

JSL

Journal of the
School of Language,
Literature and
Culture Studies

Spring/Autumn 2016

Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi

Contents

From the Editor's Desk

5

1. That "Longing For Cities":
The Cityscape in the Fiction of
Jean Rhys and Katherine Mansfield

Ruchi Mundeja

7

2. Nostalgia for the Colonial World:
A Reconsideration of Mayyazhi's Colonial Past

Sreenath V.S.

20

3. How Progressive? Modernity at Stake in Ahmed Ali's
Twilight in Delhi

Satish C. Aikant

30

4. *Swadeshi* and the Revolutionary Movement in
Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* and *Char Adhyay*

Rita Banerjee

40

5. Writing England through Indian Eyes:
The Mode of Travel Writing

Arti Minocha

52

6. Five Poems by Sukanta Bhattacharya

Amitendu Bhattacharya

66

7. Paulin S. Vieyra, Father of African Francophone Cinema
C'était il y a quatre ans Or How the West was won!

Ashish Agnihotri

71

8. History in Their Voices: Oral Narratives as a Tool
for Documenting Endosulfan Tragedy

Sheeja Rajagopal

78

That “Longing For Cities”: The Cityscape in the Fiction of Jean Rhys and Katherine Mansfield

Ruchi Mundeja
Lakshmibai College, University of Delhi

“...you see I am not a highbrow. Sunday lunches and very intricate conversations on Sex and that ‘fatigue’ which is so essential and that awful ‘brightness’ that is even more essential - these things I flee from...”

Katherine Mansfield (Qtd in Smithv)

In a number of statements such as the one quoted above or when Mansfield writing to Ottoline Morrell, referred to herself as “baby scholar” and “upstart”(Mansfield *Letters* 319), or in the way Rhys distinguishes herself from the heavily cerebralized modernist milieu by referring to her “one syllable mind”(Rhys *Letters* 24), there is a self-conscious attempt on the part of these writers to place themselves as ‘lowbrow’. It is not the contentious(the cross-overlies) but the commentative value of that self-positioning that I examine in this essay. Reading these writers as in an interrogatory relationship with the thematics of high modernism, I focus on their engagement with the city. In engaging with this trope that was so much a part of a canonized writer like Woolf’s overhauling of gendered economies, I look at how Rhys and Mansfield add a necessary post-scriptum to that.

Touching upon Henry James’s depiction of the city’s spectacle, Woolf asks in an essay on James-”If London[or the modern city in general] is primarily a point of view, if the whole field of human activity is only a prospect and a pageant , then we cannot help asking, as the store of impressions heaps itself up, what is the aim of the spectator , what is the purpose of his hoard?”(qtd in Parsons 2000:61). Mansfield, Rhys, and Woolf herself, approach and read the visual spectacle with

an expository 'purpose' in mind. Rhys deploys the axes of female flânerie to chart the difficult journey of single and disempowered women through the city. In their precipitous descent into alcoholism and vagrancy, brought on or at least exacerbated in large part by societal intolerance, Rhys situates a counter-critique on the society that pillories them. Mansfield's depiction of underclass women like Rosabel in 'The Tiredness of Rosabel' and Ada Moss in "Pictures" manoeuvres between the transformative and the carceral in charting women's negotiations through the city. Modernist fiction's interest in the new, visible, urban presence of women is reflected in the works of Rhys and Mansfield, yet the revolutionary thrust of female flânerie is 're-routed' in seminal ways. Mansfield's 'The Tiredness of Rosabel' and Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* and 'Mannequin' look at the "fairy palaces" ("Tiredness of Rosabel" *Collected Stories* 513), the consumerist havens, from the point of view of the server rather than the served. Where Woolf turned female flânerie into a high art, my analysis points to how Rhys and Mansfield in their work are more attuned to the urban forays of disadvantaged women. The important difference is that of class—most of Woolf's wandering women are tied to stable (mostly upper-class) structures. Rhys and Mansfield on the other hand focus on women who are a part of the mass that in fact engage the spectatorial eye of Woolf's female narrators, whether one thinks of *Mrs Dalloway*, or 'Streethaunting'.

In Woolf's *Night and Day*, Mary Datchet, the suffragist, after a morning spent immersed in work, prefers to indulge her palate in a restaurant, "a gaudy establishment" (70), while her co-workers choose the quieter alternatives—the much older Mrs Seal eating sandwiches brought from home on a park bench and Clacton opting for a spartan vegetarian meal as opposed to Mary's heavy repast. We follow Mary as she seats herself in a restaurant, and see that a covert flânerie is also a part of the indulgence—"she bought herself an evening newspaper, which she read as she ate, looking over the top of it again and again at the queer people who were buying cakes or imparting their secrets." (70) Running into a female friend, she lunches with her, and then they both emerge onto the bustle of the street, with a purposive sense of being a part of its energy—stepping out "with a feeling that they were stepping once more into their separate places in the great and eternally moving pattern of human life" (70).

Compare this with Sasha Jensen in the opening section of Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight*—"I have decided on a place to eat in at midday, a place to eat in at night, a place to have my drink in after dinner. I have arranged my little life". (9) Rhys situates a single woman in an urban context but here the beleaguered aspects of women's existence in cities is more palpable. Her women's outsidership both disadvantages them and gives them the acidic edge with which to unpick the imperial/ racial/ gendered hierarchies that form the subtext of the city. The novel suggests that it is only through such micro-management that Sasha can negotiate the urban landscape. Sasha follows this up by talking of how choosing the right eating places/drinking holes is crucial to her staying afloat. She talks of how "last night was a catastrophe" (9) recounting an incident of how while drinking in the

company of a woman and her male companion, she broke down-at which the woman turned on Sasha for making a public spectacle of her misery. In her unrestrained display of emotion in the cafe, Sasha flouts the distinction between public and private-but this certainly needs to be read in juxtaposition with how Sasha's own privacy is publically consumed. Throughout the text, Sasha's outré positioning and her powerlessness vis a vis the economic grid entails her own privacy being invaded with impunity by those in power. This is most crucially conveyed in her humiliation, both professional and sexual, at the hands of her employer at the fashion house¹. The anguish at how the marginalized are easy prey is written into sentences like this one- "No more pawings, no more prying- leave me alone" (37).

Sasha speaks of how she needs to narrow down on places where she can be "dry, cold and sane" (10). A little later, she plans her next fifteen days with the main thrust on how the idea of survivalism is tied to picking the right urban spots-the ones most likely to be gentle on a down-and-out vagrant like her-" This is going to be a quiet, sane fortnight. Not too much drinking, avoidance of certain cafes, of certain streets, of certain spots, and everything will go beautifully" (14). The contrast with the passage from Woolf could not be starker- while Mary chooses her spot to run her spectatorial gaze over the urban scene, Rhys's women pick spots that promise inconspicuousness. There is a crucial commonality too- the women in both scenarios execute a reading of the urban miasma- though Mary does it with/in relative ease, whereas Sasha's bitter dissection is of one from the margins. But what stands out is that Rhys and Mansfield (self-consciously?) choose protagonists who represent the grimy side of women's urban endeavours-as Parsons says, Rhys portrays the "counterparts to the university-educated and professional women entering the city in the first decades of the twentieth-century city: mannequins, models, showgirls, and prostitutes- and are problematically uncertain realizations of the urban woman as model for emancipated identity" (145). While Woolf revolutionizes women's relationship to cities by showing her women laying a claim to space(the young Elizabeth in *Mrs Dalloway*), Rhys's women look for a space to retreat. And yet from those nooks and crannies of withdrawal, they fix an unerring eye at the prejudicial societal 'sneer' as played out in public spaces. While Rhys's women themselves remain bound within a narrative of failure, their fate reflects back on class and race hierarchies as equally important in any valuation of the changing trajectories of women's lives. Thus what the colonial parvenus, Rhys and Mansfield do, is through choice of alternate city spaces, to cut into the classism of the modernist pantheon.

If we shift our focus from Woolf to Mansfield and Rhys, we see the underside of the urban milieu coming into view. Ali Smith notes that " Woolf in her more rivalrous moments dismissed Mansfield to herself for her 'cheap' realism, the ABC tea shop, waitress-peopled, downmarket settings of her stories". (xix) Woolf commented on various occasions on the cheapness of Mansfield's fiction, and her comment if lifted out of its disparaging registers, can in fact throw light on the

positionality of the two writers-Mansfield's deliberate incursions into the most minutely material aspects of her 'downmarket' protagonists' lives as a deliberate departure (in common with Rhys) from the "aesthetics of respectability" (Thomas 2012: 64). In turn, Woolf's discomfort highlights how as Thomas says, "imperialist politics and aesthetics of feminine respectability inform her judgements about the artistic credibility and respectability of Mansfield's writing" (79).

So to move from *Night and Day* to Mansfield's 'Pictures' marks a movement from, while still remaining within the parameters of women's emergence into visibility, the pioneers to the stragglers- Mary investing her intelligence and energy in spearheading the suffragist campaign and Miss Ada Moss struggling to find work as a contralto singer. Interestingly even the rather patrician Katherine Hilberry has her moment in an ABC teashop in *Night and Day*- and yet it becomes the place where she scripts a part of her own at least partly self-impelled narrative with Ralph. It is a site for a writerly interlude- where she, having first bought pencil and paper in the bookstall, secures an empty table and a cup of coffee and writes her impatience with bourgeois mores-she complains of William's and Cassandra's unimaginativeness in that they "insist that we are engaged". The energy and intellectualism of Mary's and Katherine's ventures is very different from the seedy narrative of Ada Moss's struggles. Even as she sinks into the comforts of the 'gaudy establishment' where she lunches, Mary's is a self-conscious foray into the urban vortex. Ada Moss's straying into the ABC teashop is more a quotidian marker of the landscape that defines her life and crucially linked to her itinerant, random existence. After revelling in the orgiastic tableaux of imagined "Good Hot Dinners" and "Sensible Substantial Breakfasts" ('Pictures' *Collected Stories* 119) she counts out her money and left with only one and threepence, chooses to head for an ABC. Mansfield and even more pungently Rhys sketch the geography of dis-possession through the spots and locales which form the fabric of their protagonists' lives- decrepit hotels, cramped bedsits, lavabos and back streets and alleys. Rhys's *Quartet* in fact is about sketching a pedestrian path that is in sync with the protagonist, Marya's desire to discover the 'other' city-Deborah Parsons speaks of how the Parisian Left Bank was made up of both the middle class spots, the Bals Musettes, frequented by students from the Sorbonne, and on the other hand the boîtes which were more disreputable (156). Parsons notes that Rhys knew of both since Ford organised dos at the Bals Musettes. So it is even more significant that her characters, such as Marya, incline more towards the world of the boîtes. In her architectural mapping, Rhys consciously charts the less privileged borderlands of the city.

Commentaries on Woolf and the city highlight how the route charts and sites/sights that her characters' negotiate are seminally tied to her political critique, the most cited example of course being *Mrs Dalloway*. My argument is that in the same vein, the choice of locations in Mansfield and Rhys deserve equal attention in foregrounding the critical element in their writings. For instance to stay with Mansfield's 'Pictures', in their discussion of 'new spaces of food consumption' (81),

Gareth Shaw et al rightly point out that the department store was certainly the quintessential commercial consumerist haven, but the newly evolving food chains also merit attention. In another essay by Scott McCracken, the complexities of gender and the modern metropolis, and the transforming co-ordinates of both, are approached through the emblem of the chain tea shop. The establishments he looks at are ABC and Lyons. McCracken points out that the “chain teashop was a key element in a distinct lower-middle-class habitus” (86).

In situating Ada Moss in the ABC teashop Mansfield gives us but in characteristically low-key fashion a visual sketch of a space occupied by women—the ABC’s were staffed by women. Mansfield relies on her readers’ awareness of this by not making the gender of the cashier clear till sometime later in the narrative. Thus she slips in the sense of a differently defined urban scene at the level of the quotidian— and this is in keeping with how the story explores the everyday, deglamorized, struggles of small-time professionals like Ada Moss—the revolutionary ferment of women’s incursions into the outside world is squarely approached through the lens of privilege/non-privilege. Additionally, one might turn to Saikat Majumdar’s thesis, a part of his formulations on postcolonial thought, that “the assertion of the ordinary as a significant site of the historical” (Majumdar 2013:176) must be taken into account in tandem with the more theatrical aspects of struggle. Using that theoretical frame, I am arguing that Mansfield and Rhys venture into the non-spectacular and even the compromised in their explorations of the potentially emancipatory narrative of women’s growing engagement with modernity.

Though ‘Pictures’ lingers on the visible urban presence of women and although this story looks at predominantly female encounters, the register along which these thematics unfold may be read as non-utopian. This is related to how Mansfield and Rhys look at the woman-woman encounter through the multiple prisms of race, class and gender and hence these encounters are necessarily fractured and divisive. To that extent the work of these writers treads the difficult ground between being non-constructivist but decidedly expository. The story in fact begins with a particularly abrasive encounter between one woman and another, Ada Moss and her landlady to be precise. Such friction between the woman lodger and the female house owner is an ubiquitous feature in Rhys’s fiction and here we glimpse a similar dynamics in Mansfield. Mansfield suggests that the survivalist registers being common to both, the encounter is inevitably hostile— the landlady seeks to eke out her rent from Ada Moss as also to clip the wings of this rather beleaguered avatar of the New Woman—“My sister Eliza was only telling me yesterday—‘Minnie...’ she says ‘She may have had a college eddication and sung in West End concerts’ says she ‘but if your Lizzie says what’s true,’ she says ‘and she’s washing her own wovens and drying them on the towel rail, it’s easy to see where the finger’s pointing.’” (120) Mansfield sketches a scenario where the most intimate parts of a woman’s life are publically consumed. After that final act of infringing on Ada’s privacy by snatching away her private letter, she backs away but not before labelling Ada a woman of dubious character, by the heavily ironized sally of addressing her as “My Lady” (121).

For these women, their unattachedness, their non-implication in the marital, as well as their inferior class positioning makes them targets of societal opprobrium. Rhys's women constantly battle that sneer too. In *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna's progress through a procession of rooms that replicate one another is paralleled by a repetitive enactment of hostility on the part of the landladies. Thus Mansfield and Rhys do frequently paint the same landscape as Woolf- in fact perhaps oftener than her in that much of Rhys's fiction focusses on single women. These are all writers drawn to the spectacle of the city and preoccupied by women's negotiation of it. But while Woolf and the city have long been the subject of critical enquiry, it is only now that that the same thematics are beginning to be explored vis a vis Rhys and Mansfield². This is also to re-visit the core argument of this essay- to bring up front the congruent but also the non-congruent while studying these writers' different perspectives is in the ultimate analysis to add to and extend Woolf's well-theorized investment in the urban scene, and to see how writers with a different positionality bring a new, though perhaps not as enabling a dimension, to the subject.

Away from London for some time, Mansfield wrote in her journal in 1915- "My longing for cities engulfs me". (71) Intrigued or repelled by the spaces of the city, but alike returning to its labyrinthine realities time and again, Mansfield and Rhys take us into the 'rooms' of single women yet their explorations square up to the indignities of their lives more decidedly than Woolf's fiction does. The focus of Mansfield and Rhys is on the inglorious. This is not to suggest that their work does not take cognizance of the aspirational vis a vis women- yet it makes more space for fraying of aspirations, the lacklustre struggles of the underclass, the tiredness of the Rosabels in other words. Admittedly these are more narratives of failure than fruition- the rooms are a suitably decrepit accompaniment to the grimy lives of their inhabitants. Woolf's oeuvre enjoys its rightful place in the feminist archive since hers is an enabling narrative in the ultimate analysis. Yet as Sue Thomas points out, the tactility of hardship, the underworld of unsavoury sights and smells, is left out of her writing and in fact a revulsion to it expressed in many of her private statements. Thomas notes how 'Pictures' opens with the stale smell of Ada Moss's 'cheap' dinner pervading the room as also becoming the signature signifier of the story. She relates this to how Woolf in a number of statements panned Mansfield herself as also her stories such as 'Bliss' for their cheapness. Both Rhys and Mansfield factor in the sensory co-ordinates of their protagonists' existence with unflinching attention to minutiae, which probably explains Woolf's objection to the 'cheap realism' of Mansfield's stories.

A louche, low, world is of course the fictional province within which Rhys works. All three writers chronicle changing gender paradigms through their focus on women and the city, yet in Rhys's case, the registers of class and race equally pressingly modulate that concern. Deborah Parsons speaks of how the proliferation of consumer "stores offered a new sensory experience for women, and were liberating for those working and shopping in them". (47) Mansfield and Rhys

portray this more from the inside, focussing on how the fragile sense of identity of their outré protagonists is affected by this consumerist stimuli. Pamela Dunbar points to how Mansfield “challenges conventional notions of the romantic heroine by focussing on ageing and socially disregarded figures”, if one thinks of stories such as ‘Miss Brill’, ‘The Canary’, ‘Life of Ma Parker’.(71) In their conscious choice of socially marginalized protagonists, Mansfield and Rhys certainly extend the canvas of fiction revolving around women.

I would like to end this essay with looking at two stories, one from each writer, where they examine the consumer spectacle of the city². Rhys tells the story of the urban vortex from the other side- whether it be from the point of view of the model vis a vis the world of art or from the perspective of the mannequin when it comes to the booming, bustling fashion industry. That in fact is how one of her early stories is titled. The story that recounts a very young Anna’s first assignment as ‘Mannequin’, hence the title, looks at the unglamourized inside of the glamour business. Rhys employs a de-pastoralized vocabulary to convey the shabbiness of the setting, such as when the room where the models change, if one looks beyond the sensual flashes of rouge, naked limbs and silken lingerie, is described as unwelcoming and cold, “a very inadequate conservatory for these human flowers” (Rhys, *Collected Short Stories*, 21). There is also a frequent evocation of the labyrinthine metaphor- on numerous occasions, Anna’s negotiation of the corridors of the establishment is compared to her winding her way through a maze. The story shows an interest in the back-rooms of the glamour industry- Anna muses over how “At the back of the wonderfully decorated salons she had found an unexpected sombreness; the place, empty, would have been dingy and melancholy, countless puzzling corridors and staircases, a rabbit wren and a labyrinth” (21).

Interestingly the word ‘underground’ is used to describe the place from where lunch is served. This is important since this is the most animated space in the building and the place where Anna exists in an uneasy bonhomie with the other models. This scene is the centrepiece of the story. On the one hand, it is the space where the work-force casts a counter-glance at the inner workings of the business, such as a fellow model, Babette, who speaks of sexual exploitation at the hands of proprietors of these salons. To that extent it is the ‘underground’ feminine space of subversion. But at the same time Rhys looks at the internal hierarchies that reign among the women. Rhys lingers over how the models have been selected to fit into the ‘genres’ of the fashion industry. This is of course a glance at how commodification is finessed into an art, with fine distinctions and artful niches honed to perfection. She hints at how their professional profiles seem to seep into their actual demeanour, such as when Mona, the femme fatale of the house is shown as having cultivated a sneering superior air towards the rest. Rhys’s inside rather than aerial view also dwells on how work divisions breed rivalries, for instance how the pale-faced ‘workers’ sewing away with “the stamp of labour” on them glance enviously at the “blatant charms” (23) of the models. While both processes

are implicated in the process of commodification, the latter is more inconspicuous, the former more in the arena of visibility.

The lunch room, riven though it is by hierarchies, is also the place where they experience a temporary reprieve from the “raking eyes of customers”(25), and where they swap stories about boyfriends and career struggles. It is a measure of Rhys’s unromanticized portraiture that she shows how the scopic ethos permeates the store and so even the lunch hour is not entirely free from the assessing gaze that the women turn towards each other, though it also allows for a modicum of sociability that eases the otherwise dehumanized atmosphere of the place.

Rhys again collapses the division of the inside and outside by bringing the metaphor of the labyrinth from the street to the inside. Where a number of Rhys’s novels show the woman wending her way through hostile streets, sneering faces and derisive glances, this story places that sense of dislocation on the inside. Sasha’s sense of the houses stepping forward aggressively to sniffingly judge her claim to urban passage takes a slightly different complexion in Anna’s case in ‘Mannequin’ even as the feeling of constriction binds the experiences of the two. At many points in the story Anna feels the oppression of the inside weighing on her and after the long day of work, feels that “the white and gold walls seemed to close in on her.”(25) In fact, that sense of winding through a never-ending maze also forms Sasha’s experience of the inside of the fashion house she works for, as she is sent off by Mr Blank on a futile search.

Thus neither shopper nor worker break free from exploitative networks. For all early readings that saw Rhys’s work as lacking a locational specificity, these cryptic yet involved renderings of specific urban facets shows how attuned she was to what Steve Pile terms the “micro-climates” (12) written into cityscapes. Rhys conflates the inside-outside yet again when the story’s finale casts a glance at the surging stream of models and mannequins sashaying down the pavement of the Rue de la Paix, as if the street and the ramp of the couture house have merged into one. There is admittedly a moment when Anna feels an onrush of elation at being part of this purposeful, pulsating, female multitude. Rhys plays on the notion of artifice when she again deliberately bends a pastoral metaphor in describing how the colourful and gay parade of mannequins made the pavements “beautiful as beds of flowers”. (26) The final vision is of the Paris night swallowing up these women. The story looks at the world of fashion from the inside and its gendered lens explores both facets- the enabling potentialities as also further entrapment within a consumerist gaze. In lingering over the aspect of artifice and constructed glamour that make up the city, Rhys unpicks the tantalizing surface-text of the urban fabric to reveal the lurking inequities and oppressions on which it rests. The story touches upon both the sense of a burgeoning female presence in the city, but also the networks of exploitativeness that impede its paths.

Like Rhys in “Mannequin’, Mansfield approaches the fashion industry in ‘The Tiredness of Rosabel’ through the consciousness of the worker. Mansfield’s story places Rosabel in the consumer space along all the three axes identified by Reginald

Abbott(1992:194) as central to women's relationship to commodity culture-as a shop helper, as a shopper and as a consumer icon(in the way that both the girl in the shop and her male friend spectaclise her). The story significantly begins with Rosabel exercising her power as a consumer though the reader is made to understand clearly that this power is severely constrained and can only mean securing one indulgence at the cost of forgoing others. The story plays off one kind of room against another-the dazzling largesse of the rooms of fashion spectacle as against Rosabel's small rented accommodation. These represent the two poles of the urban spatial environment for women from the sub-strata trying to make a life for themselves in the city.

That Rosabel's entire negotiation of city spaces, including her domestic establishment, is mediated by her worker's experience of the consumerist parade, is in evidence- on her way home, she endows with magic some of the sites encountered but as she nears her room, the magical changes into the gothic-"Westbourne Grove looked as she had always imagined Venice to look at night...even the hansoms were like gondolas dodging up and down, and the lights trailing luridly...When she stood in the hall and saw...the stuffed albatross head on the landing, glimmering ghost-like.."(514). Rosabel's interface with the city is through the registers of fantasy - the oppressiveness of public transport is briefly palliated by the romantic haze induced by her reading a few fragments of *Anna Lombard* over her co-passenger's shoulder. At the same time, the 'voluptuous' fantasies unleashed by the read fragment make her chafe against the mass of humanity, which "seemed to resolve into one fatuous, staring, face..." (514) She seeks to erase her own implication in that anonymous sea of humanity through the erotic power of the fantasized scenario. This is also in contiguity with the desire for transcendence that the day's events at the store have released in her. The two spaces that define her existence are alike marked by constraint and powerlessness, but one through its potential for voyeurism, creates 'room' for imagining an alternate, richer, life.

Mansfield like Rhys retains a stubborn focus on grim micro-details, such as when Rosabel shifts from the canvas of fantasy to confronting the decrepitude of her day-to-day existence-with even the minutest details such as the enamel coming off the basin being recorded by the writer. Objectality is of primary importance in the way Mansfield and Rhys reconceive/revise modernist landscapes. Objects are foregrounded but while in Woolf everyday objects lead forward to the epiphanic(the snail in 'The Mark on the Wall'), in these writers they are squarely a measure of the oppressiveness of the existence of the lower classes. Mansfield and Rhys have an unerring eye for the small, trivial detail. Can one then hazard to say that in Woolf details are both brought up front but also fitted into a whole-ideological/aesthetic-but in Rhys and Mansfield they obtrude, stare you in the face, and become a statement in themselves?

At the store, Rosabel has a unique vantage point from where to view up close the private lives of her customers. Mansfield shows how the spectatorial operates

here from the point of view of both the customer and the seller and for the latter it is alternately intoxicating and embittering. As she watches the languorous intimacy between the young lady and Harry, she experiences a moment of rage at being treated like a mannequin by the girl who then sweeps out of the shop, secure in her affluence. Thus if we read backwards, Rosabel's entire journey back from the establishment where she works is an effort to un-write her dehumanisation by the rich class. While the girl personalizes the encounter briefly when she comments on how good the hat looks on Resale, but in the next moment majestically exits from the shop with scarcely a look backwards, Harry in turn dehumanizes her by his over-familiar remarks on her figure. As soon as his girlfriend's back is turned he assumes a tone of insolent familiarity in speaking to Rosabel, thereby underlining that her status as a shopgirl renders her easy game. When the girl first enters the store, she turns to airily ask of her escort-"What is it exactly that I want, Harry?" (515) who envisages for her an eccentric, impossibly structured, piece with a giant feather. For the upper classes, buying is a non-utilitarian pursuit that strengthens the aura around them. This is precisely the scenario that Simmel in his essay on fashion associates with the fashionable strata of society- how their quest is for the item that scandalizes- "The reason why even the aesthetically impossible styles seem distingue, elegant and artistically tolerable when affected by persons who carry them to the extreme, is that the persons who do this are generally the most elegant...so that under any circumstances we would get the impression of something distingue and aesthetically cultivated" (544).

Class dynamics are written into the fashion script, and the pursuit of fashion by the luckless protagonists of Rhys and Mansfield foregrounds this aspect. Rosabel's entire fantasization following from that brief encounter revolves around a romance with Harry but at the centre of this flight of imagination is the life that it can make available to her. Consumerism remains very much the pivot even of her fantasy life- the bunch of violets that she buys at the beginning of the story and that seem like a rash indulgence, are now available by the armful. There is the luxuriant erotica of dress and food-it is these sensual luxuries that form the centre of Rosabel's dream and it is these that electrify her contact with Harry. Mansfield brings alive the yearning for consumer goods in someone who is steeped in that economy, but from the other side, those who are part of the industry yet without the material power to be its beneficiaries. Thus Rhys and Mansfield are aware of the chimera their women pursue but they also understand how these can give a sense of worth to their dispossessed selves. They portray the compelling nature of these consumer spectacles for those women struggling to forge a life for themselves in urban centres, with understanding, since their own experiences showed them how these contributed to the self-definition of the derided. Maroula Joannou points out that in an article in 'Harper's Magazine' Rhys dwelt on the pleasure she got from clothes and how this added a different dimension to and hence interrupted her predestined role as a victim- "This assumes" she said that "I have never had any good times, never laughed, never got my own back, never

dared, never worn pretty clothes, never been happy" (470). Rhys's protagonists alternately analyze the iron grip of contemporary trends as manifested in fashion and draw on these as a way out of their abjection. Joannou comments on how the vocabulary of fashion is expansively spread across Rhys's works—"It encompasses hairstyling, jewellery, cosmetics, manicure and all the means whereby the fashion-conscious woman is able to perfect..." (470). In 'The Tiredness of Rosabel' Mansfield's enters the fashion industry through the 'tired' Rosabel's eyes. Rhys's fiction focusses similarly on the role that fashion plays in the lives of her women characters from a non-judgemental perspective. In fact, they often reconcile themselves to the drabness and constraint of the 'rooms' they live in by dwelling on the buying of new clothes. When Julia Martin's connection with her lover Mr Mackenzie in Rhys's *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* is finally severed, she skirts the emotional wrench of the situation by buoying herself up with how she can at least present a better made-up face to the world- "She thought of new clothes with passion, with voluptuousness. She imagined the feeling of a new dress on her body and the scent of it, and her hands emerging from long black sleeves". (15) In that last reference to self-specularity is the voice of a woman trying to restore her pride in her physical self.

Thus these fictional pieces from Rhys and Mansfield do not look at the fashion system from within a rigid binary of dupes/ accomplices- their women are the victims but also alternately the strategic deployers of what this new consumer realm had to offer- whether to fight off "the eternal grimace of disapproval" (*Voyage in the Dark* :140) or to eroticise and expand the contours of their drab existence. But of course that brings us to how "the hieroglyphics of dress" (Joannou 2012:475) is so much at the heart of Rhys's writing and whether the popular culture paradigm it falls into would not again summon the spectre of high and low, a fact contested by Woolf in her questioning why writing on fashion should be designated 'trivial', yet her tone in her essays and personal memoirs indicates that she herself never quite saw much merit in these user-oriented realms. Modernists saw themselves as creators and not as consumers. Trinh T Minh-ha writes- "High culture has often been defined as creator-oriented" and a little later, "High culture in such a context is...mystified as the exclusive realm of the creators, while popular culture remains equally mystified as that of the passively demanding consumers who, more often than not, are presented by their very advocates as fixed and unchanging in their ideology of consumption" (Minh-Ha 1991: 195-197). One is arguing against that last assumption-that even those who are participants in this culture retain a perspicacity to decode its inner workings, that consumption need not be entirely covered from creative or tactical cunning.

Woolf famously made the point in 'Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown' that the frame overpowers the framed, that the extraneous descriptiveness obscures rather than reveals. It is here that the micro narratives of the non-canonical (at least at that time) writers could be seen as in dialogue with such formulations. For with Mansfield and Rhys, we return to those grottos of mundaneness where micro details are not

merely atmospheric or even illuminative(in terms of throwing light on the character) but in fact seminally related to their own interstitial placement between core and periphery, consumer (as caustic readers of the urban milieu's gender/class/race biases) and consumed (the derision they themselves faced as 'little colonials'), inside and outside. Placed at the heart of the imperial metropolises, they register through the course charted by their women characters, both the potentialities and the predatoriness of the cityscape.

Notes

1. This is the moment in the text where the owner asks her whether she can speak French. The man is referred to as 'Mr Blank' and in naming him thus Rhys is pointing to how his dehumanized, blustering clinicalness reduces others to a 'Blank'. Interrogating Sasha about her previous job, he learns from her that she worked as a mannequin. At this piece of information his gaze slides appraisingly over her body, and Sasha, subjected to his blasé and proprietary scrutiny stumbles over the next few questions he asks her- "now everything is a blank in my head- years, days, hours, everything is a blank in my head." (18). In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Rhys portrays Sasha as battling a societal scrutiny that pares her down to a feeling of inconsequence. Rhys constantly circles back to how in their forays outward into the world her women are doubly disadvantaged, fighting not just on the front of gender, but judged by markers of class/ race as well.
2. One aspect that increasingly came home to me as I researched on Rhys was the startling difference in editions of Woolf and Rhys. If one were to look at this specifically through the prism of the city, references to city spaces in Woolf are well-substantiated but in editions of Rhys, there is no gloss on these at all, even though Rhys names so many specific places/ urban locations.
3. To cast a quick glance at where Woolf stands on this subject, Reginald Abbott notes how Woolf remained divided between "the exciting but terrifying realities of the modern consumer world" (195). He notes how Woolf once recorded her relief in her diary at finding what she wanted at a private dressmaker's, a more exclusive mode of shopping that she enjoys for being "quiet" and for marking her deliverance from the "parade" of Oxford street. (197) The same ambivalence can be seen in Woolf's essay 'Oxford Street Tide'. Though her tone in the essay is ironic, she does remain torn between this quicksilver world of fast changing trends, swamped by a tidal supply of goods as well as customers, and a quieter alternative. This would extend my argument of how the prism of class is central to analyzing these writers' imbrication in the cityscape. Jane Garrity in her article on 'Virginia Woolf and Fashion' looks at Woolf's ambivalent position vis a vis the subject. She points out that Woolf chose Madge Garland, the fashion editor of 'Vogue', as fashion consultant and was several times featured in the magazine, yet in her private papers there is a silence about this and Garland is depicted as an overdone fashionista (in Humm 2010;205).

References

- Abbott, Reginald. 1992. 'What Miss Kilman's Petticoat Means: Virginia Woolf, Shopping, and Spectacle' *MFS* 38.2 pp 193-216.

- Dunbar, Pamela. 1997. *Radical Mansfield-Double Discourse in Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Garrity, Jane. 2010. 'Virginia Woolf and Fashion' in Maggie Humm (ed) *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, Edinburgh University Press.
- Joannou, Maroula "All right, I'll do anything for good clothes" – Jean Rhys and Fashion' *Women: A Cultural Review* 23.4 , 463-489 DOI : 10.1080/09574042.2012.739849.
- Majumdar, Saikat. 2013. *Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of Empire*, New Delhi, Orient Blackswan Private Limited.
- Mansfield, Katherine. 1984. *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield Volume One 1903-1917* Eds Vincent O 'Sullivan and Margaret Scott Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- McCracken, Scott. 2005. 'Voyages by teashop – An urban geography of modernism' in Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (eds) *Geographies of Modernism: Literatures, cultures, spaces* London, Routledge.
- Minh-Ha, Trinh T. 1991. *When the Moon Waxes Red-Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*, New York, Routledge.
- Murry, John Middleton, ed. 1984. *Journal of Katherine Mansfield 1904-1922*, New Zealand, Hutchinson.
- Parsons, Deborah L. 2000. *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity*, Oxford University Press.
- Pile, Steve. 2005. *Real Cities: Modernity, Space and the Phantasmagorias of City Life*, London, Sage Publications.
- Rhys, Jean. 2000. *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, London, Penguin.
- . 2000. *Good Morning, Midnight*, London, Penguin.
- . 1985. *Letters 1931-66* Eds Francis Wyndham and Diana Melly, London, Penguin.
- . 1987. *The Collected Short Stories*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company.
- . 2000. *Voyage in the Dark*, London, Penguin.
- Shaw, Gareth, Louise Hill Curth and Andrew Alexander. 2006. 'Creating New Spaces of Food Consumption: The Rise of Mass Catering and the Activities of The Aerated Bread Company' in John Benson and Laura Ugolini (eds) *Cultures of Selling: Perspectives on Consumption and Society since 1700*, Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Simmel, Georg. 'Fashion' May 1957, *The American Journal of Sociology*, LXII.6.
- Smith, Ali. 2007. 'Introduction' in *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, London, Penguin.
- Thomas, Sue 'Revisiting Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf and the Aesthetics of Respectability' in *English Studies*, 94.1 , 64-82 DOI 10.1080/0013838X.2012.721242.
- Woolf, Virginia 2005. *Night and Day*, New York, Barnes and Nobles Classics.

ISSN 0972-9682

Published by

PENCRAFT INTERNATIONAL, B-1/41 ASHOK VIHAR II, DELHI-110052