitation fruit and plants Anna sees in the houses in which she is a tenant. In one of those house there is a dusty moulding of grapes and pineapples round the walls of the sitting room which is an ominous presentation of English society's petrifying effect on life and nature. In other lodgings, Anna is almost spellbound by a "plant made of rubber with shiny, bright red leaves" that strikes her as typical of English smugness and stasis and stands out as a foil to her own vulnerability and uprootedness:

It looked proud of itself, as if it knew that it was going on for ever and ever, and as if it knew that it fitted in with the house and the street and the spiked iron railings outside. (*V.D.*, p. 30)

The constant dichotomy between the Caribbean and England might give the misleading impression that everything associated with the Caribbean is rosy while England is unredeemingly negative. Jean Rhys and Joan Riley have avoided that oversimplification. It is quite true that the

positive or negative qualities of each respective world are overrated in the heroines' perception of them, which represents an understandable way of reacting to the hostility met in England. In spite of that, however, each world contains its opposite, even if it is sometimes only potentially. Anna's evocations of Dominica mention frightening cockroaches, devouring barracoutas and a "terrible," destroying sun. Similarly, the English countryside turned out to be more beautiful than Anna expected, with lots of colourful flowers. Still, this beauty is alien to Anna, "as if the wilderness had gone out of it" (*V.D.*, p. 67).⁶ In Hyacinth's idealized vision of Jamaica, too, one can glimpse, and more and more often as the novel progresses, unromantic aspects of the Caribbean, the ones Hyacinth tries hard to push to the back of her mind. For instance, elements like dirt or unpleasant smells surface from time to time in her unconscious as she dreams about her homeland. And Hyacinth's dreams of a paradisiacal Jamaica eventually crumble when she goes back to the Caribbean and is confronted with the utter squalor of the tenement where she spent her childhood before leaving for Europe:

The familiarity of weathered wood and corroded zinc refused to be dismissed. ... The smell was like a physical blow, dredging up smells and tastes from long, half-buried memories. (*U.*, p. 136)

The vividness of Anna's and Hyacinth's impressions are also achieved through the devices, such as dreams, daydreams and memories Jean Rhys and Joan Riley have used to integrate their heroines' perceptions into the narrative. Techniques such as these give more fluidity to the text and add complexity to the novels as well as dynamism to the dialectical movements between present and past, reality and dream, England and the Caribbean. As Thomas F. Staley has pointed out in

⁶ Let us note, incidentally, that the distance between Anna and English nature is rendered by the many "as if" that punctuate her impressions of the landscape, as they do all her perceptions of England: "There was a lark rising jerkily, *as if it went by clockwork, as if someone were winding it up ...*" (*V.D.*, p. 67, italics mine).

connection with *Voyage in the Dark*, "the function of this ... narrative process is ... crucial to the novel's theme. ... These reflections into Anna's past ... provide a sense of movement and evoke the novel's central image of a voyage, both inward and outward."⁷ In *The Unbelonging* too dreams and memories have a functional role and add depth to the theme of divided identity by making possible the recurrent juxtaposition and hence contrastive interplay of the conflicting world in Hyacinth's life. But these techniques also deserve to be paid attention to because they contribute to making the characterization of the female protagonists of the two novels successful in terms of authenticity and "roundedness."⁸ The feminist critic Sydney Janet Kaplan has referred to dreams or other introspective methods used "to depict the internal life of female characters in the process of self discovery"⁹ as "feminist consciousness." Although these literary devices have also been used by male writers, they have been overwhelmingly used by women novelists because they enable them, much better than external realism can, "to go beyond stereotypes, and ... to create whole selves in their fiction that [go] past abstractions that separate feeling and thinking."¹⁰ The importance of these technical devices in giving a more

⁷ Thomas F. Staley, *Jean Rhys: A Critical Study*, London, Macmillan, 1979, p. 59.

⁸ It should be added that Rhys's use of a first person narrator makes her characterization of Anna reach a degree of intensity of inner life that Riley's more detached third person narrator achieves rather less successfully.

⁹ Sydney Janet Kaplan, "Varieties of Feminist Criticism," in: Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, op. cit., p. 48.

¹⁰ Sydney Janet Kaplan, *Feminine Consciousness in the Modern British Novel*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1975, p.2. This work was cited in Thomas F. Staley's study of Jean Rhys mentioned above to underline the fact that Rhys's approach was less aesthetic but more social than the novelists discussed in Kahn's book. The fact that Jean Rhys's "modernism" also includes a social vision has been discussed in Mary Lou Emery, "The Politics of Form: Jean Rhys's Social Vision in *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Winter 1982), pp. 418-431. This article also pinpoints Anna's resistance to exploitation and concludes that "internal splitting" (p. 422) is the price Anna has to pay to survive.

balanced view of a woman character are maybe hinted at ironically by Rhys when she makes Anna read Zola's *Nana*. Nana's story has, indeed, some common point with Anna's (their names, to begin with) but the naturalistic method used by Zola makes any understanding from the inside impossible.

The passage from one world to another so vividly suggested by the imagery and narrative modes of the two novels and representing their heroines' inner division operates at many different levels. It would indeed be extremely reductionist to see Anna's and Hyacinth's exile in England only in terms of a passage from the colonial Caribbean to the metropolitan centre. Their displacement also coincides with a transition not only from the relative security of childhood to the anxiety of adulthood but also from a world dominated by the mother figures of Francine and Aunt Joyce to a confrontation with male sexuality embodied in Anna's lovers and Hyacinth's incestuous father. In several respects then exile is not the prime source of Anna's and Hyacinth's malaise but the catalyst that exacerbates the alienation which, we are made to feel through the heroines' memories of childhood, is somehow inbred in their nature.

The multiple alienation Anna and Hyacinth experience as colonial immigrants, adolescents and women is best crystallized in their relationships with other people. A profound wish to be loved and to belong runs throughout their dealings with others. This wish takes many forms. One of the most obvious ones is their yearning for another racial identity. White Anna has always wanted to be black not only to feel nearer to her surrogate mother Francine but also, as a critic of Jean Rhys has put it, to look like her "real mother who was rumoured to have been coloured."¹¹ This desire for Blackness is also a way of distancing herself from her self-righteous stepmother Hester and the English values she stands for. Like Anna, Hyacinth is also at odds with her own colour and longs for

¹¹ Deborah Kelly Kloepfer, "Voyage in the Dark. Jean Rhys's Masquerade for the Mother," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Winter 1985), p. 449.

whiteness, a desire which she tries to make come true by having her hair straightened. Her blackness makes her feel ugly and inadequate and is, to her, the source of many of her problems, though a tinge of paranoia sometimes biases her judgement in that matter. By wishing for whiteness, "a badge of acceptance" (*U.*, p. 75) to her, Hyacinth wants to secure affection and approval from others. In that respect, Hyacinth is very much a product of English racism against coloured immigrants who, as a consequence of racial hostility, are made to reject and despise their own racial group and finally their own selves as well.

As adolescents Anna and Hyacinth are torn between childhood and adulthood. Both are reluctant to give up their youth, nostalgically evoked in their memories of the Caribbean, for adult age. Hyacinth's bedwetting, for example, is a clear expression of her refusal to grow. Anne feels like dying after her first periods because she realizes that "that day [she]'d started to grow old and nothing could stop it" (*V.D.*, p. 62). In both novels, incidentally, the pangs of growing are linked with the theme of the unavoidable passing of time which is illustrated by the clocks that attract the two heroines' attention in times of crisis.

As women, Anna and Hyacinth are both abused by men, Anna mentally and Hyacinth physically, although the two forms of abuse obviously overlap. Their relations to men are dominated by fear, fear of being rejected by her lovers in Anna and fear of her father's brutality and sexual overtures in Hyacinth. Hyacinth's fear, in particular, takes an obsessive character which is expressed by the sheer recurrence in the text of the word "fear" or semantically related terms. Page 26 of *The Unbelonging*, for example, contains no less than seven of them. No wonder then that they are left scarred for life by their traumatizing experience: Anna is on the verge of a schizophrenic madness and Hyacinth develops an almost neurotic fear of any sexual involvement. Yet both resist, in their own way, the male oppression they experience. And their resistance to it is very similar to a form of resistance Caribbean slaves opposed to slavery: mental maroonage. Anna and Hyacinth maintain some sort of mental

independence by escaping into the world of dreams and imagination. Mental maroonage as a form of resistance is associated in *Voyage in the Dark* with the Carnival during which black slaves, to whom Anna feels particularly close, put on white masks, symbols of respectability, while keeping their cultural integrity behind them.

Divided as they both are Anna and Hyacinth are clearly archetypes of what Elaine Campbell has called in a recent article: "the dichotomized heroine in West Indian fiction."¹² That sort of heroine has often been portrayed in a stereotyped way by male writers in whose novels she is invariably "drawn to settle her dilemma -- for good or for ill -- through marriage or mating."¹³ *Voyage in the Dark* and *The Unbelonging* offer a different solution. One might object, of course, that, even if they do not opt for the easy conclusion Elaine Campbell refers to, these two novels do not project a very positive image of the Caribbean woman exiled in Britain. Anna and Hyacinth with all their weaknesses and, at times, lack of resourcefulness are not at all the type of "strong women" some feminist critics, like Elaine Showalter, for instance, would like to be portrayed in feminine literature.

This being said, however, it is also important not to see Anna and Hyacinth simply as failures and victims of men and life in general. Admittedly, they never succeed in reconciling their conflicting selves as, for instance, the heroine of Paule Marshall's novel of exile set in New York *Brown Girl, Brownstones* does. But, in their own way, they preserve their dignity and achieve integrity of a sort even if they do not achieve a unified self-identity which is, after all, "the central concept of Western male humanism."¹⁴ Anna seems eventually defeated but throughout her ordeals

¹² Elaine Campbell, "The Dichotomized Heroine in West Indian Fiction," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. XXII, No. 1 (1987), pp. 137-143.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁴ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, London, Methuen, 1985, p. 7.

the inner voice of her memories and imagination remains untouched. Besides her decision to have an abortion, however determined it may be by social pressure and even if it is a denial of the vitality of her Caribbean self, is a painful decision to make and a way of reclaiming, even though temporarily, the mastery of her own body. Like Anna, Hyacinth commands our respect because she does not shirk the confrontation of her idyllic dreams with reality. The shock of seeing the squalor of Jamaica makes her understand that she first has to come to terms with her childhood before growing up. The final image of her imaginary retreat in the cave (a significant feminine symbol) where she used to play as a child brings to mind the ending of another Caribbean novel of exile, Denis Williams's *Other Leopards*, in which the male hero ends his search for identity by retreating naked up a tree. Hyacinth's retreat, too, is open to different interpretations. It can be interpreted as her final withdrawal from the outside world into a nearly foetal state. But it can also be seen as a first attempt at exorcizing the past by going back to it with the enhanced knowledge that the exposure of her dream world has brought to her.