

Alienated Women: Competition and Degradation
in Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*

Caitlin Moloney

Although not warmly embraced when first published, Jean Rhys's novel *Good Morning, Midnight* is now the object of renewed scholarship, with critic Judith Kegan Gardiner going so far as to call it a "masterpiece" (233). Critics are fascinated by protagonist Sasha Jensen who wanders through Paris, a city filled with old memories both happy and sad. Yet as Sasha narrates the novel, we are presented with a woman who seems to be utterly hopeless. Recent scholarship probes into what has contributed to this: her fixation on inanimate objects, her obsession with her appearance, and her adherence to a strict routine to name a few of the most common analyses. Yet few scholars examine the significance of women's relationships with one another in *Good Morning, Midnight*. An analysis of interactions between women is important to understanding Rhys's protagonist; because Rhys's women systematically learn to degrade each other, every woman seems to be alienated from others of her own sex.

The artist Serge's recollection of a Martiniquan woman "at the end of everything" (Rhys 95) is the most poignant example of systematic, female-on-female degradation. While living in London, Serge had found this woman in front of his door, drunk and "crying so much that it was impossible to tell whether she was pretty or ugly or young or old" (96). Through his narration, we learn that the cause of this crying episode was an encounter with a young girl who had verbally assaulted the woman, calling her "dirty" and saying she has "no right" to be in the apartment building. The girl finishes her attack by stating "I hate you and I wish you were dead" (97). Critic Sanford Sternlicht writes, "the girl hates a woman she hardly knows. Why? [Is it] because...this is how females feel toward each other from behavior inculcated from childhood?" (Sternlicht 98). Rhys makes it very clear that this passage is intended to be read as a social critique; as Serge comments about the girl, she is "only seven

or eight, and yet she [knows] so exactly how to be cruel and who it [is] safe to be cruel to” (Rhys 98). Children don’t come up with such harsh judgments about people on their own; presumably this girl has overheard such words about the Martiniquan woman from the other adults in the apartment complex. Like any child, she mimics adult behavior, so that her own conduct—at least verbally—is a sad paradigm of the racist, sexist and classist contempt she has learned is socially acceptable.

Serge’s anecdote is a testament to not only the general pattern of female interaction in *Good Morning, Midnight* but also to Paulo Freire’s theory of oppression: Oppressed individuals often exhibit the same contempt toward one another that their oppressors show them. In his monumental work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire writes that “almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend to themselves...become oppressors...This is their model of humanity. This phenomenon derives from the fact that the oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of ‘adhesion’ to the oppressor” (29-30). The instance of the little girl deriding the Martiniquan woman demonstrates that the women of the apartment building are the very perpetrators of slander against one of their own: another woman. Serge notes two women in particular who look upon the Martiniquan with “cruel eyes” (Rhys 97). The women of the apartment complex seem to have internalized the message that they may abuse her because of lifestyle; she is a half-black woman who is openly “kept” by a white man and therefore subject to their blatant derision.

We see how quickly antagonism can develop between women when Sasha gazes out of her hotel window and her eyes fall upon a girl who is in the opposite window applying make-up. Sasha comments that the girl “averts her eyes, her expression harden[ing]. I realize that if I watch her making-up she will retaliate by staring at me when I do the same thing” (34). Two unacquainted women may become enemies even though they might not ever

formally meet. This passage is significant as well because of the “self-masking” that make-up involves. Feminist theory argues that women learn to adopt the “male gaze” when looking at themselves or at other women. Therefore, another woman’s beauty, or “beautification process” through make-up may be seen as a threat. Feminist author Naomi Wolf explores this in *The Beauty Myth*:

...‘beauty’ is an economy in which women find the ‘value’ of their faces and bodies impinging...on that of other women’s. This constant comparison, in which one woman’s worth fluctuates through the presence of another, divides and conquers. It forces women to be acutely aware of the ‘choices’ women make about how they look.(284-5)

Here what may be Sasha’s absentminded staring off turns into a strange competition; eyes become weaponry to use against another woman.

That women look upon one another with a “male gaze” so that they may judge another woman’s beauty is also significant in light of the Martiniquan woman from earlier. The fact that she is half-black also raises the question of whether the other women are disparaging her not only for her sex but also for her skin color. This adds further dimension to women’s interpretation of what qualifies another woman as “beautiful” and what makes her worthy of contempt. Here, the women of the apartment complex presumably feel threatened that a white man would be sexually attracted to non-white woman; their racism makes them seem the Martiniquan woman’s race as something ugly and detestable. Therefore, a white man’s attraction to her would be all the more threatening: his attraction flies in the face of their bigoted ideology. Interestingly, they direct their anger at this supposed “betrayal” not at the man, but at the woman.

Eyes consistently convey hostility throughout the text. When Sasha turns her own eyes onto other women, she frequently does so because she is paranoid and anxious to

interpret others' opinions of herself: "I go into a tabac. The woman at the bar gives me one of those looks: What do you want here, you?" (Rhys 104). Even though no actual words have been exchanged, Sasha believes she can already detect unfriendliness. A second woman "behind the bar" also poses a threat in Sasha's mind. Sasha wonders whether the second woman will "giggle or...say something about me in a voice loud enough for me to hear" (98). This last musing of Sasha's refers to an earlier encounter with a different woman in a different bar. On that occasion, a woman had verbally insulted Sasha so loudly that the entire cafe heard. This greatly distresses Sasha, but she feels incapable of any retaliation other than to "look at the tall girl" (51). As Sasha fights back the tears that threaten to spill, she nurses a violent anger against her attacker, thinking to herself: "One day...when you're not expecting it, I'll take a hammer...and crack your little skull like an egg-shell" (52). This is an alarmingly clear example of female-on-female hostility. In studying Rhys's works, Sternlicht observes that "women in her earlier novels are always hostile, and the protagonists are either hostile in return or they repress anger or flee in tears" (98). In her own sour encounters with other women, we see Sasha's propensity to all three reactions: hostility, repressed anger, and the threat of tears.

On that earlier occasion in which Sasha was very publicly humiliated, the other, younger woman had loudly exclaimed—according to the translation Sasha gives readers—"What the devil is she still doing here, that old woman?" (Rhys 54) As Sasha agonizes over this, she muses that the young woman had said that "partly because she didn't like the look of me" (53). The fact that one woman is moved to verbally insult another because she doesn't "like the looks" of the other speaks volumes about women's interactions with one another in a society that objectifies their sex. Whether this girl doesn't "like the looks" of Sasha because she thinks Sasha *is* beautiful—and therefore, a threat—or because she *doesn't* think Sasha beautiful—and therefore, worthy of her contempt—is irrelevant to readers. What *is*

important is that the girl thinks that another woman's "looks" is justification enough to treat her maliciously.

Society's objectification of women is what encourages them to treat each other so cruelly. French feminist Luce Irigaray argues that because women in a patriarchal society are essentially "commodities," it is virtually impossible for them to "enjoy their own worth among themselves...the interests of businessmen require that commodities relate to each other as rivals" (196). Rivals indeed; Sasha's sense of being at odds with other women is so deeply ingrained that she felt resentful even towards the dolls that were on display at a past job. Sitting by idly, she would eye the "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 18). These dolls can be read as a representation of society's idea of what women should be; a doll is after all a type of model, which is an idealization. Sasha's animosity in response to the dolls' supposed success demonstrates how deeply she has internalized not only society's commodification of women, but also of the inherent competition that must then exist between women.

Sasha even witnesses the detrimental effect of objectification on the relationships between *other* women. As she gazes into a hat shop, she watches an elderly, bald-headed woman try on hat after hat, as her daughter "stays in the background. She is past shame, detached, grim" (22). The daughter thinks that because her mother is old, she is silly to adorn herself, perhaps because no man will find the old woman attractive at this point no matter what she wears. As they leave the shop empty-handed, "the daughter bursts out. A loud, fierce hiss: 'Well, you made a perfect fool of yourself, as usual. You've had everybody in the shop sniggering'" (23-3). Even mother-daughter relationships are subject to corruption in Sasha's society. Sasha feels compassion for the old woman—she is after all, very conscious of her own aging self. Yet this mother-daughter scene reinforces the sense that a relationship with another

woman can be dangerous ground.

In an interesting anecdote in which Sasha equates herself with a kitten, she implicitly reveals that women's treatment of one another is often the source of their own demise. She recalls living in London below a couple that owned a cat. The kitten goes out into the street where "all the male cats in the neighborhood were on to her like one o'clock. She got a sore on her neck, and the sore on her neck got worse. 'Disgusting,' said the German hairdresser's English wife. 'She ought to be put away, that cat'" (54-5). The sequence of Sasha's narration implies that the kitten got the sore on her neck *because* of the male cats that were "on to her like one o'clock." Significantly, it is the woman of the couple that finds the cat "disgusting" for the sore's apparition; it is a small reflection of the way in which women systematically learn to debase and exclude each other. It is not hard for readers to make the jump here from this kitten to a sexually promiscuous woman whose sexual activity makes other women uneasy. The fact that the woman's response is not concern for the kitten's well-being but rather disgust is important. She seems to shun the cat in the same manner that a sexually promiscuous woman may be shunned by other, more reserved women.

Yet the kitten—"feeling what was in the wind"—leaves the couple, seeking refuge in Sasha's apartment (55). Yet although it is clear that Sasha sees herself in the kitten ("In the glass just now, my eyes were like that kitten's eyes" [56]), she eventually loses her patience with the kitten: "She wouldn't eat, she snarled at caresses. She just crouched in the corner of the room, staring at me. After a bit of this I couldn't stand it any longer and I shooed her out" (55). Interestingly, Sasha loses her patience with a creature whose situation she views as a mirror of her own situation in society. This passage suggests that even women who are conscious of the effects that vicious behavior between women can fall prey to such behavior themselves. Although Sasha later regrets shunning the kitten, it had darted out into the street where a "merciful taxi went over her" (55). This passage is furthermore important as an

allegory to Sasha's own fate. We have already seen that Sasha feels that she and the kitten share an intimacy. Because Sasha claims that the kitten "knew her fate" (54) we can reasonably assume that Sasha is implying her own coming death, an image we may recall as the novel closes.

Because she consistently feels in competition with and degraded by other women, Sasha develops a fear of them. She intimates exactly this when René—whom Sasha is attracted to despite her belief that he is a gigolo after her money—asks her what she is so afraid of that has reduced her to being unable to feel comfortable with him. She responds: "You want to know what I'm afraid of? All right, I'll tell you. . . I'm afraid of men—yes, I'm very much afraid of men. And I'm even more afraid of women" (172-3). The consequence of being *more* fearful of women than men is that Sasha is alienated from the very people who might otherwise provide understanding and solidarity. She frequently reads dislike and disapproval in the eyes of women she's never met and sometimes doesn't even speak to. Where she might have found companionship with other women similarly affected by living in a patriarchal society, she instead finds reason for apprehension. This effectively restricts Sasha to forming relationships almost solely with men who, also under the influence of a patriarchal society, frequently objectify her.

Society has left poor women—such as Sasha—to fend for themselves, and because securing a man's affection may provide material yet essential gains, women who are strangers to each another may become rivals. Sasha relates a story in which she meets a random man who buys her dinner. During their meal, he obsesses over a letter from another girlfriend who wants money to buy a new pair of shoes. Sasha listens to him grapple over whether the other woman is playing him for his money or not. But just as the man is ready to take Sasha home, she mistakenly blurts out that she has scarcely eaten for the past three weeks. The man deserts her; he doesn't want to initiate another relationship with a poor woman that will compel him

to financially support her. Here, the unidentified girl and Sasha are set up as competitors even though they will never meet each other. Sasha drunkenly and readily accepts this: “Close-up of human nature—isn’t it worth something? . . . But there you are, if you’re determined to get people on the cheap, you shouldn’t be so surprised when they pitch you their own little story of misery sometimes” (90). Unfortunately, Sasha thinks that how this man has treated her is somehow justifiable: he was going to presumably use her for sex, and she him for material support. She is not upset by his objectification of her nor her own objectification of herself. She merely affirms that this other girl and herself were both objects “to be gotten on the cheap” by a man.

Importantly, while Sasha *has* had relationships with women that have *not* been hostile, these relationships are both infrequent and insubstantial. There is not one female character in the entire novel to whom Sasha ever turns for comfort. Although her London friend Sidonie gives her money to travel back to Paris, it is not done out of genuine goodwill. She simply says: “I can’t bear to see you like this...I think you need a change” (11). It’s easier for Sidonie to give Sasha money and shoo her away than to provide true support, which would be emotional availability.

Sasha’s interactions with a nurse illustrates that even when women are not explicitly demeaning to one another, they may still unintentionally hurt one another. After Sasha gives birth to her son, the midwife “comes in and says: ‘Now I am going to arrange that you will be just what you were before. There will be no trace, no mark, nothing’” (60). There is nothing in the text to suggest that the nurse *wants* to do something painful to Sasha. In fact, she even seems to be extra-giving with Sasha: “She swathes me up in very tight, very uncomfortable bandages. Intricately she rolls them and ties them. She gives me to understand that this is usually an extra. She charges a great deal for this as a rule” (60). The nurse seems to be fond of Sasha, providing for free a service for which she usually charges rather highly. Yet she does

hurt Sasha emotionally:

When I complain about the bandages she says: 'I promise you that when you take them off you'll be just as you were before.' And it is true. When she takes them off there is not one line, not one wrinkle, not one crease.

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And five weeks afterwards there I am, with not one line, not one wrinkle, not one crease.

And there he is, lying with a ticket tied round his wrist because he died in a hospital. And there I am looking down at him, without one line, without one wrinkle, without one crease.... (60-1).

The repetition here in Sasha's language suggests she feels emotionally empty by the lack of physical evidence that she ever gave birth to a son. Although the nurse only meant to do Sasha a favor—help Sasha retain her pre-pregnancy body—she inadvertently makes Sasha feel barren. Rather than being able to spend time with her son—who was “swathed up too, like a mummy” (60)—Sasha is physically prevented from intimate bonding. Worse still, she not only has no memory of holding and cradling her infant son, but she has no evidence that she ever had one. Her melancholy repetition of “no line, no wrinkle, no crease” suggests that she feels somehow cheated by this experience; she *had* the experience of childbirth and yet retains none of its joys nor any substantial reminder of it. The nurse's well-meant actions are guided by a patriarchal society's notions of what women want—to be attractive. In Sasha's case however, this is a painful and depressing incident in her life and only adds to her sense of disconnect with other women.

At other times Sasha has seemingly kind encounters with other women, but these too prove to be trivial. When Sasha passes “nearly two hours” in a shop trying on a succession of hats, the employee helping Sasha is “quite friendly” the whole time (70). Yet this seems to be

due to the girl's desperate need for customers; she continuously claims that "All the hats now are very difficult. All my clients are complaining" (70). Indeed, although Sasha seems to feel a sort of connection to the employee, she refrains from attempting a friendship: "I have a great desire to ask her to come and dine with me, but I daren't do it...If I asked her to dine with me, it would only be a failure" (70). Sasha's musing implies that the customer-employee relationship is all she could realistically hope for from this woman. Anything beyond this would be a "failure."

On one occasion Sasha shows kindness to an elderly woman who begs Sasha for money. Yet the experience is devoid of meaning for Sasha. As the woman steps out of the shop with a loaf of bread she "she smiles at me and waves gaily, [and] I wave back. For a moment I escape from myself. But she disappears along a side-street, eating the loaf, and again I start thinking about dyeing my hair (49). Sasha's sense of connection with the woman is fleeting; there is no long-lasting feeling of kinship. In stark contrast with this brief and forgetful encounter is Sasha's subsequent conflict with the girl in the café who publicly humiliates Sasha when she exclaims "What the devil is she doing here, the old woman?" *This* incident remains sharp in Sasha's mind. She mentally carries this comment with her for the rest of the day, agonizing over it. The blatant difference between these two episodes—which occur back-to-back in the novel—demonstrates that the formative interactions between women are those that are negative rather than positive.

When René asks her if there was not ever a woman she felt she "could have loved," Sasha responds that there was once one, who she saw while at a brothel: "There isn't anything to tell, except that I liked her. She looked awfully sad and very gentle. That doesn't happen often" (160). Yet nothing ever comes of this: "While I was thinking these sentimental thoughts a fresh client came in and she rushed off to join the crowd that was twittering round him" (160-1). The fact that a potential love between two women is prevented so that one of them

can sell her body to a man reinforces the fact that society's objectification of women negatively impacts their relationships with one another.

Sasha's ability to bond with other women is so fractured that by the end of the novel she is completely alienated. Ironically, when she discusses what makes a woman an intellectual—a *cérébrale*—she does not discuss this with another woman, but with a man. René almost affectionately calls Sasha “stupid” rather than a “*cérébrale*,” because as he claims a *cérébrale* is a woman who likes neither men nor women and “nothing and nobody except for herself and her own damned brain or what she thinks is her brain” (162). In other words, René's definition of an “intelligent” woman is one who must be completely alone. Sadly, by the close of *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha fits René's definition. She is so completely alienated from other women that the novel ends with her metaphorical death as she accepts the sexual advances of a man she had previously rejected. Here, readers may recall the kitten that Sasha earlier identified with. Just as Sasha saw the kitten's recognition of its fate—physical death—Sasha now accepts her own symbolic death. Unable to bond with other women, readers are left with the image of a defeated woman who resigns herself to a life of empty and debasing relationships with men.

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Subsequent citations of *Good Morning, Midnight* will be made parenthetically. Affirmations: of the modern 1.2 Spring 2014 16

Affirmations 1.2 in the Dark (1934), Rhys's protagonist, like the author, finds herself cast upon the shores of a cold and unforgiving England after having grown up in the Caribbean.² Anna has recourse to memories of her childhood early in the novel, and while she dwells on them in. In a despairing moment, Anna thinks, "that when you can hear time sliding past you, like water running." In effect, Anna's past is initially manifest as memories but these memories become flashbacks that overtake rather than comfort her in the nightmarish final scene; similarly, in the beginning of *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1930), Julia "found pleasure in memories After "Good Morning, Midnight" was first published in 1939 Jean Rhys didn't publish another book until 1966. What might have led to such a gap in her literary output? Rhys's life was very difficult for many years. Sophia Jansen is clearly another iteration of the heroines of the first three novels "the desperate, rootless woman Rhys returned to obsessively in her work. By this stage, though, Rhys was fully in control of her material and style, and able to render Sophia's situation more vividly and acutely than ever before. Rhys was conversant with other writers of her generation and she's now loosely grouped among modernist writers of the early 20th century. *Good Morning, Midnight*. Jean Rhys. 40-page comprehensive study guide. Includes detailed chapter by chapter summaries and multiple sections of expert analysis. Thanks for exploring this SuperSummary Study Guide of "Good Morning, Midnight" by Jean Rhys. A modern alternative to SparkNotes and CliffsNotes, SuperSummary offers high-quality study guides that feature detailed chapter summaries and analysis of major themes, characters, quotes, and essay topics. Overview. Published in 1939, *Good Morning, Midnight* is a semiautobiographical work written by Jean Rhys. A writer of Creole and Welsh descent, Rhys lived in the British West Indies before traveling to England to study.