

Exchange and Impasse in Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*

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This essay aims to analyze the writing by a white Creole writer Jean Rhys (1890-1979), who writes about the relation of colonial periphery to the European metropolis, with a focus on women's streetwalking and consumer culture. Born in West Indies, Rhys moved to England at the age of 16. Working as a chorus girl, a mannequin and an artist's model, she sometimes fell into prostitution and continuously suffered poverty. Her pre-war novels were often initially considered as stories based on her own suffering life, though critics have increasingly come to recognize their formal and stylistic sophistication.

The heroine of *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha Jansen, is the eldest one among Rhys's women. She also experienced prostitution in the past when she was forced by poverty and starvation. When the story begins, Sasha is on a two-week trip to a Paris that she knows well. During her stay, she remembers rooms, streets and scenes from her past, meets a few foreigners, has several unpleasant encounters with the man next door whom she dubs the *commis voyageur*, and meets a gigolo who later attempts to rape her in her room. Sasha drives him out of there but later regrets it. She opens the door hoping he will come back again, but the *commis* enters instead. Though having always previously disliked him, this time, Sasha embraces him and pulls him onto bed, saying, "Yes—yes—yes."

Jean Rhys's pre-war novels demonstrate her anxieties over the societal changes brought about by the increasingly globalized marketplace. *Good Morning, Midnight* is paradigmatic in this regard, since in this novel, Sasha is almost exclusively constructed as in relation to treatment of "impasse", a complex term which pertains not only to the circulation of consumer goods but also to broader issues of imperialism. By examining Sasha's relationship with male characters in *Good Morning, Midnight*, I shall detail the process of

exchange built on the power dynamics and the consequent impasse that Sasha fails to escape from.

As Rachel Bowlby well points out:

Good Morning, Midnight takes the impasse as one of its themes: there is no way out, the street is an impasse. But it is structured like a rhetorical impasse too, since all its positive territories are already excluded with the force of impossibility (once there might have been hope for change, for a long time there has been none). (57)

In rhetoric, an “impasse” defines a structure “where the proposition includes assumptions which are contrary to those of the addressee, who is thus unable either to reply according to the same terms, or to deny something on which s/he has not been directly challenged” (57).

Sasha presents us with a glimpse of her defiance of the racial and gender hierarchies of colonialist cultures. Her gestures of resistance, however, often appear to be immediately reappropriated by the response of this male-dominated system. The notion of “exchange” is fundamental to her dealings with men. In her relationship with Mr. Blank, her employer, impecunious Sasha had exchanged her freedom to get an income. No longer impoverished, she now becomes a buyer, using money as a weapon with the painter and the gigolo to try to reverse the coercive pressure of power dynamics she had suffered during her younger years. However, as I hope to show, Rhys demonstrates the impossibility of this change by presenting Sasha as voluntarily embracing the *commis* at last with the utterance of “yes-yes-yes.” This “yes” answers the question “Quite like old times. Yes? No?” which opens the novel and demonstrates that even when endowed with financial resources, Sasha is still placed in a difficult plight—an impasse where she can ultimately hope to change nothing.

Mr. Blank

Sasha once worked for an English owner, Mr. Blank, who asked Sasha to take a letter to the cashier, but mispronounced this French word “caisse” as “kise.” Therefore, Sasha moved aimlessly with a futile mission. Being gibed at

as a “hopeless, helpless little fool” by Mr. Blank (*GMM* 24), she is fired from the job. The “kise” episode reveals the symbolic and linguistic domination over a colonial woman in the metropolis. She tries to transform her status by following the Englishman’s instructions and takes pains to enter public places but only to fail. A male employer’s language befuddles a female employee both physically and psychologically. This scene also exemplifies the woman’s subjection and silence, a relation also evident in the following interior monologue of Sasha:

Well, let’s argue this out, Mr. Blank. You, who represent Society, have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month. That’s my market value. . . . So you have the right to pay me four hundred francs a month, to lodge me in a small, dark room, to clothe me shabbily, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings till you get me to the point when I blush at a look, cry at a word. (*GMM* 25-26)

400 francs a month represents the market value of Sasha’s imprisonment at the shop. As Chris GoGwilt puts it, “the memory of her earlier attachment to the 400-franc dress defines the contradictory logic of her confinement to the workspace of the shop for the sake of her flâneuse enjoyment of wandering the streets” (70). Sasha tries to break out of this rate of exchange but only to find herself being dismissed. She at that time possessed no money or room and so was bound to be vulnerable to the vicissitudes of this capitalist market. For Mr. Blank, “his economic power ensures that it is Sasha who pays for his misarticulation” (Gregg 154).

Delmar and Serge

Sasha encounters a Russian called Nicolas Delmar who introduces her to his friend, the Russian Jewish painter Serge Rubin. During their meetings in Serge’s studio, Sasha bursts into tears due to the apparently sincere demonstration of friendship by the two men. Serge says: “Cry if you want to. Why shouldn’t you cry? You’re with friends” (93). Later it turns out that Delmar and Serge have been planning to ask Sasha to buy one of Serge’s paintings. Thus, Carol Dell’Amico reads Sasha’s weeping as the threshold of a

crisis since “her association with these men has evolved into a kind of test in relation to the proposition early on advanced in the novel” (22).

Serge leaves for an appointment, “with the mocking expression very apparent,” says something in Russian before he leaves: “[I]f you [Sasha] didn’t want to buy a picture you needn’t buy one. Nobody expects you to” (98-9). However, it seems that Sasha is not at all surprised or sensing that her loneliness has been exploited. Instead she replies: “Oh, but I do. I absolutely want one” (99). She chooses a painting of an old Jew playing the banjo, and just then Serge returns and they discuss the price:

“The price of that is six hundred francs,” he says. “If you think it’s too much we’ll arrange some other price.”

All his charm and ease of manner have gone. He looks anxious and surly. I say awkwardly: “I don’t think it at all too much. But I haven’t got the money”

Before I can get any further he bursts into a shout of laughter. “What did I tell you?” he says to Delmar.

“But have it, take it, all the same. I like you. I’ll give you as a present.”

“No, no. All I meant is that I can’t pay you now.”

“Oh, that’s all right. You can send the money from London. I’ll tell you what you can do for me—you can find some other idiots who’ll buy my picture.”

When he says this, he smiles at me so gently, so disarmingly. The touch of human hand I’d forgotten what it was like, the touch of the human hand.

“I’m serious. I mean that. Take the picture and send me the money when you can.”

“I can let you have it tonight.” (*GMM* 83-4)

Dell’Amico argues that, although being positioned as a buyer in this episode, Sasha is “subject to exploitation” (23). Delmar and Serge treat her with apparent kindness only to “more effectively fleece her” (24). Sasha is brought into their circle not due to their being truly interested in her well-being or friendship, but only because of her purchasing power (indicated by the fur coat she wears when she meets Delmar). Their mutual inter-relationship is

inevitably tainted by the system of commodity exchange which all of them have to conform to, as they cannot “escape the exigencies of the burgeoning market” (24). However, these processes can on occasion work to the benefit of individuals.

I shall further point out that Sasha here is actually enjoying this exploitation as it is the only way for her to regain the respect from men which she has been desperately craving for a long time. Possession of money empowers her to a certain degree, and therefore “her relative position within a network of capitalist relation that hasn’t changed, has changed” (Dell’Amico 26). She seems momentarily to be taken in by others’ perception of her and to adopt their point of view. She thinks of herself as or wants to be regarded as a “successful woman.” Her wealth allows her now to preserve her dignity and to enter into exchanges with men who treat her with sincerity in a society where only beautiful and/or wealthy women have control over their price in the market.

The Gigolo and the *Commis*

Rhys inscribes two sinister doubles in *Good Morning, Midnight*: René, who is called the gigolo by Sasha and a nameless commercial traveler next door whom she calls *commis*. René approaches her on one evening when she is visiting the Dome. She at first seeks revenge on him by being “so devastatingly English”: “Perhaps I should manage to hurt him a little in return for all the many times I’ve been hurt” (73).

The *commis* in the dressing gown always frightens Sasha and on one occasion calls her a *vache* (cow). She listens to his verbal abuse when she hears a knock on the door. She assumes it to be the hostile *commis* but it turns out to be the gigolo outside “looking excited and pleased with himself” (*GMM* 149). At the end of the novel, when Sasha hopes the gigolo will come back to her, it is the *commis* that enters the room. According to Veronica Gregg, this technique suggests that “both men are alter egos, distorted shadows, one of the other” (157).

The importance of finance for Sasha in the establishment of her independence is apparent. Her relationship with René, the gigolo, is based on a system of patronage. It is Sasha who now has the money and the gigolo who

relies on her. This arrangement in itself provides Sasha with the independence that she usually lacked in her earlier relationships with other men such as her husband, employer, and customers of prostitutes. She allows herself to enjoy this relationship in a way that follows the established pattern of exchange. According to Paula Le Gallez, in *Good Morning, Midnight*, Jean Rhys gives an acute new angle on “the oppressive nature of the patriarchal system in which a woman is financially dependent upon a man” (140). Rhys inverts the usual gender order through Sasha’s economic independence in her relationship with René.

Cathleen Maslen wittily interprets the *commis* as a commodified form of humanity like René. The *commis*, as a salesman, “presumably obliged to identify himself with his unidentified wares in order to exact a profitable exchange” (Maslen 145). Furthermore, his loitering on the landing represents a “demented refinement of Sasha’s compulsive flanerier” (145) and echoes her determination to “hide from the wolves outside” (*GMM* 33) in the hotel. For Sue Thomas, the “monstrous” interaction between Sasha and the *commis* is a trope for “a European culture constructed by relations of predation, cruelty, market value and hierarchisations of people” (136). Mary Lou Emery also effectively demonstrates the *commis* to be identified as a figure of patriarchal authority and even fascistic terror. Yet, as Dell’Amico sees it, Sasha’s interaction with the *commis* may be distinguished from her previous relationships with Mr. Blank, René, Delmar and Serge. While all the other men prove to be in some way predatory, especially René and the Russians who are after Sasha’s money, only the *commis* asks nothing of Sasha: “Well, what do you want?”/ “Nothing,” he says, “nothing”. As Dell’Amico notices, the *commis* never tries to sell her anything: even though he himself is inevitably involved in and defined by the all-compassing network of circulation, “he is the single minor character in the text with which Sasha is expected to *exchange nothing*”(37). However, for me this “exchange nothing” is not as salutary as Dell’Amico appears to believe. Rather, it deletes the triumphant experiences that the money bestows. In other words, when embracing the *commis*, her power to exchange money for things vanishes and she can only return to the past. Rhys ends the novel with an emphasis on how problems of complicity and submission continue to be posed.

As Gregg aptly points out, René is a mirror image of Sasha, “a parodic

reflection of Sasha's past, symbolized by the fact that they both lived in the same house in the south of France"(161). His financial dependence on Sasha resembles her own financial dependence on men in the past. Therefore, her rejection of Rene can be interpreted as her rejection for her own past. "You can have the money right away, so it would be a waste of time, wouldn't it?" (*GMM* 153)—here Sasha hopes to avoid the nightmare of a submissive past that haunts her. She in fact is trying hard to change and to say no to the statement of "quite like old times" on account of her economic power. However, she fails at last when accepting the *commis*, who serves as a double ego of René, and therefore, Sasha's past.

At the conclusion of the novel, Sasha embraces the *commis* on her bed, saying "Yes, yes, yes," a phrase that clearly echoes Molly Bloom's last words in *Ulysses* (1922). For Thomas Staley, Molly's and Sasha's "yesses" affirm "the possibility of union between men and women in which both natures are in harmony and love" (97). Elgin W. Mellown assumes that Sasha "overcomes the drift toward death that obsesses the earlier manifestations of the Rhys women (and the earlier Sasha) by finding [...] compassion" (467). With a similar redemptive reading, Carole Angier claims that "in accepting the *commis* as her lover, Sasha accepts into herself, as equal to herself, what is mean even the most and contemptible and mad" and at last manages to "admit her identity with even the most hopeless of the human race"(66). Arnold E. Davidson refers to Sasha's act as "transcendent": "Her immediately subsequent 'yes' [...] is 'yes' to a different kind of love, one that depends entirely on her. She will now define, for herself, what her love—or whatever it is—is" (363). Gregg compares Sasha's embrace of the *commis* with Serge's brusque rejection of the mulatto woman and reads her act as a "morality tale about the responsibility of the artist" not "to turn away from that which appears horrible or repugnant" and about the "moral responsibility of the Other to forge a practice of the self that is inclusive rather than exclusionary" (160-1).

Yet, as I see it, if we relate this yes with the opening sentence of the novel ("Quite like old times," the room says. "Yes? No?"), it is not difficult to find that Sasha is actually admitting yes to this question—Yes, "quite like old times." This means that although Sasha can boast of possessing power in the processes of exchange power, the basic hierarchies of gender have not changed

at all, “just like old times.” The optimistic reading of the final yeses cannot entail a solution to the impasse faced by Sasha, even if she wishes to negotiate the impasse by “embracing the repugnant Other without denying his otherness, his strangeness” (Gregg 160). Although she has tried to reject her past along with her previous relationships with men and to assert herself through her consumer activities, when embracing the *commis* she at last accepts what she cannot escape and must admit to herself the continued existence of the impasse.

The Impasse

The novel, teeming with impasses, opens with Sasha’s hotel, which is described in such a way as explicitly to define such a location:

There are two beds, a big one for Madame and a smaller one on the opposite side for monsieur. The wash-basin is shut off by a curtain. It is a large room, the smell of cheap hotels faint, almost imperceptible. The street outside is narrow, cobble-stoned, going sharply uphill and ending in a flight of steps. What they call an impasse. (9)

The narrative ends where it begins, with a room questioning Sasha with “Quite like old times. Yes? No?” It concludes in the same room where she affirms “Yes-yes-yes.” The text is built on the impasse balancing carefully between this Yes and No. On the one hand, things have changed immensely since Sasha, now with money and room, no longer needs to seduce men for patronage or suffer abuse from employers. Rather, her relatively secure economic independence improves her relationships with men. She now tries desperately to reverse the position in which she was placed in the past. On the other hand, however, although men like the painter and the gigolo now pursue her for money, her relations with them “are still thoroughly tinted by power dynamics pursuant to the (same old) institutionalized sex-gender inequalities” (Dell’Amico 26). When she enjoys the company offered by the Russians and when the gigolo is driven out by her, the readers may believe in the triumphs she has gained via her financial empowerment. However, Rhys undercuts any such optimistic interpretation by inserting the scene of the embrace with the

commis who she had always previously loathed. In this way, Sasha, just as before, falls into “a trap, a closing off of escape, which can only be negotiated by embracing the repugnant Other, the personal stranger who is right next door” (Gregg 160). In this way, Rhys illustrates the colonization of a woman who remains caught in the political, economic, and social “impasse” in the metropolis of the 1930s.

In this essay I have furthered Bowlby’s point by demonstrating how Rhys’s pre-war novel *Good Morning, Midnight* is shaped by the insights and concerns that she develops as a displaced colonial and outsider for whom everything may be defined in terms of exchange. Although the possession of purchasing power enables her to assert her influence in her relationships with men, this can only operate under the previous conditions of exchange; when there is nothing to offer, as manifested in her relationship with the *commis*, Sasha has no choice but to return to the old times and accept her past which compounds her oppressive experience of marginalized identity. In this sense, her financial independence brings nothing about but a further reinforcement of the original impasse: as a female, Sasha remains entrapped through being defined in sexual terms.

As a close to this essay, I hazard the following parsing of Sasha’s series of three final “yeses.” Has Sasha proven herself circulated in the impasse of exchange in the imperialist marketplace? Yes. Is Sasha finally forced to accept her past that enforces submission? Yes. Just like old times? Yes.

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