



Communal Pleasure in Jean Rhys's Fiction

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Abstract

Laura Frost's *The problem with pleasure: Modernism and its discontents* has blazed a new trail and annexed the concept of pleasure to the notion of modernism in her reading of Jean Rhys's fiction. For all her meticulously traced genealogy of pleasure, however, communal pleasure is conspicuously absent. This paper argues against a simplistic generalization of Rhys's treatment of various kinds of pleasure. It is true that Rhys's female protagonists all make choices that steer them away from pleasure and happiness, but a close-up look at the socio-historical contexts of their life shows that they are often forced to make such choices rather than doing so of their own accord. It is also true that they deserve sympathy, but this sympathy is not earned through their refusal to take part in collective pleasure, as Frost has claimed, but by their sufferings caused by mercenary men who take advantage of their poverty and dislocations, which reflect or refract such socio-historical factors as intense industrialization and globalized colonization. Each of Rhys's novels contains some moments, however brief, that throw insight into her female protagonist's genuine love for the pleasure afforded either in nature or in art whose appreciation cannot be achieved unless through taste. And they are capable of sharing such pleasure with people around, and even with strangers, which implies a sense of communal well-being and a yearning for communal feelings. Indeed, part of Rhys's contribution to modernism is her redefinition of pleasure, but an integral part of that reconceptualization is her reshaping of communal pleasure.

Keywords Jean Rhys · Communal pleasure · Modernism · Female protagonists · Socio-historical factors

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Introduction

For more than half a century there has been a tendency among critics to place Jean Rhys's work in relation to modernism. While most studies concerned have focused either on the issue of how "Rhys's Caribbean background strongly informs her modernism" (Savory, 2009, p. 14), or on the question of how Rhys's texts show "that female modernism takes up female subjectivity at precisely the point that Freud abandoned it" (Moran, 2007, p. 17), Laura Frost's *The problem with pleasure: Modernism and its discontents* has blazed a new trail and annexed the concept of pleasure to the notion of modernism in her reading of Rhys's fiction. More specifically, she uses Rhys's texts as typical examples of "modernism's dismissal of accessible pleasure as facile and trite, and its valorization of that which requires effort and training" (Frost, 2013, p. 9). Underpinning all Frost's analysis of Rhys's fiction is a central argument, namely that "the fundamental goal of modernism is the redefinition of pleasure: specifically, exposing easily achieved and primarily somatic pleasures as facile, hollow, and false, and cultivating those that require more ambitious analytical work" (Frost, 2013, p. 3). Such a view, obviously, presupposes a hierarchy of pleasures ranging from the highest, such as a purified or refined kind of pleasure, to the lowest, which suggests crudity and debasement. What makes Laura Frost's work remarkable is her emphasis on "modernism's contribution to the genealogy of pleasure," which she describes as "the declared substitution of one set of pleasures (refined, acquired, and cognitive) for another (embodied, accessible), in which the disavowal of the latter is promoted as an aesthetic principle" (Frost, 2013, p. 22). It seems logical that Jean Rhys has made a similar contribution, otherwise she would not have caught Frost's close attention.

There is a problem, however, with *The problem with pleasure*. For all its meticulously traced genealogy of pleasure, one particular type of pleasure, namely communal pleasure by which I mean the aesthetic pleasure that implies a sense of communal well-being and a yearning for communal feelings, is conspicuously absent. In Frost's analysis, Rhys's protagonists are hardly presented as capable of sharing their pleasure with others. Frost also argues that Rhys tends to position her down-and-out protagonists as more sympathetic than her upper-class characters, "but this sympathy is earned by individuals through their inability or refusal to take part in collective pleasure," and it is because of this inability that her "characters are drawn to obliteration, repetition, debasement, and self-destruction" (Frost, 2013, p. 164). Admittedly, almost all Rhys's female protagonists "have been diagnosed by critics as depressed, melancholic, schizophrenic, borderline personality, and, perhaps most commonly, masochistic" (Frost, 2013, p. 189), but are these symptoms innate and inborn? If not, what has given rise to such psychological traits? My own reading of Rhys's stories cautions against a simplistic generalization of her treatment of various kinds of pleasure. If her characters' lives are by and large overcast pleasure-wise, the clouds do give way to sunshine sometimes, however brief such happy moments may be. How should one then explain such complications?

I

The basic premise of Laura Frost's argument is that Jean Rhys, like other modernist writers, aims at the reconceptualization of pleasure. In order to specify the way modernist writers reconceptualize pleasure, Frost comes up with the term "unpleasure" which she defines as follows:

...unpleasure is not the opposite of pleasure, but rather its modification. The concept of unpleasure breaks with the conventional separation of human experience into two tendencies, as expressed in Bentham's ominous opening of *The principles of morals and legislation*: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain and pleasure*..." (Frost, 2013, p. 6)

Frost seems quite satisfied with her use of the term, as revealed in the following claim: "More than any other term, 'unpleasure' is able to encompass both the complex, dialectical representations of pleasure and the readerly affects modernism puts into play" (Frost, 2013, p. 25). What is particularly worthy of attention here is the word "dialectical," which shows that Frost's approach is informed by Lionel Trilling, who in his essay "The fate of pleasure" pinpoints a "dialectic of pleasure which is the characteristic intellectual activity of Keats's poetry" (Trilling, 2000, p. 433). The following is Trilling's own explanation of that "dialectic":

Keats, then, may be thought of as the poet who made the boldest affirmation of the principle of pleasure and also as the poet who brought the principle of pleasure into the greatest and sincerest doubt. He therefore has for us a peculiar cultural interest, for it would seem to be true that at some point in modern history the principle of pleasure came to be regarded with just such ambivalence. (Trilling, 2000, p. 434)

Frost bases her views on the above-said "dialectic" and moves on to argue that "Trilling points to Romanticism as a contrast" (Frost, 2013, p. 4), namely a contrast to modernism.

It is true that Keats' discourse of pleasure is a legitimate context for examining such modernist writings as those by Jean Rhys, but another Romantic poet, namely William Wordsworth, seems to be a more relevant context. As pointed out by Rowan Boyson in her monumental work *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment idea of pleasure*, "the modern idea of pleasure" could have benefited more from Wordsworth's poetry:

The modern idea of pleasure is primarily individualistic: indeed, modernity is often characterized (and criticized) as the moment, which legitimized individual pleasures, rather than transcendent ends, such as God, family or society. The argument of this book, however, is that there is a counter-strain in Enlightenment philosophy and in Wordsworth's poetry, in which pleasure is considered as inherently communal rather than private and solipsistic. The book seeks to retrieve this almost-forgotten idea about how pleasure might register a feeling of collective dependence and interaction, and might be generated from a feeling of community. (Boyson, 2012, p. 1)

What merits our special attention here is Boyson's endeavour "to retrieve this almost-forgotten idea about how pleasure might register a feeling of collective dependence and interaction, and might be generated from a feeling of community." Here comes, then, an interesting question: Is "this almost-forgotten idea" also forgotten by Laura Frost? Does her concept of unpleasure contain any feeling of collective dependence and interaction? Does she take into account any feeling of community at all when she theorizes about unpleasure and applies it to the interpretation of Rhys's fiction?

The "almost-forgotten idea" of communal pleasure is at least ignored, if not forgotten, by Frost. She does mention Wordsworth once in *The problem with pleasure*: "Trilling points to Romanticism as a contrast, exemplified by... Wordsworth's praise in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* for 'the naked and native dignity of man' that is found in 'the grand elementary principle of pleasure' " (Frost, 2013, p. 4). But she seems to have overlooked a frequently quoted argument which is at the core of Wordsworth's idea of pleasure: "The poet writes under one restriction only, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human being possessed of that information which may be expected of him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer or a natural philosopher, but as a man" (Wordsworth, 2007a, p. 312). This argument for "the necessity of giving immediate pleasure" is in a way an appeal for the sharing of aesthetic pleasure. It would be a pity if this aspect of Romantic discourses on pleasure went unnoticed, when any attempt is made to refer to Romanticism as a contrast to modernist writings like those by Rhys.

Let me hasten to add that it would be an even greater pity to leave unnoticed such writers as Walter Pater, John Ruskin and William Morris, whose fin de siècle British discourses of pleasure can actually provide an even more relevant context, both spatially and temporally, for the works of Jean Rhys who resided and was educated in Britain from 1906. Like Wordsworth, who maintains that a pleasure/joy is "imperfect while unshared" (Wordsworth, 2007b, p. 292), Pater, Ruskin and Morris all set much store by the collectivity of pleasurable experiences—they not only advocate aesthetic pleasure, but also see in it the possibility of community. Pater, for example, calls for a "life of refined pleasure," in his preface to *Renaissance*, which implies "eras of more favorable conditions, in which the thoughts of men draw nearer together than is their wont, and the many interests of the intellectual world combine in one complete type of general culture" (Pater, 1873, p. xxx). Herein lies a clear indicator of the communal nature of his proposed pleasure, i.e., the one that is conducive to the thoughts of men drawing nearer together. While emphasizing that "there is a certain number of artists who have a distinct faculty of their own by which they convey to us a peculiar quality of pleasure which we cannot get elsewhere," Pater believes that these artists "have their place in general culture, and must be interpreted to it by those who have felt their charm strongly" (Pater, 1873, p. 50). Here his emphasis on the need to "convey...pleasure" and on "general culture" clearly indicates a type of pleasure which is to be shared and will contribute to a culture in a communal sense. To him, all refined pursuits tend to yield a pleasure which ought to be shared in as broad a sense as possible. As observed by Kurt Lampe, Pater simply aims at some sort of "music, in that wider Platonic sense," which "includes all the arts—dancing, singing, playing instruments, civic

and religious rituals, military exercises, mathematics, and philosophy—by which a society attempts to create a beautiful orderliness in its individual and collective life” (Lampe, 2015, p. 183). In short, Pater has left to the twentieth century Britain a cultural heritage which hinges on beauty, order and communal pleasure.

No less influential on fin de siècle British discourses of pleasure is John Ruskin, whose most noteworthy contribution in this connection is his book *The pleasures of England* which consists of four lectures, given in Oxford in 1883-1885, all under the rubric of “pleasures,” namely “The pleasures of learning,” “The pleasures of faith,” “The pleasures of deed,” and “The pleasures of fancy.” “Of these pleasures,” he argues, “the leading one was that of Learning,” “a pleasure totally separate from that of finding out things for yourself” (Ruskin, 1988, p. 12). In other words, the issue of pleasure does not interest him in the slightest unless it goes beyond one’s self interest. While explaining the overall sketch of his above-said lectures, he chooses not to mince the following truth: “I have approached every question from the people’s side, and examined the nature, not of the special faculties by which the work was produced, but of the general instinct by which it was asked for, and enjoyed” (Ruskin, 1988, p. 12). Like Pater, Ruskin sees an urgent need for conveying the pleasure perceived by whoever engages in refined pursuits. For instance, he praises “the drawings in Saxon manuscripts” for the “rapid endeavours to express for themselves, and convey to others” the pleasure felt by the artists themselves (Ruskin, 1988, p. 26). Many similar examples can also be found in his *Sesame and lilies*, where he insists on the importance of pursuing “wholesome pleasure” (Ruskin, 2002, p. 17), and the need for a “writer’s delight” to “become in turn a source of pleasure for readers” (Helsing, 2002, p. 113). Another typical example of his proposed wholesome pleasure is his comment on the source of aesthetic pleasure on the part of Alpine excursionists: he refutes the claim that Alpine excursionists “should attribute their pleasure to some true and increased apprehension of the nobleness of natural scenery,” and contends that the “real beauty of the Alps is to be seen, and seen only, where all may see it, the child, the cripple, and the man of grey hairs” (Ruskin, 2002, p. 6). Such pleasure, accessible to and shareable by old and young, healthy and disabled, is wholesome indeed and cannot but be a valuable object of study for anyone who is interested in discourses of pleasure, especially the ones in the late 19th-century and the early 20th-century Britain.

Equally influential, if not even more so, is William Morris who, in many of his essays, relates aesthetic pleasure to the happiness of the whole mankind. In “The aims of art,” for instance, he claims that “the aim of art is to increase the happiness of men, by giving them...hope and bodily pleasure in their work; or, shortly, to make man’s work happy and his rest fruitful. Consequently, genuine art is an unmixed blessing to the race of man” (Morris, 1948a, p. 591). Even in appreciating the beauty of an old building, he would like people to think about “all the generations of men”: “How we please ourselves with an old building by thinking of all the generations of men that have passed through it...we should feel a pleasure in thinking how he who had built it had left a piece of his soul behind him to greet the new-comers one after another long and long after he was gone” (Morris, 1948b, p. 560). Similarly, he offers to share with his fellow countrymen his responses to “lesser arts,” along with “the men who wrought this kind of art”: “I believe I am not

thinking only of my own pleasure, but of the pleasure of many people, when I praise the usefulness of the lives of these men, whose names are long forgotten, but whose works we still wonder at" (Morris, 1915a, p. 112). Seeing that lesser arts are often rejected in his own country, he points out that this is "to the injury of the community" and then declares himself to be "a professed pleader and advocate for them... since it is through them that I am the servant of the public, and earn my living with abundant pleasure" (Morris, 1915b, p. 235). A more intriguing example is his definition of "wealth":

Wealth is what Nature gives us and what a reasonable man can make out of the gifts of Nature for his reasonable use. The sunlight, the fresh air, the unspoiled face of the earth, food, raiment and housing necessary and decent; the storing up of knowledge of all kinds, and the power of disseminating it; means of free communication between man and man; works of art, the beauty which man creates when he is most a man, most aspiring and thoughtful—all things which serve the pleasure of people, free, manly, and uncorrupted. This is wealth. (Morris, 1948c, p. 608)

Morris here is evidently pleading in favour of communal pleasure, indicated by such expressions as "serve the pleasure of people," "the power of disseminating it," "free communication," etc. The fact that he, together with Ruskin and Pater, helps shape the powerful fin de siècle British discourses of pleasure is indisputable.

However, one question remains unanswered, namely the question of whether Jean Rhys has read Pater, Ruskin and Morris, albeit their powerful influence. No solid evidence seems to have been produced which can point to the direct impact of their ideas on Rhys. It does not matter, however, whether she once came under their direct influence. What matters is that she did live in an era when their discourses of pleasure had been among the shaping forces of British literature. Given their status and the cultural climate at that time, their ideas concerned could not have gone unheeded for a novelist, like Rhys, who is also deeply interested in the issue of pleasure. It is legitimate, therefore, to assume that Rhys has at least benefited indirectly from Pater, Ruskin and Morris who have left their imprints on modern discourses of pleasure, the idea of communal pleasure not the least among them.

Has Laura Frost paid due attention, then, to the above-said discourses of pleasure? As already mentioned in the introductory part of the present paper, Frost sees in Rhys's protagonists a mere "inability or refusal to take part in collective pleasure." To be sure, Frost's concept of unpleasure does throw insight into the complexity of the nature and the causes of pleasure, and the way modernist writers redefine pleasure. Her chief merit lies in her meticulous analysis of different types of pleasure on the basis of a close reading of modernist writings, including those by Jean Rhys. More praiseworthy is her attempt to avoid simplification and to distinguish between the various kinds of pleasure/unpleasure that she examines in the works of various authors even if these works are categorized under the same rubric of "modernism." Frost writes as follows in this regard:

While Joyce's masochism and Lawrence's female submission, for example, are impulses towards unpleasure, those authors both maintain the horizon of con-

ventional (easy, simplistic, somatic) as well as valorized (analytical, aesthetic, transformative) pleasure. For Hamilton and Rhys, by contrast, unpleasure is a spectrum ranging from ennui to *jouissance* that is shadowed by anhedonia. (Frost, 2013, p. 164)

Frost's comparative studies on Joyce, Lawrence, Hamilton and Rhys have shed light on their respective characteristics, for which she has provided ample textual evidence indeed. Unfortunately, however, she has failed to ponder over the possibility of incorporating into her notion of unpleasure any strand of collective, or communal, pleasure. Whatever kind of pleasure she examines, be it a broad "horizon of conventional (easy, simplistic, somatic) as well as valorized (analytical, aesthetic, transformative) pleasure," or "a spectrum ranging from ennui to *jouissance* that is shadowed by anhedonia," it is treated as private, solipsistic and individualistic. It seems that, to her, communal pleasure is simply out of sight, if not out of mind.

But does Jean Rhys, too, merely focus on individualistic pleasure? Are her characters capable of affect which induces feelings of community which in turn generate pleasure at all? To answer these questions, one needs to have a close-up look at Rhys's texts proper, which constitutes the main content of the following passages.

II

It is true that Rhys's fiction often paints a bleak picture. More often than not, her female protagonists get bogged down in a somatic world characterized by sex and alcohol. "Critics," therefore, "regularly refer to 'the Rhys woman': a narcissistic, self-defeating, financially dependent victim who makes dubious decisions and declares the world a hostile conspirator against her" (Frost, 2013, p. 187). All this being acknowledged, it still remains to be found out if Rhys's characters are utterly unable to take part in collective pleasure. Do they always indulge themselves in crude pleasure or false amusements?

A close examination of Rhys's texts reveals that her protagonists ARE capable of feelings which can by no means be put into the category of low, passive and corporeal pleasures. Almost all her female protagonists, to a greater or less extent, show genuine love for the pleasure or joy afforded to them either in nature, or in music, dancing and fine arts whose appreciation is achieved through taste. In other words, they are capable of deriving pleasures that are associated with taste rather than the gratification of appetite. Furthermore, when they experience such pleasures, they often feel an impulse to share them, not only with their loved ones, but also with strangers. It does not go too far to say that, in such circumstances, their pleasure gives rise to communal feelings.

A typical example can be found in *Good Morning, Midnight*, which is considered by many to be Rhys's bleakest novel. Sasha, the heroine and the first-person narrator, reminds one of Baudelaire's flâneur or, more appropriately, flâneuse. She is often found wandering in streets, noticing people and things, shopping and meeting strangers, and then going back to her cheap rented room for eating and drinking. But she is not without happy moments. Before her baby dies, she has

enjoyed a happy life with Enno (whose true nature has not been revealed at that time), and we see her “tuned up to top pitch” by love, which makes her notice the lovely colours in the sky or of lights on water (Rhys, 2020, p. 111). Herein, obviously, lies a joy not only derived from beautiful colours and lights offered in nature, but also a joy coupled with communal feeling, love being a kind of feeling which is meant to be shared. Sasha is appreciative of beauty not only in nature, but also in art. There is a description in the novel of her memory of the room where she was happy with Enno, even many years afterwards, which had “rose-patterned wallpaper” (Rhys, 2020, p. 110). This time the pleasurable experience is associated with the beauty of art, instead of the beautiful sky and water. Nonetheless it registers communal feeling. A more convincing case is Sasha’s encounter with Serge, a Russian painter, from whom she manages to purchase a picture. The whole scene involves music, dancing and fine arts. A third person involved is Delmar, who helps display Serge’s finished pictures to Sasha by arranging them around Serge’s room:

When he has finished pictures are propped up on the floor round three sides of the room.

“Now you can see them,” he says.

“Yes, now I can see them.”

I am surrounded by the pictures. It is astonishing how vivid they are in this dim light. . . Now the room expands and the iron band round my heart loosens. The miracle has happened. I am happy. (Rhys, 2020, p. 93)

Sasha is happy because she is elevated by those pictures. And her pleasure is in fact gradually built up—before she gets to see those pictures, she has already had a pleasant time talking with both Delmar and Serge who, in addition, plays “some beguine music, Martinique music” and then “holds the mask over his face and dances” (Rhys, 2020, p. 86). Here the pleasure produced by the music and dance is shared: Sasha feels that Serge “dances very well” and Delmar “claps his hands in time to the music” (Rhys, 2020, p. 86). What is more touching is that Serge, seeing that Sasha is deeply moved by the music and has burst into tears, convinces her that she is “with friends” (Rhys, 2020, p. 87). This friendship, developed in the atmosphere of music and dance, is certainly a pleasant feeling of community, which can be further proved by Serge’s generosity—when Sasha discovers that she is not able to pay him on the spot for the purchase of a picture, Serge makes a generous offer: “But have it, take it, all the same. I like you. I’ll give it you as a present” (Rhys, 2020, p. 94). The whole scene ends in still another meaningful interaction between Serge and Sasha:

...He rolls up the picture in tissue-paper, ties it round with a bit of string and I take it under my arm. Then he gives my hand a long, hard shake and says “Amis.” When he shakes my hand like that and says “Amis” I feel very happy . . . (Rhys, 2020, p.94)

It should be added that Sasha does not know Serge and Delmar until the picture-purchase-scene, which is an undeniable testimony to her capacity for

affection and her willingness to share her pleasure even with strangers. Moreover, the detail in Sasha's reiteration of her pleasure—"I am happy," and then "I feel very happy"—serves to reinforce her willingness and capability to take part in collective pleasure, given right and proper circumstances.

A similar case can be found in *Quartet*, where there is a description of how the heroine Marya is attracted and even up-lifted by music. Although she has to live in a sordid hotel, being poor, she enjoys waking in the mornings to the sound of a "man with a flock of goats who passed under her window every morning about half-past ten, playing a frail little tune on a pipe" (Rhys, 1929, p. 111). His music "enchanted her," because it is "thin, high, sweet," "like water running in the sun" (Rhys, 1929, p. 111). The pleasurable feelings that Marya is going through here are evidently emotions of taste, which are different from other feelings such as sexual desire and acquisitiveness, and which call for imagination. In other words, Marya is capable of "the pleasures of imagination" as specified by Mark Akenside, whose prestigious philosophical poem, *The pleasures of imagination*, "popularized Addison's ideas" advocated in his "famous essays on the imagination from the *Spectator*" (Brewer, 2013, p. 82). More interestingly, Marya here is spiritually attached to a friend who she has never really met, namely the pipe-playing man, who "is like an ancient shepherd giving the world unintentional poetry, in a twist on the pastoral tradition" (Savory, 2009, p. 33), for "the man played, not to attract customers, but to keep his flock in order" (Rhys, 1929, p. 111). Marya feels spiritually attached to the man because he not only plays sweet music but also, by playing the music, manages to keep the sheep in order, the sense of order being another factor which contributes to her pleasure. Although she does not know the pipe-playing man in person, her spiritual attachment to him and her sense of order, deriving from the enchanting music, register nonetheless feelings of community. In a way, she has participated in some sort of collective pleasure, which almost has a lasting effect—we are told that, even when the music starts to fade, she thinks the pipe-playing man's music "persistent as the hope of happiness" (Rhys, 1929, p. 112). To say the least, Marya yearns for communal pleasure.

There is a similar case in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, whose female protagonist Julia also has the potential for emotions of taste that may give rise to the impulse to communicate and to share one's pleasurable experiences or happy memories. Although the adult Julia lives "the life of a dog" (Rhys, 1931, p. 11), she is sensitive to beautiful things, such as flowers and trees, or to places where she has had fond memories. In one of her conversations with Horsfield, she tries to share with him her memories of Ostend where she has spent her childhood—her face "brightened up" while doing so: "I like Ostend. I like it very much. I was happy there, and I always remember places I was happy in. I mean, I remember them so that I can shut my eyes and be there . . ." (Rhys, 1931, p. 50) Despite the fact that she gets increasingly unhappy as she grows up, she always cherishes the memories of her happy childhood:

The last time you were really happy—happy about nothing? When you were happy about nothing you had to jump up and down. "Can't you keep still, child, for one moment?" No, of course you couldn't keep still. You were too

happy, bursting with happiness. You ran as if you were flying, without feeling your feet. And all the time you ran, you were thinking, with a tight feeling in your throat: “I’m happy—happy—happy. . .” (Rhys, 1931, p. 159)

When she is happy, Julia is likely to become highly imaginative and her imaginative empathy even extends to a tree: “When you were a child, you put your hand on the trunk of a tree and you were comforted, because you knew that the tree was alive—you felt its life when you touched it—and you knew that it was friendly to you...” (Rhys, 1931, p. 158) On another occasion we find Julia “thinking of the words ‘orange-trees,’ remembering the time when she had woven innumerable romances about her mother’s childhood in South America” (Rhys, 1931, p. 105). The image of orange-trees here is evocative in the sense that it brings forth pleasant memories which forge a link between Julia and her mother, a link which is in a way communal. An equally evocative bond can be found in flowers, which reflect Julia’s strong emotional attachment to her mother: she once spends more than she can afford for her mother on some red roses, for which “she took her last ten-shilling note from her bag” (Rhys, 1931, p. 127). All these details testify to Julia’s capacity for emotions of taste.

Still another example can be found in *Voyage in the Dark*, whose heroin Anna is not without pleasures of imagination and emotions of taste. Shortly after the beginning of the novel, she is found “reading *Nana*,” a novel by Zola (Rhys, 1982, p. 9). In addition to reading, she also enjoys going to the theatre or the cinema, and a most significant detail in her experience of a film is an unattributed line from Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”: “Through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea...” (Rhys, 1982, p. 107) Admittedly, her story is by and large a sad one: she is forced to move from her Caribbean home to England together with an uncaring stepmother, after the death of her father; almost alone in England, she has to support herself by working as a chorus girl, which marks the beginning of an unhappy life. But she always cherishes memories of her home in the West Indies which, when compared with England, is a poignant reminder of “a difference in the way I was frightened and the way I was happy” (Rhys, 1982, p. 7). Of all her happy memories, the most touching one is that of her close emotional tie to a black servant called Francine, whom she finds endearing because of her kindness, diligence, simple-heartedness, and her singing and even her complexion: “I was happy because Francine was there...Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad” (Rhys, 1982, p. 31). By describing “being black” as “warm and gay,” the narrator here drives home the message regarding the connection between pleasure and communal feelings. Even the way Francine eats mangoes brings pleasure to Anna:

The thing about Francine was that when I was with her I was happy. She was small and plump and blacker than most of the people out there, and she had a pretty face. What I liked was watching her eat mangoes. Her teeth would bite into the mango and her lips fasten on either side of it, and while she sucked you saw that she was perfectly happy. When she had finished she always smacked her lips twice, very loud—louder than you could believe possible. It was a ritual. (Rhys, 1982, pp. 67–68)

It would be hard to find a more touching and more vivid depiction of pleasurable experiences tinged with warmth, ingenuousness, and feelings of community.

No less similar is *Wide Sargasso Sea* in terms of communal pleasure. Antoinette, the heroine, first impresses us as a daughter of Nature. In her early days, “she is full of life, but wild, like the nature that surrounds her” (Savory, 2009, p. 81). Like almost all the other female protagonists under the pen of Jean Rhys, Antoinette is sensitive and responsive to the beauty of Mother Nature. Her friendship with Tia, the daughter of a black slave, is formed in the midst of natural surroundings which are aesthetically appealing to her: she meets Tia “nearly every morning at the turn of the road to the river” and they have such fun together that they sometimes even “stayed till late afternoon,” and she enjoys “looking at the pool deep and dark green under the trees, brown-green if it had rained, but a bright sparkling green in the sun” (Rhys, 1999, p. 13). She is so observant that she is able to capture the nuances of the depths, light, and colours of the water: “The water was so clear that you could see the pebbles at the bottom of the shallow part. Blue and white and striped red. Very pretty” (Rhys, 1999, p. 13). There are in fact many descriptions of how Antoinette responds with pleasure to plants/flowers, especially those in the garden in her own house. For instance, she is particularly drawn to an octopus orchid which, when flowering, “was a bell-shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. The scent was very sweet and strong” (Rhys, 1999, p. 11). The plants that attract her include roses, coralita, jasmynes, orchids, ferns, ginger lilies and honeysuckles, to name only a few. The significance of her delight in those plants goes beyond her private feelings, as aptly pointed out by Elaine Savory:

For Antoinette, the pleasure of home inheres in whatever grows at home: orchids, roses, tree ferns and honeysuckle...She learns in her convent school that Theophilus received a rose which never died and later became a Christian and a martyr...so a rose becomes more than just a flower: it is an emblem of faith, but one associated with self-sacrifice and martyrdom. Significantly, the association of flowers with self-sacrifice emerges in the context of her honeymoon, where the honeymoon house is strewn with flowers, with coralita on the dining table and roses on a serving tray. (Savory, 2015, p. 95)

Indeed the association of flowers with self-sacrifice indicates the extent to which Antoinette is willing to share her pleasure/happiness with her loved ones. A most telling piece of evidence can be found in the honeymoon house, which is “strewn with flowers” as already observed by Savory, where the happy Antoinette offers her unnamed husband—although we all know that he is none other than Mr. Rochester—“soft light kisses” when he is asleep and even tries to cover him up with her own body against “the land breeze” which she thinks “can be cold” (Rhys, 1999, p. 55). That is to say, Antoinette is willing to share her happiness even at the cost of her own health and, in such a case, self-sacrifice is part of communal pleasure.

The above-analyzed cases show that all Rhys's female protagonists have in fact the capacity or potential for sharing their own pleasure, even to the extent of self-sacrifice. But why are they all eventually drawn to obliteration, debasement and even self-destruction? The answer to this question lies in the socio-historical

circumstances in which they live; these circumstances constitute the main content of the third section of the present paper.

III

Although Rhys's female characters are capable of taking part in collective or communal pleasure, they are rendered unable to do so in one way or another, the ultimate reason being the influence of socio-historical conditions on their life. More specifically, they are all "denied socially valued places of belonging" (Lopoukhine et al., 2020, p. 133). They have all lost their voices, so to speak, which would have given expression to their communal pleasure. To be more precise, their voices are "silenced" or "obstructed," in the words of Juliana Lopoukhine, Frédéric Regard and Kerry-Jane Wallart, by "the power structures of organized society" that "depend on a complex interaction of economic, class, racial, national and gender privilege" (Lopoukhine et al., 2020, p. 133). It should be added that, in Rhys's fiction, these power structures are invariably embodied in some mercenary and treacherous men.

On the face of it, Rhys's characters often base their action on their own choices, but are their choices purely voluntary? Laura Frost maintains that "her characters do exercise choice; however, they make choices that steer them away from pleasure and happiness" (Frost, 2013, p. 206). Nevertheless, a close-up look at the socio-historical contexts of the lives of Rhys's characters shows that they are often forced to make such choices rather than doing so of their own accord. A revealing circumstance is that they do not have a permanent place of residence, thus having to move from one hotel to another, often a sordid one, with the exception of Antoinette who ends up in a "madhouse" which is even worse. As soon as the novel *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* opens, for instance, Julia is found living in "a cheap hotel on the Quai des Grands Augustins," which "looked a lowdown sort of place and the staircase smelt of the landlady's cats" (Rhys, 1931, p. 9). The heroine of *Quartet*, similarly, is forced to live in "Montmartre hotel" which "cannot possibly be called a solid background" (Rhys, 1929, p. 8). In the opening part of *Good Morning, Midnight*, too, the female protagonist Sasha is found staying temporarily in "a large room, the smell of cheap hotels faint, almost imperceptible," trapped in a "narrow, cobble stoned" street, which the first-person narrator calls "an impasse" (Rhys, 2020, p. 3). Actually, throughout the story, Sasha is recurrently trapped in anonymous and uncanny hotel rooms, as indicated by one of her interior monologues: "Back to the hotel without a name in the street without a name. You press the button and the door opens... You go up the stairs. Always the same stairs, always the same room" (Rhys, 2020, p. 138). Equally uncanny are some of the hotels in which Anna, the heroine of *Voyage in the Dark*, finds herself. In one summer, she has to stay in "the chorus-girls' hostel in Maple Street" which gets on her nerves (Rhys, 1982, p. 21) and later she stays in a hotel where some "stags' heads stuck up all over the dining-room... The one over our table was as big as a cow's. Its enormous glass eyes stared past us" (Rhys, 1982, p. 77). All these hotel-scenes suggest that their dwellers are constantly on the move, roaming about for safety, jobs, food, etc. What is it, then, that causes them to be out of their elements?

If one unreservedly applies Laura Frost's theory of "unpleasure" to the analysis of the above-mentioned dislocations, s/he is likely to look upon the homelessness of Rhys's characters as something they do of their own free will. True, it is in those hotels, with the exception of the case of Antoinette, that Rhys's female protagonists eventually abandon themselves to alcohol or loveless sex which places them under the governance of both pain and pleasure, or rather "unpleasure" which Frost sees as "not so much a by-product of political disenfranchisement or personal trauma as it is a chosen attraction" (Frost, 2013, p. 164). But is it really a chosen attraction? At least they do not choose to live in those places, but are actually forced to live there. Julia, for instance, once tells Mr. Horsfield that she is from Ostend and she "was happy there" (Rhys, 1931, p. 50). However, she has to leave Ostend and seeks living, together with her mother, in England. The loss of their former happiness is reflected in her mother's sighing which strikes a sympathetic chord in Julia's heart: "This is a cold, grey country. This isn't a country to be really happy in" (Rhys, 1931, p. 105). The story of Marya, too, opens up with Stephan and herself boarding in a cheap hotel in Paris which is foreign to her. After Stephan is thrown into jail, she is utterly impoverished and compelled by Heidler and Lois to become part of a *ménage à trois*. No less peripatetic is Anna's life, as she is forced to leave her Caribbean home and taken to England by her stepmother Hester, who cuts her off financially after she leaves school. Stranded and alone, Anna has to support herself as a chorus girl and then is seduced by Walter who does not really love her. Like Anna, Sasha is also financially unstable, having had an unhappy marriage and a traumatic experience of her child's death, which leaves her adrift in streets. Unlike Sasha, Julia, Anna and Marya, Antoinette does not have to board at a hotel, but she is isolated from the rest of the world in the mansion she calls the "cardboard house" (Rhys, 1999, p. 107), after she is taken by her husband from Jamaica to England. Being thought mad and confined, she leads a more miserable life than a peripatetic one. In brief, Rhys's female protagonists all end up in lodgings that they would not have chosen if there had been any alternative, which means that they are bound to be out of their elements.

That is to say, Rhys's characters are rendered increasingly incapable of higher pursuits by their miserable lodgings, which eventually force them to succumb to what Frost calls "unpleasure." For the Rhys heroine, a more appropriate term than "unpleasure" would be "manic pleasure," a term that Mary Lou Emery has used to describe Maria's state of mind which is in fact a "self-deception that accompanies her social displacement" (Emery, 1990, p. 108). What Emery says about Maria actually applies to all Rhys's female protagonists, whose life experiences have one thing in common: vulnerability to social dislocations. This is probably one of the reasons why Nancy R. Harrison contends that, in Rhys's five novels, seemingly "only the name of the heroine is changed" (Harrison, 1988, p. 61). Viewed from a broader perspective, the dislocations suffered by Rhys's characters are caused by deep, complex social and historical factors, such as industrialization, increasingly large-scale wars and globalized colonization that has gone rampant. The rootlessness of Julia, Marya and Sasha reflects the phenomenon of polarization which is part of the capitalist industrialization, whereas Anna and Antoinette are simply wrenched from their Caribbean homes, which refracts the

sufferings wrought by globalized colonization. Rhys aptly responds to such socio-historical phenomena as a modernist writer, for “modernism...is said to represent dislocations caused by intense industrialization, world war, collapsing or changing belief systems and the enormous impact of globalized colonization” (Savory, 2009, p. 14). Rhys’s fiction sheds light on such a turbulent world by depicting her characters as outsiders. Indeed, “Rhys’s great theme in her fiction is the outsider,” which has to do with “modernism developed in Europe” (Savory, 2009, p. 116).

It should be further pointed out that the term *modernism* has a wide range of implications and is capable of several levels of interpretation. Frost’s focus on modernism’s reconceptualization of pleasure is quite legitimate, but her approach would have been more holistic if she had taken into account communal pleasure. A related problem is that she mentions “conventional pleasure” in the same breath with “the dumb happiness of beasts” while discussing the “hallmarks of modernism”: “Conventional pleasure is dismissed precisely because it is too easy and seems to pander to the dumb happiness of beasts” (Frost, 2013, p. 20). This simplistic juxtaposition of conventional pleasure with somatic pleasure is repeated several times in Frost’s book. For example, she argues that Rhys is “highly attuned to vernacular culture as the main force of conventional, bodily pleasure” (Frost, 2013, p. 31). The problem with this juxtaposition is twofold. First, conventional pleasure is not necessarily confined to corporeal pleasure, but should also include communal or collective pleasure, because the word “conventional” really means “following what is traditional” (Hornby et al., 2010, p. 332) and there has been a long tradition of regarding pleasure as inherently communal ever since the forming of “a counter-strain in Enlightenment philosophy and in Wordsworth’s poetry,” even more so in fin de siècle British discourses of pleasure, as already discussed in the first section of the present paper. Second, Rhys’s characters ARE capable of higher pleasures, although in the end they are all fallen in one way or another. However, as implied in the foregoing analysis, they would have chosen in the first place a kind of pleasure that is far beyond the dumb happiness of beasts.

To be sure, Rhys uses the metaphor of animals for all her female protagonists to a greater or less extent, but the animal images often suggest that they are at bay because of outward circumstances rather than their inborn animal desire. In *Quartet*, where references to animals are most frequent, Marya is described as “a strayed animal” (Rhys, 1929, p. 11). A suggestive detail in the text is her response to Heidler’s amorous advances: as he pushes her bedroom door open and moves towards her, she is seized with the “Fright of an animal caught in a trap” (Rhys, 1929, p. 90). An even more suggestive detail is the depiction of Marya lying in Heidler’s arms “quivering and abject” “like some unfortunate dog abasing itself before its master” (Rhys, 1929, p. 131). Obviously, Marya’s sexual relationship with Heidler does not bring her any pleasure or even what Frost calls “unpleasure,” but sheer pain and fear. Admittedly, she has desire for pleasure, spiritual as well as physical, and she does have such pleasure, though briefly, which can be seen in her reflections on Stephan: “This was the only human being with whom she had ever felt safe or happy” (Rhys, 1929, 134). But her happiness is soon gone after she falls into Heidler’s clutches, even if she still keeps longing for pleasure:

And her longing for joy, for any joy, for any pleasure was a mad thing in her heart. It was sharp like pain and she clenched her teeth. It was like some splendid caged animal roused and fighting to get out. (Rhys, 1929, 74)

The analogy between a caged animal and Marya's longing for joy brings out in sharp relief the root-cause of Marya's sufferings—all her accesses to pleasure, communal pleasure in particular, are blocked just as an animal is caged and cornered.

The metaphor of animals is also used in all the other novels we have discussed so far. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, for example, the hungry Sasha becomes "so animal-conscious" that she compares herself to a mare fearing that unknown people around "would let gates bang on my hindquarters," thus triggering "the bright idea of drinking myself to death" (Rhys, 2020, p. 37). In *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, the animal images become more specific. We are told that Julia lives "the life of a dog" (Rhys, 1931, p. 11), and that she doesn't have "a dog's chance" against "the combination of Mr. Mackenzie and Maitre Legros," the former having sexually exploited her whereas the latter serving as Mackenzie's lawyer (Rhys, 1931, p. 22). In *Voyage in the Dark*, too, occurs a dog image—Anna's relationship with Walter so disgusts Vincent that he calls Walter a "dirty dog" (Rhys, 1982, p. 86). A more sinister animal image crops up in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: on the wedding night, Antoinette tells "Rochester" about her childhood memory of how she "saw two enormous rats, as big as cats, on the sill staring at me" (Rhys, 1999, p. 48). The metaphor of animals here is actually an innuendo to the Creole madwoman who is locked by Mr. Rochester like a caged howling animal, which Rhys has made clear in one of her own letters:

The Creole in Charlotte Brontë's novel is a lay figure...She's necessary to the plot, but always she shrieks, howls, laughs horribly, attacks all and sundry—*off stage*. For me (and for you I hope) she must be right on stage. She must be at least plausible with a past, the reason why Mr. Rochester treats her so abominably and feels justified, the reason why he thinks she is mad and why of course she goes mad, even the reason why she tries to set everything on fire, and eventually succeeds. (Personally, I think that one is simple. She is cold—and fire is the only warmth she knows in England.) (Rhys, 1984, pp. 156–157)

Antoinette feels cold indeed. But, before she moves to England, she has warmth and warming pleasure which she will willingly share with her loved ones, including black servants, and her newly-wed husband in particular. I have already shown, in the second section of the present paper, how Antoinette tries to share her pleasure, after they make love, by offering to "Rochester" "soft light kisses" and even to protect him with her own body against the cold breeze. What I have withheld is her husband's behaviour in the same intimate scene, which is narrated through his own mouth: "One afternoon the sight of a dress which she'd left lying on her bedroom floor made me breathless and savage with desire. When I was exhausted I turned away from her and slept, still without a word or a caress" (Rhys, 1999, p. 513). From this revealing spot we can see the whole leopard, namely "Rochester," who has no love but only savage desire for Antoinette. In other words, she is misused by a man

who should have provided her with security which would have enabled her to enjoy and share a happy life.

Like Antoinette, Rhys's other female protagonists are also essentially affectionate and capable of warmth, as already analyzed above, but are abominably exploited and betrayed by the men whom they either mistakenly love or would have loved. Marya is first disappointed by Stephan and then is mistreated by Heidler. Julia is successively cheated by Mr. Mackenzie, Mr. Horsfield and Mr. James, who invariably dismiss her with some money after taking advantage of her. Anna is first seduced and then jilted by Walter. And Sasha is abandoned by Enno, who cast her off unfeelingly after the death of their baby. One commonality of all these relationships is that they are corrupted in one way or another by money or what Thomas Carlyle calls the principle of "cash-payment nexus" (Carlyle, 1965, p. 38). What makes things worst is that this cash nexus is internationalized, as reflected in Sue Thomas' analysis of *Good Morning, Midnight*, in which even music, together with Sasha, is reduced to "part of an international commercialized pleasure industry" (Thomas, 2022 p. 98). Given such an international climate, there is really no escape, for the Rhys heroine, from becoming "commodities to be bought and hostages who must pay their way" (Harrison, 1988 p. 63). The most typical case here is the arranged marriage between Antoinette and "Rochester" whose precondition for marrying Antoinette is "thirty thousand pounds...paid to me without question or condition" (Rhys, 1999, p. 41). Although Antoinette tries to build up a mutually affectionate relationship with him, he is primarily interested in financial security, since all his father's property will go to his elder brother through primogeniture. The same logic underpins Julia's relationships with MacKenzie, Horsfield and James, who all give Julia money as if that would clear their consciences. For instance, Horsfield feels "powerful and dominant" when he has given Julia "the five hundred and one of the thousand notes" (Rhys, 1931, p. 47). In the case of *Quartet*, the root-cause of the tragedy lies in Stephan's being a fly-by-night art dealer whose dishonesty in financial transactions not only lands him in jail but also renders Marya extremely vulnerable. A similar case is found in *Good Morning, Midnight*: the break-up of Sasha's marriage is mainly caused by the irresponsible Enno who, while in their financial difficulty, tells her that she "mustn't talk about love" (Rhys, 2020, p. 111) and never returns to her after he finds a job and then leaves home, having made an empty promise to send money. A worse case is Anna's relationship with Walter who, treating her as a plaything purchased by money, simply dismisses her with a "cheque for £20" for her "immediate expenses" at the moment of deserting her (Rhys, 1982, p. 58). All this shows that Rhys's female protagonists are betrayed into the hands of treacherous men who render them unable to lead a normal life, let alone a happy life which they would otherwise share with others.

In a nutshell, Rhys's well-trodden female protagonists deserve sympathy indeed, but this sympathy is not earned through their refusal to take part in collective pleasure, as Frost has claimed, but by their sufferings caused by mercenary men who take advantage of their poverty and dislocations, which reflect or refract such socio-historical factors as intense industrialization and globalized colonization. True, they are ultimately drawn to obliteration, debasement and even self-destruction, but they do not choose such "attractions." Rather, they are compelled to deaden the hurt by

what Frost sees as “unpleasure.” A close analysis of Rhys’s texts reveals that her characters do have capacity and potential for feelings which can by no means be categorized as easy, low, passive and corporeal pleasures. Like plants they all love, they would bloom with luxuriant foliage, given proper soil and climate. Unfortunately, however, they are deprived of wholesome soil and are left adrift in a hostile world. Each of Rhys’s novels contains some moments, however brief, that throw insight into her female protagonist’s genuine love for the pleasure afforded either in nature or in art whose appreciation cannot be achieved unless through taste. And they are capable of sharing such pleasure with people around, and even with strangers, which implies a sense of communal well-being and a yearning for communal feelings. Admittedly, part of Rhys’s contribution to modernism is her redefinition of pleasure. Notwithstanding, an integral part of that reconceptualization is her reshaping of communal pleasure.

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