

# TABULEIRO DE LETRAS

**Trapped: the colonisation of everyday life in Jean Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight***

**Sem saída: a colonização da vida cotidiana em *Bom dia, Meia-noite* de Jean Rhys**

Viviane de Freitas<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT:

This work seeks to investigate the ways in which Rhys's fiction, and the novel *Good Morning, Midnight* in particular, exposes and critiques the specific social conditions that engender the depletion and alienation of everyday life. The work examines *Good Morning, Midnight's* heroine's precarious existence in the metropolitan centres of Paris and London, by engaging with the works of the French theorists who study the dimension of experience named as "everyday life", such as Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord and Maurice Blanchot. These social theorists' analysis of the pervasive logic of consumer capitalism as well as the notion of "colonisation of everyday life" offer valuable insight into Rhys's modernist novels.

Keywords: Consumer society; Everyday life; Modernity

## RESUMO:

Este trabalho busca investigar as maneiras pelas quais a ficção de Rhys, e o romance *Bom Dia, Meia-Noite* em particular, expõe e critica as condições sociais específicas que geram o empobrecimento e a alienação da vida cotidiana. O trabalho examina a existência precária da heroína de *Bom dia, Meia-noite* nos centros metropolitanos de Paris e Londres, em diálogo com as obras dos teóricos franceses que estudam a dimensão da experiência denominada "vida cotidiana", tais como Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord e Maurice Blanchot. A análise que esses teóricos fazem da lógica penetrante do capitalismo de consumo, bem como a noção de "colonização da vida cotidiana" oferecem valiosas perspectivas de leitura dos romances modernistas de Rhys.

Palavras-chave: Modernidade; Sociedade de consumo; Vida cotidiana

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<sup>1</sup> Doutoranda do Programa de Pós-graduação em Literatura e Cultura da Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA).  
Email: [defreitasuk@gmail.com](mailto:defreitasuk@gmail.com)



## Introduction

In *Everyday life*, Michael Sheringham (2006) investigates a variety of ways of thinking and questioning “the everyday” or “*quotidien*”, through an interdisciplinary approach of the works of thinkers and artists. Sheringham shows that by exploring “the complex tissue of lived experience”, these works react against “the way everyday life was being subordinated to narrow functionalism” (SHERINGHAM, 2006, p. 14). Besides, the theorist investigates how the logic of advanced capitalism, which relies on the principles of acceleration and accumulation, results in the inevitable and steady deterioration of everyday life.

In multiple ways, Rhys’s modernist novels expose how everyday life is impoverished by a politics of exploitation and repression. Rhys’s alienated, destitute and helpless heroines, living on the margins of the metropolitan centres, are perfect examples of passive everyday subjects, “deprived of the possibility of making their own history, personally” (SHERINGHAM, 2006, p. 172). Sasha, in particular, Rhys’s most complex and critical heroine, renders an acute critique of “the specific perversities of morality, which characterise high consumption societies” (SAVORY, 1998, p. 111).

In the first section of this work, “Nothing happens,” I shall look into the nothingness of the protagonist’s life by establishing a connection with the ideas of the theorists Maurice Blanchot and Henri Lefebvre, who critique the notion of the “chiaroscuro of everyday life”, the concept of everyday life as “deadly dullness alleviated by miraculous moments” (SHERINGHAM, 2006, p. 20). The fact that Sasha is always waiting for something to happen and change her meaningless and monotonous life reflects this idea.

In the second section, “Trapped in a generalised exchange”, I shall establish some connections between Rhys’s exploration of the pervasiveness of commodification and the heroine’s fatalist vision of life. I shall engage with what Lefebvre and the Situationists called “the colonisation of everyday life” (SHERINGHAM, 2006, p. 10) and their analyses of the alienation of the everyday. I shall also investigate Rhys’s critique of the unchecked rationalisation, policing and manipulation that came to predominate in everyday life. Finally, I will associate her image of the world as an enormous disconnected machine with the inhuman and mechanical world promoted by the global exhibition.

## 1. Nothing happens

I had just come from my little health-stroll round Mecklenburgh Square and along the Gray's Inn Road. I had looked at this, I had looked at that, I had looked at the people passing in the street and at a shop-window full of artificial limbs. I came in to somebody who said: 'I can't bear to see you looking like this.'

'Like what?' I said.

'I think you need a change. Why don't you go back to Paris for a bit? ... You could get yourself some new clothes – you certainly need them. ... I'll lend you the money,' she said (RHYS, 2000a, p. 11).

If we track down the first scene of *Good morning, Midnight* in the present time of the narrative, we will find Rhys's heroine, Sasha Jansen, wandering in the streets of London, looking at passers-by, at shop windows, watching the movement of urban life. We will also find her being looked at - as she is walking, she bumps into her old friend Sidonie, who urges Sasha to change her life, so she lends her money to travel to Paris and get some new clothes. The acts of walking, looking, displaying, and buying are prominent in *Good morning, Midnight*. They consist in the heroine's recurrent activities as she moves unsteadily through her inner and outer journeys.

*Good morning, Midnight*, like Jean Rhys's (1890 – 1979) early novels<sup>2</sup> in general, is marked by a sense of survival and by repetition. *Good Morning, Midnight* in particular, with its minimal plotting, concentrates on ordinary activities, such as walking, eating, drinking, shopping, talking to strangers, noticing the movement of the Parisian city life. If we try to enumerate in a timeline Sasha's life "events", there will be very few relevant events, in the sense of something that stands out in the ordinary everyday life account that is basically what the novel consists of. Besides, considering that the protagonist's origins and background are unknown<sup>3</sup>, and that she leads a lonely life, all we are left with are her wanderings in the city and her memories, which concentrate on her life with her former husband in Paris.

Even Sasha's account of her past life is markedly uneventful. As the heroine recalls her past in her flashbacks, the only events that she highlights are her (almost accidental) marriage to Enno, the birth and death of their baby, and the couple's separation. The latest is taken by the

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<sup>2</sup> Rhys's novels can be divided into two phases: the modernist phase, which includes *Quartet* (published in 1929), *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (published in 1931), *Voyage in the Dark* (published in 1934), *Good Morning, Midnight* (published in 1939), and the postcolonialist phase, with the acclaimed novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (published in 1966), translated in Brasil as *Vasto Mar de Sargaços* (published in 2012).

<sup>3</sup> As remarked by Elaine Savory (1998, p. 117) "the Caribbean is a submerged text in [Good Morning, Midnight], the issue of erased nationality is so important in the novel that it suggests something is being coded about erasure of the Caribbean which stands behind the English affiliation and gives Sasha her acute critique of the English and of power".

protagonist as a watershed, dividing her life into a “before”, when she seemed to have some hope in the future, and an “after”, when she “began to go to pieces” (RHYS, 2000a, p. 119). Another watershed took place five years before the present time of the novel, when a female relative left her a legacy of a two-pound-ten weekly income and a room off the Gray’s Inn Road. Instead of envisioning a fuller future life, Sasha’s income and “room of her own”<sup>4</sup> marked the beginning of her “death”, “it was then that [she] had the bright idea of drinking [herself] to death” (RHYS, 2000a, p. 37).

In *Critique of everyday life*, Henri Lefebvre opens up a debate on the “theme of the production of the everyday, of revolution as the revolution of everyday life” (TREBITSHI, 2008a, p. xxvii). In the preface to the book, Michel Trebitsch notes that Lefebvre’s thinking on the everyday cannot be treated separately from his thinking about modernity. In this respect, he remarks that, “if modernity is the brilliant, even gaudy, side of the new, the everyday is its insignificant side” (TREBITSHI, 2008a, p. xxvi):

[the everyday] is what is humble and solid, what is taken for granted and that of which all the parts follow each other in such regular, unvarying succession that those concerned have no call to question its sequence (LEFEBVRE apud TREBITSH, 2008a, p. xxvi)

Lefebvre’s *Critique* is influenced by Marx’s theory of alienation, which claims that everyday experience was impoverished by industrialization, as human labour came to be treated as commodity and became conditioned by the industrial cycles of production. On that basis, Lefebvre holds modernity responsible for degenerating everyday life into “the everyday”. The French theorist blames modernity for having “despoiled the everyday life of former times” (TREBITSH, 2008a, p. xxvi), times when the quotidian was not associated with boredom and dullness, as an empty time awaiting extraordinary, miraculous moments. He laments that the “the primal diversity of the everyday individual” (SHERINGHAM, 2006, p. 140) has been overlaid by “the uniformity and mediocrity” that characterise everyday life.

Rhys’s novels perfectly capture the conception of the everyday life as a repetitive, unvarying sequence. This notion is epitomised by the constriction and monotony of her

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<sup>4</sup> This passage seems to mock the idea put forward in “A room of one’s own” by Virginia Woolf, Rhys’s contemporary, that a regular income to provide for living expenses and a room of one’s own would be the basis for a woman’s independence. As noted by Bowlby (1992, p. 34) “Rhys’s novels seem to [...] mock as mere drawing-room fantasy, the bright hopes of new women’s stories, or even the bright hopes of stories of progress at all.”

heroine's lives. In this regard, it is worth noting the recurrent allusions to "Sunday"<sup>5</sup> as an intolerable day, a metaphor for the stagnancy of their lives: "The feeling of Sunday is the same everywhere, heavy, melancholy, standing still. Like when they say, 'As it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be, world without end'" (RHYS, 2000c, p. 36). Moreover, *Good morning, Midnight*'s bleak story is suggested by the novel's title, a quotation from Emily Dickinson's unnamed poem<sup>6</sup>, which is also the novel's epigraph.

Maurice Blanchot also critiques the notion of everyday's uneventfulness. When questioning the idea of the "*rien ne se passe*" of the everyday, he asks, "for whom does nothing happen? In other words, what is the who of the everyday?" (BLANCHOT apud SHERINGHAM, 2006, p. 20). He concludes that the everyday subject has "an almost passive participation in daily activities, where the self dissolves into anonymity". Blanchot denounces the role of mass culture and media, such as movies, soap operas, fashions, as substitute for the "lived" everyday we fail to recognise all around us" (BLANCHOT apud SHERINGHAM, 2006, p. 18). He notes that the manufacturing of the "everyday-as spectacle" results in further "alienating and disguising (and de-politicising) the everyday in which we actually participate."

Although Rhys's novels belong to the a period prior to Blanchot's theories in the twentieth century, a period not influenced by the massive presence of television, they clearly capture the notion of the everyday-as-spectacle through the social alienation and the psychological and economic disenfranchisement of Rhys's heroines in the centres of the modern capitalist world. The uneventfulness and dullness of these heroines' lives are particularly rendered by the fact that they seem to be trapped in a vicious circle of repetition of dingy dwelling places, unsatisfactory jobs and relationships. Moreover, the central trope of exhibition and the multiple references to exhibitions throughout the narrative evoke the notion of "everyday-as-spectacle", according to which, "the *quotidien* is no longer what is lived, but what is looked at or shown, spectacle or description, without interaction" (BLANCHOT apud SHERINGHAM, 2006, p. 18)

*Good morning, Midnight* starts by the promise of a rebirth for the protagonist. After the chance encounter with her old friend, Sasha goes on a fortnight trip to Paris with some money to buy new clothes. The trip is taken as a life saving opportunity, an occasion to leave behind

<sup>5</sup> In *Good morning, Midnight*, references to Sunday include: "Gloomy Sunday" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 9), "Sunday – a difficult day anywhere. Sombre dimanche..." (RHYS, 2000a, p. 15).

<sup>6</sup> Good morning, Midnight! / I'm coming home, / Day got tired of me – / How could I of him? / Sunshine was a sweet place, / I liked to stay – / But Morn didn't want me – now – / So good night, Day! (DICKINSON apud RHYS, 2000a, p. 6)

“the dark streets, dark rivers, the pain, the struggle and the drowning...” (RHYS, 2000a, p.10), ultimately a chance for changing a life that seems to be beyond the limit of her endurance. In this regard, it is significant that shopping and displaying new clothes enact the possibility of making Sasha anew. It is also revealing that a trip to Paris, the centre of fashion and consumption and, in the present time of the narrative, the city that hosts a world’s fair, the Exhibition, gives the heroine the opportunity to reinvent herself.

Although not named,<sup>7</sup> the Exhibition visited by Sasha refers to the 1937 *Exhibition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques Appliqués à la Vie Moderne*.<sup>8</sup> It is fundamental to consider Rhys’s oblique references to the global Exhibition and to other historical events, such as the First World War in *Good morning, Midnight*. Not only do they provide the novel’s backdrop, but they also lead us to regard the precarious situation of Rhys’s heroine in the light of the broad European socio-historical context.

Moreover, the context and the symbolic significance of the global Exhibition give deeper meaning to the issues thematically explored by the novel, such as the central trope of exhibition; the emphasis on the themes of appearance, looking and displaying; the notion of everyday as spectacle; the mechanisation and dehumanisation of life; the pervasive consumerist logic and the unchecked rationalisations that came to predominate in the modern capitalist world. Most importantly, as noted earlier, the foremost image of the Paris Exhibition situates the narrative in the context of global capitalism, impelling us to look at the “nothingness” of the heroine’s life as well as her “passivity”<sup>9</sup> in the light of the broad social, economic and historical context.

Among all Rhys’s protagonists, Sasha is perhaps the best incarnation of Lefebvre’s picture of the “modern man”<sup>10</sup>, deprived of social reality and truth, and “private”, less social, less human, less individual (LEFEBVRE, 2008aa, p. 248). *Good morning, Midnight*, in particular, bears many traces of dialogue with Lefebvre’s *Critique* as Rhys exposes the idea of the nothingness of everyday life in modern capitalist society through the heroine’s extreme isolation, alienation, and the relentless repetitiveness of her life.

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<sup>7</sup> In choosing not to name it, Rhys’s ‘Exhibition’ in *Good morning, Midnight* alludes to other global exhibitions, and ultimately establishes the tropes of spectacle and exhibition, which are central in the novel.

<sup>8</sup> See the discussion of the Paris Exhibition in *Good morning, Midnight* in EMERY, 1990, pp 144 – 172.

<sup>9</sup> In this work I contend that Rhys’s heroines’ passivity is determined by social conditions. This position is in consonance with Emery’s argument that Rhys’s novels explore “the specific social conditions that create an insecure and dependent ego in women” (EMERY, 1990, p. 116).

<sup>10</sup> Lefebvre’s *Critique de la Vie Quotidienne* was first published in 1947, eight years after the publication of *Good morning, Midnight*.

The foremost metaphor of Rhys's character is that of a woman trapped in a labyrinth, evoked by Sasha's dream in which she is in the passage of a tube station in London, desperately looking for the way out (RHYS, 2000a, p. 12). This image is also endorsed by the "kise" episode, when her boss sends her on an errand, but she gets lost walking through "passages that don't lead anywhere" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 22). Sasha's surreal labyrinths are recurrently echoed in the narrative by other representations of space that suggest images of trapping. The protagonist's predicament can be summarised by her lament that "the passages will never lead anywhere, the doors will always be shut. I know..." (RHYS, 2000a, p. 28). Also, Sasha's allusion to her "[wait] for the door that will open" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 83) and other references to doors that open, enabling her to escape in the rare moments of happiness, endorse the idea of life as a wait for extraordinary moments, as described by both Lefebvre and Blanchot.

Lacking the attributes of a conventional plot, namely a linear succession of events that relate to each other by a principle of causality or temporality, *Good morning, Midnight* can be characterised as an anti-plot novel, or an "unstor[y]" as remarked by Bowlby (1992, p. 35), an uneventful novel, in which nothing really happens, instead, things keep repeating themselves. The narrative stasis reflects the nothingness of Sasha's life. Rhys's heroine always appears to be waiting for something exceptional to happen, "a miracle" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 14), something that will change her life and invest it with meaning and joy. In this regard, it seems that Rhys is mocking the reader's expectation of an eventful life/story by recurrently referring to the verb "happen" in a narrative marked by the sameness. It is worth examining some of these references.

One of the first references to "happen" takes place in the present time of the novel in the context of a daydream, when Sasha, in a rare moment of joy, is looking at Serge's pictures in his room. She fantasises that she is alone in this room and dreaming about the future, "waiting for the door that will open, the thing that is bound to happen. ..." (RHYS, 2000a, p. 83) In the past time of the narrative, there is a chain of references to the verb "happen" as our heroine recollects her life in Paris. In some of these references, like in the following excerpt, ironically, the prospect of an event that would change her life is juxtaposed to the recurrence of hotel rooms:

My beautiful life in front of me, opening out like a fan in my hand...

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What happened then? ... Well, what happens?

The room in the Brussels hotel – very hot. (RHYS, 2000a, p. 99)

Here, the change of the verb tense from Past Simple “What happened, then?” to the Present Simple “Well, what happens?” reinforces the repetitiveness of hotel rooms, as though endorsing that nothing meaningful happens in her life, just a succession of rooms<sup>11</sup>.

However, there are some exceptional moments in the narrative in which the mood changes and something finally is likely to happen. The passage that follows, in the present time of the narrative, strikes a much happier tone as it envisions a promise for the future in the form of “the sensation of spending” money by shopping for random, cheap things in a department store:

Well, sometimes it’s a fine day, isn’t it? Sometimes the skies are blue. Sometimes the air is light, easy to breathe. And there is always tomorrow... Tomorrow I’ll go to the Galeries Lafayette, choose a dress, go along to the Printemps, buy gloves, buy scent, buy lipstick, buy things costing fcs. 6.25 and fcs. 19.50, buy anything cheap. Just the sensation of spending, that’s the point. I’ll look at bracelets studded with artificial jewels, red, green and blue, necklaces of imitation pearls, cigarette-cases, jewelled tortoises. ... And when I have had a couple of drinks I shan’t know whether it’s yesterday, today or tomorrow (RHYS, 2000a, p. 121).

In the passage above, it is worth noting that the sensation of buying is associated with the sensation of drinking. Rhys’s heroines in general seek to fulfil their yearning for release, freedom and oblivion by drinking and shopping<sup>12</sup>. In *Good morning, Midnight*, these are the only circumstances that seem to relieve Sasha’s anxiety to eliminate time. Sasha, in particular, finds in alcohol her “fire and wings” (RHYS, 2000a, p. 73) and has already damaged herself with strong drink. Like all Rhys’s heroines, Anna seeks refuge in alcohol to escape the sameness, the deadly dullness of her life:

And when you’d had a drink you knew it was the best way to live in the world, because anything might happen. I don’t know how people live when they know exactly what’s going to happen to them each day. It seems to be it’s better to be dead than to live like that (RHYS, 2000c, p. 64).

<sup>11</sup> The juxtaposition of “happen” and the recurrence of another hotel room also appears at pages 104, 118, 119, 120.

<sup>12</sup> For all Rhys’s heroines the idea of buying and wearing beautiful clothes are associated with the possibility of envisioning a fuller future life. Shopping, using Anna’s words, “[k]eep[s] hope alive and you can do anything...” (RHYS, 2000c, p. 112). Julia also associates clothes and shopping with the idea that “Anything might happen. Happiness.” (RHYS, 1998, p. 131) For Marya, “[wearing] beautiful clothes” makes her feel “fresh and young like a flower” (RHYS, 2000b, p. 127)



In Sasha's case, only the consumption of fashions and commodities seem to endorse the possibility of a fuller life: "Tomorrow I'll be pretty again, tomorrow I'll be happy again, tomorrow, tomorrow...." (RHYS, 2000a, p. 48). Otherwise, not only does she withdraw from the present, but she is also unable to think about future: "I think 'tomorrow' there is a gap in my head, a blank – as if I were falling through emptiness. Tomorrow never comes" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 133).

Shopping and displaying fashions seem to be the only circumstances that provide occasion for Sasha to reinvent herself in the novel, such as in her "transformation act", which consisted of having her hair dyed blond *cendré* and buying a hat and a dress (RHYS, 2000a, p. 53). Furthermore, the sensation of spending may also have a soothing effect, as the circulation in the marketplace seems to provide a legitimate place for Rhys's displaced, dislocated heroine, even if temporarily, as it places her as a consumer.<sup>13</sup> The marketplace is a kind of refuge within the alienating urban environment for Sasha. The "comforting" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 57) visit to the hairdresser (RHYS, 2000a, p. 52 - 53), and the buying process of a hat, described as "[a celebration of] an extraordinary ritual" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 59), are particular instances of consumerism as a means of inclusion in the metropolitan life for Rhys's character. Ultimately, Sasha's movement as a consumer seems to momentarily suspend the narrative stasis and offer the illusion that "anything might happen" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 104).

## 2. Trapped in a generalised exchange

In *Everyday Life*, Michael Sheringham remarks that modernisation resulted in what Lefebvre and the Situationists<sup>14</sup> called "the colonisation of everyday life" (SHERINGHAM, 2006, p. 10). By focusing on the works by the Situationist Guy Debord and on Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*, Sheringham (2006, pp. 134 – 174), approaches their analyses of the alienation of the everyday to indicate how the rise and predominance of industrialization brought about the privatisation and de-realisation of everyday life, removing

<sup>13</sup> This becomes evident by the fact that Sasha feels safe and comfortable in the Luxembourg Gardens, where she can purchase the right to be in the place (RHYS, 2000a, p. 46).

<sup>14</sup> The Situationists' (1957) and Lefebvre's (1947) critique refers to a different historical context from that of Rhys's pre-war novels (*Good morning, Midnight* was published in 1939 and Rhys's other modernist novels between 1928 and 1934). Debord's spectacle includes the effect of television and TV advertisement on everyday life, which is not the case in Rhys's context. Her novels record the influence of advertisements in other media. Nevertheless, these social theorists' analysis of the pervasive logic of consumer capitalism as well as the notion of "colonisation of everyday life" finds deep resonance in Rhys's earlier fiction.

life from history and real events and becoming “an essentially imaginary construct, a disembodied space – the world of pure consumption” (SHERINGHAM, 2006, p. 10):

If colonisation produces underdevelopment, then similarly the manipulation and policing that work on everyday life tend to engender its depletion and alienation. [...] Modern society involves the agency of disconnected, specialized forms of knowledge: at the “general” level of the everyday there is ignorance, emptiness, and passivity. Technological innovations modify everyday life but do not transform it because they operate randomly and tend to reduce individual autonomy and creativity (SHERINGHAM, 2006, p. 171).

In *Good morning, Midnight*, the protagonist’s incapacity to give her life meaning, or to make something happen to change her fate, is alleviated, as mentioned earlier, only by the dreamscape of consumption, namely, the illusion given by her participation in the urban life as a consumer, as she circulates in the marketplace, buys or exhibits commodities and fashions. In this way, the novel proposes a critical perspective of everyday life by exploring the role of the market as “substitutes for the ‘lived’ everyday we fail to recognize around us” (SHERINGHAM, 2006, p. 18). Rhys’s fiction exposes and critiques the specific social conditions that engender the impoverishment and alienation of everyday life, such as the “manipulation and policing” (SHERINGHAM, 2006, p. 171) that came to predominate in the modern life.

In *Good morning, Midnight*, Rhys employs the image of a machine to portray the modern world as a fragmented and disconnected body, without any recognisable order, but endowed with enormous powers of surveillance, with its innumerable eyes and flexible arms:

All that is left in the world is an enormous machine, made of white steel. It has innumerable flexible arms, made of steel. Long, thin, arms. At the end of each arm is an eye, the eyelash still with mascara. When I look more closely I see that only some of the arms have these eyes – others have lights. The arms that carry the eyes and the arms that carry the lights are all extraordinarily flexible and very beautiful. But the grey sky, which is the background, terrifies me. ... (RHYS, 2000a, p. 156).

It is worth noting that, despite the monstrous-like description of the machine, some parts of it can be very beautiful, and it is the background that terrifies Rhys’s heroine. The image of an enormous machine portrays the modern world as a technologically developed, highly functional society, and above all alludes to the mechanisation and rationalization of everyday life, which culminate with the process of dehumanisation brought about by modernity. In this regard, the background can be seen as the ideology behind the machine’s operation. Rhys’s

novel is “a story of a humanity depressed and degraded in the shadow of fascism”, as noted by Savory (1998, p. 127). In this sense, the background can also allude to the context of Fascism looming the already problematic post-war period in which the present time of the novel is situated.

In “Outside the Machine” (RHYS, 1995, pp 34 – 69), Rhys also uses the metaphor of a machine to describe the highly rationalised, mechanised and dehumanised environment of an English hospital in Paris, a microcosm of English society. In the short story, the focus of her critique is the English national identity. The English nurses are portrayed as “parts of a machine” (RHYS, 1995, p. 41), who “moved surely and quickly [and] ... did everything in an impersonal way”. And the English patients, who tellingly were not mixed up with the other patients in the female ward, are also described as “parts of a machine”:

They had a strength, a certainty, because all their lives they had belonged to the machine and worked smoothly, in and out, just as they were told. Even if the machine got out of control, even if it went mad, they would still work in and out, just as they were told, whirling smoothly, faster and faster, to destruction (RHYS, 1995, p. 41).

Rhys’s description of the logic by which the “machine” operates underscores the presence of fascist structures and identifications in the English institutions and discourse<sup>15</sup>. The fact that the English women would still carry on working even if the machine went mad indicates the irrational insistence on obedience to a powerful system. Moreover, the machine’s destructive powers are directed towards those who are “outside the machine”, which indicates a system of identification of insiders and outsiders. The patient Inez, who is identified as a cultural outsider/other, is afraid of the English nurses and intimidated by the English patients. She imagines that, “because she was outside the machine they might come along any time with a pair of huge iron tongs and pick her up and put her on the rubbish heap to lie and rot (RHYS, 1995, p. 41).

The fascist elements in the English institution are emphasised in multiple ways. The machine people’s surveillance power, their strict principles and intolerant views are based on the belief in the supremacy of the English national identity. The machine’s subtle and “inventive powers” of destruction is governed by a narcissist principle and aims to “crush”

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<sup>15</sup> This argument is based on the discussion of fascism in *Good morning, midnight* in Emery (1990, pp. 144 – 172) and Savory (1998, pp. 109 – 132).

(RHYS, 1995, p. 39) those who do not fit in their categories, and to eliminate others. This is evidenced by the way Inez is alienated by the gaze of the English women.

In *Good morning, Midnight*, Sasha's dreamed machine, with its staring and grasping powers, also speaks to the connection between vision and surveillance and its relation to the manipulation and policing that work on everyday life. In the novel, this connection becomes apparent by the role of the gaze in producing and regulating the protagonist's identity as a marginalised other in urban and national formations<sup>16</sup>. Rhys's character is constantly terrified by and defensive against the public gaze. Sasha is aware that the gaze she encounters in the streets produces her identity as an unwelcome stranger, and even though she is critical and resistant to that gaze, she cannot disentangle herself from the way she is mirrored in society. She is conditioned to the constructed image of herself to the point that she ends up approaching her identity based on that image, with which she is in constant dialogue, like in the following passage: "What is she doing here, the stranger, the alien, the old one?... I quite agree too, quite. I have seen that in people's eyes all my life. I am asking myself all the time what the devil I am doing here. All the time." (RHYS, 2000a, p. 46)

In multiple ways, in *Good morning, Midnight* Rhys offers insights into the rationalization and dehumanization in the modern world and relates it to the consolidation of emphatic nationalism and the global market. The novel critiques the pervasive logic of the market exchange and explores the theme of appearances, looking and exhibiting, and the social inclusions and exclusions following as a result of stereotypes and categorisations. In this regard, the trope of exhibition and the image of the Paris Exhibition are central in the novel, as mentioned earlier.

The first reference to "Exhibition" appears at the beginning of the novel. Sasha dreams that she is in the passage of a London tube station, with many people walking in front and behind her, and everywhere there are placards printed "This Way to the Exhibition" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 12). In the nightmare, she desperately looks for the way out but she can only see "passages to the right and passages to the left, but no exit sign". She asks a man in front of her for the way out and when he points to the placards, she notices that his hand is made of steel. It is worth noting that, in Rhys's elliptical narrative, this dream connects the beginning of the novel to its ending. At the end of the novel, Sasha hallucinates that the world is an enormous machine also "made of steel" (RHYS, 2000a, p.156). This detail links the world of the

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<sup>16</sup> This is also evidenced by Serge's story of the Martiniquean mullatto woman who is alienated and ill-treated by the English neighbours. Serge himself also claims to have had an alienating experience in London.

Exhibition to the image of a mechanised world, described as an enormous machine made of steel. It is also relevant the fact that there is no way out the exhibition. Not only does it indicate the commanding influence of the transnational culture of consumer-capitalism evoked by the Paris world's fair, but it also hints at the inescapable threat of inter-European conflict.

In the final part of *Good morning, Midnight*, Sasha visits the 1937 Paris Exhibition with René and we learn that she has been to it before, perhaps visiting it repeatedly: “‘I am going to the Exhibition’, I say. ‘I want to see it again at night before I go’” (RHYS, 2000a, p. 136). In relation to their visit, the only comments Sasha and René make about the Exhibition refer to the “Star of Peace” (RHYS, 2000a, p. 137), the Exhibition's symbol of international agreement and harmony. However, the precarious nature of peace is suggested by the Exhibition's architecture itself, as noted by Mary Lou Emery:

The novel opens and closes with significant allusions to the exhibition, allusions which set the novel firmly within a Paris of intense social and political conflict, symbolized best perhaps by the two major buildings of the exposition which confronted one another directly on each side of the Champs de Mars – that of the Soviet Union, topped by giant figures of a marching man and woman with hammer and sickle held high, and that of Nazi Germany, crowned by an immense gold eagle grasping a swastika in its claws (EMERY, 1990, p. 144).

The Paris Exhibition provides a significant background for the novel, as it evokes the European empires' competitive nationalism and the world's fair with its exhibition of technological and cultural products. The tropes of exhibition and spectacle abound in the novel, indicating besides the global establishment of the market, the distortions and aberrations of a consumerist culture, by which Rhys ultimately integrates, to a certain degree, the novel's exploration of fascism. Other references to exhibitions occur in Sasha's flashbacks, when she recalls the jobs she had when she lived in Paris. In one of her jobs, she worked as a tourist guide and her first client was a very rich woman for whom tourism meant consuming fashion:

Now she wants to be taken to the exhibition of Loie Fuller materials and she wants to be taken to the place where they sell that German camera which can't be got anywhere else outside Germany, and she wants to be taken to a place where she can buy a hat which will *épater* everybody she knows yet be easy to wear, and on top of all this she wants to be taken to a certain exhibition of pictures (RHYS, 2000a, p. 27).

In this passage, it is revealing that the tour starts and ends with visits to exhibitions. It is also worth noting that the exhibition of art is put “on the same plane” (RHYS, 2000a, p. 12), to use the protagonist’s expression, as the exhibition of commodities and fashions, which calls the attention to the notion of modern art as a passing fashion. Another particular instance of exhibition of art in the novel also explores the idea of commodification of art in the modern capitalist world. It refers to the Jewish painter Serge, who refuses to commercialise his art in exhibitions, except in one single occasion, when he was persuaded into giving his own art “exhibition” (RHYS, 2000a, p. 85) and did it for financial reasons. The painting that Sasha buys, a Jew “standing in the gutter, playing his banjo” (RHYS, 2000a, p. 91) is, thus, a metaphor for Serge himself, a marginalised artist who is not willing to engage in the business of art.

*Good morning, Midnight*’s exploration of the trope of exhibitionism also includes the spectacle of the poor, through the dehumanised labourers who serves as entertainment for Sasha’s acquaintance, the man who, tellingly, also “loved popular fairs” (RHYS, 2000a, p. 34). They go to a café where people paid, not for a drink, but for a place to sleep. Sasha’s acquaintance shows her the men sleeping in the café, “close-pressed against each other” (RHYS, 2000a, p. 35) as if he were “exhibiting a lot of monkeys.”

Rhys’s emphasis on the themes of appearance and exhibitions explore the notion of bodies as commodities. This is especially evident in relation to Rhys’s heroines’ dependence on their appearance for surviving. Most of young Sasha’s jobs, such as a dress-house hostess and a mannequin, rely on the exhibition of female bodies. The economic dependence on the exchange value of the female body is even more conspicuous in the case of Rhys’s heroines in the earlier novels, who are younger and, unlike Sasha who has a regular income, struggle to earn their living. They seek to increase their social value by wearing beautiful and fashionable clothes. The low “market value” of women in the modern capitalist world is evidenced by a man’s words in *Voyage in the dark*: “...have you ever thought that a girl’s clothes cost more than the girl inside them?” (RHYS, 2000c, p. 40) In *After Leaving Mister Mackenzie*, the protagonist, Julia, bitterly regrets having sold her “astrakhan fur coat” (RHYS, 1998, p. 57) because “people thought twice before they were rude to anybody wearing a good fur coat”. Anna, *Quartet*’s protagonist, craves for beautiful clothes because she dreads to be subject to humiliating public exposure, “People laugh at girls who are badly dressed” (RHYS, 2000c, p. 22). Sasha is aware that people think that she is rich because of her fur coat (RHYS, 2000a, p. 63).

Rhys elaborates on the ways that the women are depreciated in this economy, finding themselves fungible and dispensable, like dolls. In *After Leaving Mister Mackenzie*, Julia sees her body as a weapon in her struggle for survival. In one of the first scenes in the novel, she stares at herself in the mirror, longing for new clothes, and she thinks, “I don’t look so bad, do I? I’ve still got something to fight the world with, haven’t I?” (RHYS, 1998, p. 14) Like Sasha, Julia’s jobs also rely on the female body display, she worked as an “artist’s model” and also as a “mannequin” (RHYS, 1998, p. 20). In *Quartet*, Anna’s work as a chorus girl makes her feel as an automaton. She learns how “to talk like a chorus girl, to dress like a chorus girl and to think like a chorus girl” (RHYS, 2000b, p. 15), and we are told that “gradually a passivity replaced her early adventurousness” as she began to live “very mechanically and listlessly”.

Rhys implies that the “market value” of a familyless woman, alone in a large city, is so low that they can barely survive without a man to protect and support them. Julia, for instance, depends on “the money given to her by various men. Going from man to man had become a habit.” (RHYS, 1998, p. 20) Ultimately, these earlier protagonists have little recourse but to turn to prostitution as a means of survival. In *After Leaving Mister Mackenzie*, Julia feels relieved on the day she discovers she can count on the possibility of resigning herself to prostitution as an ultimate recourse: “After all, I’m not finished” (RHYS, 1998, p. 45).

Rhys’s fiction exposes the lack of agency and choice of the everyday subjects whose life is trapped in a generalized exchange, conditioned by the dynamic of the market, whereby exchange value comes to predominate over use value. Rhys elaborates on how the all-encompassing network of the market logic extends to the human interactions and relationships. In *Good morning, Midnight*, in particular, the devastating effects of the exchange logic on the human relationships are poignantly dramatised. All of Sasha’s relationships seem to be shaped by the rule of commodity exchange, they all mirror a transaction in which money seems to be the main interest of the people involved. Sasha’s marriage to Enno was motivated by the fact that “We both thought the other have money” (RHYS, 2000a, p. 96). Her relationship with René eventually appears like a promise to escape the exchange logic, but it does not last.

When Sasha meets René, dubbed “the gigolo”, she is in a smart bar and she looks like a middle-class woman with her hair done, new hat and her expensive fur coat, thus she thinks René takes her for “a rich bitch and that if he goes on long enough I can be persuaded to part” (RHYS, 2000a, p. 64). Sasha’s relationship with René is notorious for its inversion of

traditional gender roles, especially taking into account Rhys's earlier heroines, who depended financially on men and occasionally succumbed to prostitution. Sasha notes that René smiles to show his beautiful teeth, she recognizes René's seduction techniques because she knows exactly what it feels like to be on exhibition from her previous experience. Ultimately, Sasha concludes that in this relationship she has nothing to lose, "Well, what harm can he do to me? He is out of money and I haven't got any. I am invulnerable" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 64).

Although Sasha thinks of herself as an "automaton" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 10), more dead than alive, her relationship with René is a remarkable moment in the novel in which she manages to "escape from [herself]" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 42), forget her painful memories, be in the present and enjoy life. René can be fatherly protective towards her, he tells her that he feels he is with "a child" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 67) in her company. Sasha believes he makes her "feel natural and happy, just as if I were young" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 130). René, which means "rebirth"<sup>17</sup>, seems to embody the opportunity of Sasha's rebirth. This possibility is enacted in their last meeting when René surprises her on the landing:

I have my arms round him and begin to laugh, because I am so happy. I stand there hugging him so terribly happy. Now everything is in my arms on this dark landing – love, youth, spring, happiness, everything I thought I had lost. I was a fool, wasn't I? to think all that was finished for me. How could it be finished? (RHYS, 2000a, p. 148).

However, after "[kissing] fervently" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 148) in Sasha's bedroom, it seems that her emotional damage prevents her from carrying on. René's advances remind her of some troubled past experience and she hates him for that (RHYS, 2000a, p. 150). This and other passages, such as her sado-masochist "film-mind" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 147) in which she has an experience of sexual abasement, hint at her emotional and sexual damage. She fears intimacy and she thinks René's "eyes are ironical" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 149), she is terrified by the thought that he might be unkind to her. Sasha then starts to drink and when he tries to stop her, she pushes him away and tells him to "go to hell" (RHYS, 2000a, p. 150). After that, she becomes aggressive, asks him to leave and they have a terrible argument that culminates with a physical struggle in which he tries to force her.

While they are struggling in bed, Sasha has the idea to offer him money to make him leave, thus reducing their relationship to a business deal, and reducing him to a gigolo. She sardonically tells him that "Everybody's got their living to earn (RHYS, 2000a, p. 153) and

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<sup>17</sup> A feature also remarked by Angier (1992, p. 382).



that she was trying to save him trouble, that having sex would be a “waste of time” because he could have the money straight away. (RHYS, 2000a, p. 153) He finally leaves and she thinks he has taken her money with him. At that moment, with the same sardonic tone, she assesses the whole experience according to the exchange logic that frame the way she sees the world, calculating and evaluating her gains and losses, converting everything to money:

Now, calm, calm, say it all calmly. You’ve had dinner with a beautiful young man, and he kissed you and you’ve paid a thousand francs for it. Dirt cheap price, especially with the exchange the way it is. Don’t forget the exchange, dearie – but of course you wouldn’t, would you? (RHYS, 2000a, p. 154)

In the passage above, Sasha’s reference to the word “exchange” is ambivalent. In the first time, she refers to the exchange rate between pounds and francs, but the second time “of course you wouldn’t [forget the exchange], would you?” is indicative of how deeply entrenched the marketplace logic is.

## Conclusion

The first-person narrative of *Good morning, Midnight* portrays a world that seems to be humanly impossible. The heroine’s experience of alienation, loneliness and despair renders a vision of the world in which humanity is left alone in a hostile and meaningless world. Sasha’s surreal visions, asphyxiating experience of space, paranoid projections, render a disorienting vision of life in the urban centres. Although in many ways Rhys shows that her heroine is an unreliable narrator, whose memory is affected by traumatic experiences and by the abusive use of alcohol, she indicates throughout the novel that Sasha’s precarious situation, her nihilism, fatalism and her surreal visions of the world, reflect an absurd world in which individuals cannot find meaning and human values in life.

Ultimately, *Good morning, Midnight* foregrounds Rhys’s larger indictment that “what appears to be absurd is a dehumanized Rationality” (LEFEBVRE, 2008a, p. 244) that came to predominate in “our ‘modern’ towns”, as Lefebvre puts it. In this regard, it is significant that in the novel birth coincides with death. *Good morning, Midnight* starts by a promise of a rebirth for the heroine and it ends by the heroine’s spiritual death. The equivalence between birth and death in the novel is also implied by the death of Sasha’s baby days after his birth.

Death is predominant in *Good morning, Midnight* and it is present in various forms. It is epitomised by the relentless repetition, monotony and constrictions of Sasha's life, by the heroine's extreme alienation, by her asphyxiating, claustrophobic experience of the urban space, by the prevalence of the consumerist logic of life that disregards human values. Although it becomes apparent that Sasha is destructed by her own drive towards death, Rhys strongly implies that her critique is of a much larger scope. As explored in the course of this work, in multiple ways Rhys connects Sasha's predicament with the social, economic and historical context of the late 1930s. Despite being highly subjective and focused on details, the narrative of *Good morning, Midnight* does not lose sight of the big picture, and the novel claims to be read within the context of a period informed by the contradictions of industrial development, the shadow of Fascism and located between two world wars; a context in which death is an overwhelming presence.

Rhys's novel ends by its heroine giving up the "sweet place" (DICKINSON apud RHYS, 2000a, p. 6) of love and affection and succumbing to self-destruction and death. However, by exploring the multiple ways in which the modern capitalist world degrades, depresses, de-realises and ultimately destroys human life, Rhys indicates that death, and various forms of death-in-life, is a predominant, overwhelming presence in the modern capitalist world. If death is stronger than love in *Good morning, Midnight* is because it tells a story of a dehumanised, irredeemable world.

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