

Diaspora and Identity Construction: Memory Writing in *Voyage in the Dark*

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Abstract

Memory is the reflection of real-life situation and can present a sense of self and identity, which has always been an unavoidable element in the writings of diasporic writers. Taking the memory writing in Jane Rhys' *Voyage in the Dark* as the entry point, this paper attempts to interpret the memory writings that appear in *Voyage in the Dark* by combining with cultural memory, landscape memory, and identity theory. By writing about the heroine Anna Morgan's memories about the West Indies, Rhys analyzes how Anna tries to pursue her self-identity and the awakens of herself. By walking through the two scenes and cultures and living in the gap between the two cultures, Anna tries to establish her identity and pursue a sense of belongings, looking for a spiritual homeland. Rhys uses modernist writing skills such as stream of consciousness and multiple spatial juxtaposition to make a memory writing in her novel, expressing the subversion of white Creole women to colonial discourse and the identification and construction of self-identity.

Keywords: Jean Rhys, post-colonialism, memory writing, identity construction

1. Introduction

Jean Rhys (1890-1979), a Caribbean writer born in the West Indian colony, was one of the most prominent British women writers of the 20th century. Rhys' works can be said to be both "canonical and marginalized" (Wilson & Johnson, 2013). Kalliney (2012) listed the introduction of Jean Rhys as a separate chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, considering her has a special position in literary history. Of white Creole descent, she lived in the West Indies in her childhood and then emigrated to Europe. Such a special identity background makes Jane Rhys's characters often wander between the Caribbean and British cultures, focusing on the plight of white Creole women with a vivid dispersion. Rhys's own immigrant experience and the specific cultural context of the Caribbean made her more keenly aware of the complexity of her diasporic identity, whose literary work was integral to the study of postcolonial literature. The critical studies of the Rhys mainly take modernism, feminism and post-colonialism as the cut point, combined with the scattered identity experience of Rhys herself. In recent years, her works have been increasingly studied from postmodern aesthetics, narrative science, Caribbean postcolonial society, space poetics, and cross-cultural perspectives, etc. While most of the studies mainly centered around her famous work, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and relatively few studies on her other works.

Voyage in the Dark, Rhys' the third published novel, is the only autobiographical fiction recognized by the author herself. And Anna Morgan, the protagonist, shares a very similar personal experience with Rhys, which could be interpreted as an expressive declaration from Rhys. The character of Anna Morgan, "a white, Dominican-born woman much like Rhys herself (Perillo, 2022)", is featured in the novel *Voyage in the Dark*. She came to London to work in a chorus in order to support herself. After she became the mistress of a British man and was dumped by him, she eventually turned to prostitution and had an abortion. This book's interpretation of post-colonial criticism is its main point of attention. As a diasporic writer, Rhys pursues the construction of identity in her writings.

This novel adopts the first-person perspective to tell the experience of Anna in Britain as the main line, in the text through Anna's thoughts interspersed with its memories of the childhood of the West Indies in the Caribbean, in the process of the individual memories of the past writing the West Indies region creole white home memory and colonial identity confusion. Memory and literature have always been closely linked. Memory writing is also a literary tradition. As early as in the ancient Greek period, Plato put forward the term of memory poetics. Rhys

presents Anna's thoughts and spiritual world through her own memory and expresses the subversion of the Creole white women to the colonial discourse and the identification and construction of their self-identity through the coexistence of two narrative voices.

This paper attempts to interpret the memory writings that appear in *Voyage in the Dark* by combining with cultural memory, landscape memory, and identity theory. By writing about the heroine Anna Morgan's memories about the West Indies, Rhys analyzes how Anna tries to pursue her self-identity and the awakens of herself. By walking through the two scenes and cultures and living in the gap between the two cultures, Anna tries to establish her identity and pursue a sense of belongings.

2. Memory Writing and Identity Construction

Memory is a reflection of past reality through the extraction, selection, and reprocessing of the human brain to its past experiences. It can be said that to memory is to stand in the present and look at the past. "The purpose of the memory is not to simply to understand the past, but to confirm and determine the present self-image (Jin, 2017)". Memory is often used to target the current identity and seek identity through personal experiences. Memory has always been an unavoidable element in the writings of diasporic writers. For example, Gurnah once mentioned the importance of memory to him, believing that his creativity originated from the "vivid memory" and wrote about "the place in my memory" (Gurnah, 2004). As a diasporic writer with a special identity, Rhys is no exception. Before the creation of *Voyage in the Dark*, in a letter to a friend, Rhys mentioned that West India has been ringing her heart door, and that West Indian memory had an important influence on Rhys's creation of this novel. Rhys incorporated his white Creole identity and his life experiences in the West Indies into the portrayal of the character of Anna. Anna's self-image in her memory constitutes an independent narrative object, and its potential narrative voice also constitutes the postcolonial and subversive discourse in the text.

Anna thought back to "that time at home (31)," i.e., in the West Indies, when she was worn out and lonely. Her black maid Francine, who served as a figure of protection and solace for Anna in a previous life, gave her the attentive care she required while she was ill. She thought that "I wanted to be black, I always wanted to be black. I was happy because Francine was there... (31)". Anna was lying in some darkness, remembering the past, when she suddenly snapped back to reality when she saw Walter "against the light in the passage (32)". This made Anna feel as though she was in the present or reality because Walter had unexpectedly appeared in place of her memories of playing the role of protector.

To some extent Anna was really influenced by the racist white culture in a subconscious way. For instance, in the opening of the book, she recalled, "the narrow streets smelt of niggers (7)". But Anna has previously stated that she would prefer to be a black man, demonstrating her cultural preference for the West Indies and her strong sense of belonging to the black community of the colony. "Being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad (31)". It has to do with both her present situation and her childhood experiences. Anna had the thought because of her special identity. The Creoles had long been subjected to the dual attacks of British oppression and local West Indians' hatred, bearing the burden of an identity conflict. In her autobiography, Rhys articulately described her complex feelings as an intermediate member, describing herself as a repressed woman and an exile. She was actually given a "black" identity hidden under the white appearance when she was called the Hortons by the other choir girls. Anna aspires to be a black man in order to feel more at home and also because, despite being a white Creole, she wants to be a "pure" black man. The protagonist's identity is ripped apart in opposition because she alternates between defining herself as a poor white lady of Creole descent or a colonial black woman, two very different settings that occur in the story and which are connected and collided. All other identities that are at odds with society's norms are exposed under the category of British cultural hegemony. Anna's best memories of the past show that she somewhat broke through racial differences.

Once, Anna tried to convince Walter of the beauty of the Caribbean in an effort to persuade him to accept and understand her homeland, but it didn't seem to work and he did not seem to care. Because from the standpoint of being at the heart of the empire, Walter's representation of white Britain views the location Anna describes as peripheral and ineffective. Jan Assman pointed out that the culture in the center, as the culture of the empire, covers those marginalized cultures, and always takes a few elites as the early carrier, but it represents the identity of the whole society. On the one hand, Anna's words show the resistance and persistence to the oppressive words, and on the other hand, it can be seen that the positioning of personal identity is gradually becoming clear between the continuous contrast. With the exception of Walter, Anna's stepmother Hester stated that she hates the things in the West Indies. The British appear to have had a negative reaction to goods from the West Indies. They expressed their personal connections to British national identity in their responses, but they also described the colony as a wilderness far from the center of the empire.

The cultural confrontation area that dismantles the conventional binary opposition is referred to as the “third space” introduced by Homi Bhabha. In *Voyage in the Dark*, young Anna moves from the youthful Dominican Republic to Britain, leaving a “gap” between the Caribbean mother country and the original metropolitan country. She then wanders between the two cultures while attempting to gain identity from one side through memory.

At the end of the novel, When Anna suffers a miscarriage and massive hemorrhage, dying in pain and blurred consciousness, the memories of the Caribbean carnival parade she had saw in her childhood flood into her mind, and have a lapse in memory due to the hallucination. When she was a child, due to the restriction of race and class, she was not allowed to join the parade. Although she is in her final hours, at this point, her multiple identities have finally been put back together. In the illusion of herself, she can join the parade and break the bonds of race and class. In the illusion of spiritual insight and return, she also shows the awakening of personal autonomous consciousness and the soul of the soul.

In the colonized Caribbean, the Caribbean Carnival is of enormous cultural significance. Anna envisions herself participating in the carnival parade during her hallucinations when she is dying. “I was watching them from between the slats of the jalousies—they passed under the window singing—it was all colours of the rainbow when you looked down at them and the sky so blue—there were three musicians at the head a man with a concertina and another with a triangle and another with a chak-chak playing (185)”. The tripod iron, chuck, and other indelible cultural traits and symbols of the Caribbean are highlighted in Anna’s memory. The chuck is a West Indies instrument-only feature. The West Indian nursery rhyme “The Brown Hair Girl with a Ring” embodies the beloved, valued, and irreplaceable Caribbean culture in Anna’s heart. The carnival in Anna’s memory is filled with a range of vibrant hues as well as a distinctive rhythm and tune, giving readers an audio-visual feast. Since drumming, dancing, and carnival were tightly forbidden on early Caribbean plantations to prevent slaves from getting into fights, the physical and mental liberty experienced during the Caribbean Carnival reflects the region’s people’s enthusiasm. The singing and dancing of people of all ages is a release of their natural selves as well as a protest against racism and colonialism.

“‘She’ll be all right,’ he said. ‘Ready to start all over again in no time, I’ve no doubt.’ When their voices stopped the ray of light came in again under the door like the last thrust of remembering before everything is blotted out. I lay and watched it and thought about starting all over again. And about being new and fresh. And about mornings, and misty days, when anything might happen. And about starting all over again, all over again... (187)”.

Although the past memory gave Anna great comfort, she did not just indulge in the past, the last paragraph shows that Anna is also looking forward. She recalls “the last thrust of remembering” and then “about starting all over again (187)”. Although elusive or challenging to realize, this hope for “starting all over again” is a process of arousing own autonomous consciousness. To try to identify the person, repeatedly recollect the memory. The process of remembering the past also involves attempting to find a glimmer of light in the otherwise dark journey and grab hold of a floating board when one discovers that a soul cannot fit into the mainstream of British culture.

3. Landscape Reproduction and the Homesick

The multiple memory writings in *Voyage in the Dark* detail the landscape of the West Indies colonies. Through Anna’s memories, the landscape in the eyes of Anna slowly unfold. Landscape has long been endowed with emotion, assuming the function of emotional transmission. In ancient China, there is a saying that “combines emotion with scenery”. Mitchell (2002) also mentioned that “Landscape, we suggest, doesn’t merely signify or symbolize power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power that is (or frequently represents itself as) independent of human intentions” (Mitchell, 2002:1). The exploration of landscape is not limited to the scope of aesthetics, but have an interdisciplinary characteristic, related with literature, culture and even economy. While recalling the Caribbean landscape, Anna personifies some of the landscapes, such as “you could see the curve of a hill like the curve of a green shoulder (70)”. By connecting the landscape with the human body, can close the distance between human and nature. In Anna’s eyes, The West Indies landscape seems to merge with her body and even her identity and she has a sense of dependence.

In Anna’s memory, the description of landscape appears many times. “Landscape has become a way of cultural imagination, which embodies the general attention of home emotion, geographical memory and cultural politics (Huang, 2014:105)”. With the leap of thinking, the details of different places such as the sea, the estate, and other places are magnified through memory. The landscape of the West Indies that Anna recalls reflects a tropical difference from the “center of the Empire”, which means London. This primitive and rugged beauty of nature is in strong contrast to the later industrialized civilization of London, from “market street smelt the wind (7)” to “a

little grey street (8)".

In the first memory writing at the beginning of the novel, the scenery of the West Indies is reproduced. The scenery of West India keeps emerging from memory and is in sharp contrast to the present. All facets of West Indian, sound, color, smell, sea outline, sea breeze, people, food, etc. are clearly remembered by Anna. The simultaneous effects of vision, hearing and smell makes a bright and warm picture of West India with the "the smell of the sea-breeze (8)". But soon Anna pulled herself back to reality and returned to the "little grey street (8)" in London. By contrast, it illustrates the stark disparity between the two worlds. Not only is there a visible difference, but there is also a fundamental contrast in the deeper structures of the two civilizations, as well as a strong devotion to their ancestral home in the gloomy and chilly environment of Britain. The stark contrast between England's grayness and the Caribbean Sea's vibrant colors. The two spaces of the West India and London are contrasted through Anna's memories of the West Indies. The difference demonstrates a propensity to sense affiliation.

They discovered some flowers growing with grass in an English forest clearing while having a tryst with Walter. Then Anna remembers the several lovely flowers she saw on the island. "Thinking of the walls of the Old Estate house, still standing, with moss on them. That was garden. One ruined room for roses, one for orchids, one for tree-ferns (52)". It is visible everywhere, including in the Estate and the ruins. In deserted areas or against crumbling buildings, these flowers last longer. The description of the path of Constance Estate, as if there is a scene advancing slowly with Anna's walk, from, as if immersive, a metaphor for Anna's life. The journey was a symbol of Anna's life. The description of the path reflects Anna, and in addition, there is a description of the manor path to grow up through it.

Through the writing of landscape memory, the colonial landscape is closely linked with human life in this place in Anna's memory. The beauty and healing of the scenery of the West Indies become a kind of comfort for Anna, especially when she is in London, such a place makes her feel confused and alienated both from the physical environment and psychological environment. To make Although and she repeatedly recalls these scenes to try to escape from reality, but is also a kind of attempt to weapon to fight against the cold cruel reality behavior. Indeed, due to the self-selectivity of memory, the recalled landscape of the West Indies is just only one aspect of the region from her vantage point, reflecting the imagination of homeland of a Creole white people like her. It's possible that the scenery of the West Indies will alter for other groups, such as the black. From Anna's perspective, what she exhibits is the nostalgia for her homeland, which is a reflection of her quest for a sense of home and writings about the colonial setting.

4. Memory Writing Skills

Rhys incorporates Anna's individual recollections into *Voyage in the Dark*, significantly extending and enhancing the narrative perspectives through the memory writing. Rhys is a modernist author who has included numerous modernist creative approaches into her works, including the stream of consciousness and the modernist aesthetics that are prominent in her writing. In order to make the emotional expression more fluid when writing memories in this work, several creative writing approaches are also applied, preventing the insertion of memories from being abrupt.

First, Rhys uses a first-person narration in *Voyage in the Dark*, through Anna's voice to describe the events that took place around her and her own memories. The reader can become involved in the story through the first-person narrative perspective. Additionally, memory is a selective narrative process that frequently results in a person's subjective emotional preference. Selective use of the first-person narrative style enables the integration of internal and external emotions. It is beneficial to fully characterize people's subjective emotional and psychological activity. Moving back and forth between the past and the present is possible with this shattered method of memory. This can demonstrate the flexibility of ideas while also improving the reading experience for the audience. The reader can become emotionally involved in Anna's emotional changes and mental ups and downs because to the smooth but natural transition between the past and present. The narrative process inevitably involves two narrative voices—one from the present experience and the other from Anna's memories of the past—because Anna is standing in the now and looking back at the past. How to connect the past with the present is illustrated through the intersection of these two narrative voices in two tunes. The two intersecting narrative voices are set side by side.

In addition, there are two kinds of writing about memory: conscious memory and unconscious memory. Hints are frequently added upfront while recalling consciously to the comprehensive approach to highlighting the profound memories. The past and the present are in contrast. When recalling something consciously, you will frequently include a prompt to direct the reader to enter the recollection below before the recall. The addition of

these hints partly shows that Anna is actively trying to recall, and on the other hand, it creates an immersive atmosphere. By opening “two eyes inside your head (155)” to come out of the memory, how Rhys constructs Anna’s identity through memory writing is unfolded.

5. Conclusion

“Anna’s voice remains, however vulnerable, trembling like a flame that continues to burn, reminding society that real human beings suffer with each act of tyrannical speech (Pelucacci, 2020)”. The space of Anna is contrasted at the point where memory and reality meet. In accordance, this novel focuses on Anna’s vision of the world, and her thoughts gradually emerge as the first-person narrative perspective flows slowly. As the book’s initial title, “Two Tunes”, implies, Rhys’ writing embodies a juxtaposition structure between memory and the present. She uses memory writing to complement and recollect the story and to show Anna’s thoughts and spiritual world.

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