



The Silence of Maternal Absence and Black Imagined Identity in Jean Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark*

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Abstract:

This research article delves into the intricate exploration of the theme of maternal absence and its profound impact on the formation of a black imagined identity in Jean Rhys' influential novel, *Voyage in the Dark*. Through a comprehensive analysis of the protagonist's transformative journey, this study delves into the silences and gaps surrounding the absence of the maternal figure and the far-reaching consequences they have on the protagonist's racial and cultural identity. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, this research delves into the protagonist's profound sense of alienation, as she grapples with a fragmented sense of self and attempts to construct an imagined black identity as a means of reconciling the void left by her absent mother. Rhys' nuanced portrayal of the protagonist's experiences and interactions with individuals of black heritage, as well as her introspective reflections, serves as rich material for unravelling the complex dynamics between maternal absence, racial identity, and the relentless quest for self-understanding. By delving into the multifaceted layers of the protagonist's identity formation, this study sheds light on the profound influence of maternal absence and its role in shaping the protagonist's construction of a black imagined identity. Through this analysis, this research article contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between race, identity, and the vital maternal bond within the context of Jean Rhys' remarkable work, *Voyage in the Dark*. It invites further exploration and discussion of the complexities inherent in the human experience of identity formation and the enduring impact of maternal absence.

Key Words: Silence, Maternal Absence, Black Imagined Identity, racial identity, cultural identity, double consciousness, alienation, fragmented self, identity formation, black heritage, introspection, maternal bond.

Introduction:

Jean Rhys's acclaimed novel, *Voyage in the Dark*, delves into the intricate journey of Anna Morgan, the protagonist, as she grapples with the construction of her self-identity within the confines of a conservative London society in the 1930s. Born in Dominica, Anna's experiences are marked by a profound sense of loss that serves as a catalyst for her exploration of an imagined black identity, shaped in the absence of her mother. Despite her white physical appearance, Anna finds herself alienated both in her home country and in London. Rhys skillfully exposes prevalent racial stereotypes, particularly the hypersexualization of Caribbean women, while also

weaving in Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, which adds layers of complexity to the narrative. Within the novel, Anna's character becomes a canvas for the problematic nature of Du Bois's double consciousness. Despite sharing the same whiteness as English individuals, Anna refuses to identify England as her true homeland, challenging conventional notions of belonging and national identity. Rhys's exploration of this internal conflict sheds light on the intricate interplay between race, identity, and societal expectations. Anna's journey towards an imagined black identity is deeply influenced by her perception of her mother's absence and the inherent cultural and historical implications of being a Creole

from Dominica. By delving into the multifaceted dimensions of Anna's struggle, *Voyage in the Dark* not only exposes the complexities of racial identity construction but also offers a poignant commentary on the deeply ingrained prejudices and stereotypes that shape society. Rhys's nuanced portrayal invites readers to reflect on the intersections of race, gender, and personal agency in the formation of individual identity. Through an exploration of Anna's experiences, this study aims to unravel the intricate tapestry of self-identity construction in the face of loss, alienation, and societal expectations, shedding light on the lasting relevance of Rhys's masterful work.

Discussion:

The racial dynamics depicted in Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* are intricate due to the fact that Anna's racial identity is both socially and personally constructed. Hester's statement suggests that Anna's mother was not only a "coloured" woman, as opposed to being a descendant of English settlers, but also that Anna's uncle, Ramsay Colterus, fathered children with Afro-Dominican women. Anna's upbringing takes place on Constance Estate, a Dominican plantation that has been owned by her mother's family for four generations, thriving on the labor of enslaved individuals. After the sudden and unexplained death of Anna's mother, her father marries Hester, an Englishwoman who strives to restore the family's lost reputation of undiluted Englishness. Hester implies that Anna's mother was of mixed race rather than solely of white English heritage, and she expresses disdain for Ramsay Colterus, Anna's uncle, who has fathered children with Dominican women and possesses "the laugh of a negro" (Seshagiri 493).

Hester's remarks are not unfounded, as the existence of Ramsay's mixed-race children is widely known, and sexual relationships between white men and coloured or black women in the West Indies are common knowledge. In her book *Women Writing The West Indies, 1804-1939: "A Hot Place, Belonging to Us"*, Evelyn O'Callaghan supports this claim, stating, "There is abundant evidence that white men in the West Indies, whether married or single, openly engaged with black or brown mistresses" (O'Callaghan 49). These circumstances create uncertainty for Creoles like Anna, as they can never be certain

whether their mothers were colored or white. This history also fuels Hester's determination to mold Anna into a refined lady, considering her family's sexual past. Hester strives to make Anna more English than colored, yet Anna's black accent remains unchanged when she speaks English. It is in this context that Hester says to Anna:

I tried to teach you to talk like a lady and behave like a lady and not like a nigger and of course I couldn't do it. Impossible to get you away from the servants. That awful sing-song voice you had! Exactly like a nigger you talked – and still do. Exactly like that dreadful girl, Francine. When you were jabbering away together in the pantry, I never could tell which of you was speaking. (*Voyage in the Dark* 65)

The close bond between Anna and Francine can be attributed to the unique dynamics of motherhood in Creole households. O'Callaghan provides support for this observation by interpreting Carmichael's statement regarding black women's motherhood. Carmichael asserts that "Negro children are brought up altogether differently from European infants" and highlights that black mothers typically breastfeed their own children, implying that white mothers generally do not engage in this practice (O'Callaghan 53). In relation to Francine's apparent dislike for Anna's whiteness, O'Callaghan further explains that nursing is not a voluntary activity for black women but rather a duty they fulfil obediently toward their white mistresses.

The intricate racial dynamics in this novel result in Anna's struggle with her identity and her internalization of the burden placed on black people by colonialists in Dominica. Her compassion arises not only from her empathetic connection to the suffering of black individuals but also from her association of blackness with the land and nature of Dominica. Anna's love for her motherland strengthens her admiration for blackness. The uncertainty surrounding her mother's racial identity places Anna in a liminal space between whiteness and blackness. She constantly identifies herself with brownness, which exists as a mixture of both white and black: "I sat there. I didn't know what to say. There wasn't anything to say. I kept on wondering whether she would ask me what I was living on. 'What is Purity?' For thirty-five years the answer has been Bourne's Cocoa." Thirty-five years...

Fancy being thirty-five years old. What is Purity? For thirty-five thousand years the answer has been..." (Voyage in the Dark 59).

In this passage, Anna contemplates her own existence and the concept of purity, symbolized by the brand Bourne's Cocoa. The repetition of the phrase "thirty-five years" emphasizes her own age and the enduring presence of this product. Through this reflection, Anna suggests that the question of identity and racial purity has persisted for thousands of years, highlighting her own sense of being in-between, neither wholly white nor black.

Anna's self-hatred towards her own skin colour and her longing for blackness are influenced by the stereotypes attached to white and black individuals in Dominica. The Creole people, seen as embodying the colonialists' perceived "whiteness," harbour a sense of superiority despite being surrounded by native black Dominican people on the island. In this novel, Anna's voice becomes the sole perspective, silencing the black characters. Although the explicit voices of characters like Francine or other black individuals are absent, Anna's yearning for blackness serves as a conduit for the silenced black voice. The readers never directly hear from characters like Francine, but instead, Anna's thoughts and desires dominate the narrative. For instance, in a scene where Francine is washing up, her eyes red and watery from the smoke, Anna perceives her sidelong glance and a muttered remark in patois. Anna interprets this as Francine's dislike towards her whiteness, stemming from the resentment of being colonized and dehumanized. As a representative of the colonialists, Anna feels the inherent divide between herself and Francine, sensing Francine's withdrawal as an unwillingness to engage in mutual understanding or share experiences. Nevertheless, Anna persists in seeking a connection with Francine, driven by her disdain for the image of whiteness associated with the colonialist identity.

In the context of England, Anna cannot fully inhabit the "third space" because she rejects English whiteness. However, she identifies as Creole due to her birth skin colour, while also longing to be black because she associates blackness with Dominica, her motherland. The absence of her suspected-coloured mother becomes a significant factor in Anna's yearning for blackness. If her mother were still alive, Anna would have

developed her identity as a person of colour instead of a white Creole. However, she could have potentially embraced both black and white identities, given that she was born on the island and interacted with black Dominicans. This would position her in the "third space" between white and black, where she could accept herself as a person of mixed heritage while also incorporating elements of black Dominican culture.

The role of Anna's mother is crucial in shaping her sense of identity. Having a suspected-coloured mother is Anna's only tangible connection to the blackness she longs for. In England, Anna's language sets her apart from English people and contributes to her perceived difference. Additionally, the geographical origins of Dominica and Anna's physical appearance, which deviate from those of English women, further emphasize her distinctiveness. O'Callaghan cites an anonymous author of *The Koromantyn Slaves*, who describes the differences between Creole women and English women:

The eye sockets of creoles were apparently deeper than those of Europeans, "thus shading the eye from the ill effects of an ardent and glaring solar light." Physically, whites in the West Indies seemed to evolve downwards toward the bestial; and this applied to character also. So creoles in the region are represented as *less* well-bred, intelligent, active, sensitive, moral – generally less in *every* way – than the British and American writers who pronounce on them. (O'Callaghan 107)

Anna's experience in England reflects Du Bois's concept of double consciousness. She is constantly aware of being seen as different and "the other" by English people, who racialize her by labeling her with the stereotype of Creole people as inferior. The novel implies that the time period is after the abolition of slavery but during British colonialization of Dominica, as seen through the presence of Francine as a black servant rather than a slave.

In this society, the Creole community segregates themselves to maintain their caste of whiteness, preserving their economic and political power. Both Hester and Anna recognize the subtle resistance from black Dominicans, with Anna considering blackness as warmer and more nurturing compared to the perceived coldness and sadness associated with whiteness. Anna's

stepmother notices her inclination to be closer to Francine, her black servant, than to herself as a mother figure. Anna naturally adopts Francine's language and behavior, rejecting the expectations of a white lady. The absence of a mother in Anna's life creates a void within her, unconsciously driving her to seek closeness with Francine. Anna attempts to recreate the image of the mother she longs for—a nurturing, warm, and domestic figure—paralleling the stereotypes associated with black women. This domestic stereotype is evident in Francine's activities, primarily centred around the kitchen. Anna's longing for a mother figure intensifies when she moves to England, as she lacks the opportunity to experience the warmth of a mother's presence that she had felt through her interactions with Francine and in Dominica. Ironically, when Anna becomes pregnant, she opts for an abortion instead of embracing motherhood—an action that not only reveals her lack of confidence in becoming a mother but also highlights her financial limitations.

Conclusion:

In Jean Rhys' novel *Voyage in the Dark*, the themes of maternal absence and black imagined identity intersect, shedding light on the complex dynamics of race and identity. Anna's longing for a mother figure and her yearning for blackness in the context of her Creole identity intertwine, revealing the profound impact of societal structures and personal experiences on one's sense of self. The absence of Anna's mother creates a void in her life, driving her to seek connections and nurturance elsewhere. Her affinity for Francine, her black servant, stems from a subconscious desire to fill the maternal void and find solace in the warmth and domesticity she associates with black women. The domestic stereotype perpetuated by Francine's activities further reinforces Anna's longing for a mother figure and the imagined identity she constructs for black women. Furthermore, Anna's positioning in the racial landscape of Dominica and England contributes to her yearning for blackness. As a Creole individual, she grapples with the stereotypes and expectations attached to her identity, while simultaneously being aware of her otherness in English society. This double consciousness, influenced by Du Bois's concept, highlights Anna's constant awareness of being perceived as different and the struggle to reconcile her

multiple identities. Throughout the novel, Rhys explores the performative nature of identity and the illusions that shape one's sense of self. The curtain metaphor, reminiscent of Du Bois's veil, underscores the idea of performing and the sense of being trapped between different worlds. Both Anna and Du Bois depict the complexities of identity as a performance, necessitated by societal expectations and prejudices. In conclusion, *Voyage in the Dark* delves into the silence of maternal absence and the longing for blackness within the context of a Creole protagonist. Rhys's exploration of these themes, intertwined with ideas of performative identity and racial consciousness, invites readers to critically examine the intersectionality of race, identity, and societal constructs.

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