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Literature of Pre-war Mentality and Existential Crisis: A Study of Rhys' *Good Morning, Midnight* in Light of Sartre's *The Nausea*

Abstract

This research paper, in a close textual reading, investigates Jean Rhys' Good Morning, Midnight in light of Jean-Paul Sartre's The Nausea. Both novels in their respective ways attempt to explore the nature of existence before the catastrophic war. In both novels, an atmosphere of fear, loneliness, despair, anguish, viscosity and nothingness occupies the reader's imagination. Sasha, the central character of Good Morning, Midnight, is no Faustian character but she suffers patiently and endures on a grand scale. The social world denounces her in cold blood when she was heartlessly abandoned by her husband in Paris. She felt her womanhood shamelessly abused and her status as an individual denied her. She believes that suffering is the result of an unjust social and political system. Sasha seems to have gone beyond repair; she fails to find any satisfying means to resurrect herself from the damage done to her. Nevertheless, in the midst of large-scaled moral indifference and coldness of the world, her faith in humanity is reaffirmed. In The Nausea, Roquentin is not presented as a character caught up in the web of domesticity and traditional family relations. He belongs to the line of seekers who attempt to explore the enigma of existence. Roquentin sets before himself a self-appointed task of philosophizing over the nature of things and existence. His philosophical wanderings yield a vision of humanity in the end. He undertakes to write a novel to 'make people ashamed of their existence'.

Key Words: Existence, Loneliness, Suffering, Exploration, Humanity

Introduction

Good Morning, Midnight was first published on the eve of World War II in 1939; *The Nausea* appeared in the press in Paris in April 1938. Sasha, the central character of *Good Morning, Midnight* is revisiting Paris in late October 1937. Roquentin, the central character of *The Nausea*, starts his diary entries from January 1932 in Bouville. The time of action of both novels is set between the two World Wars. Europe is on the verge of second catastrophic war. The political Europe offers "a humanity depressed and degraded in the shadow of fascism" (Savoury, 1998, p. 127). Characters are placed in the backdrop of the looming danger of World War II. Both novels in their respective ways question the nature of existence. In both novels, an atmosphere of fear, loneliness, despair, anguish, viscosity and nothingness occupies the reader's imagination. In both novels, cafes are being frequently visited and revisited; waiters and waitresses, the passers-by

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pop in and out of the narrative as inauthentic beings struggling in vain against the processes of existence.

Analysis and Discussion

In *The Nausea*, Roquentin sets before himself a self-appointed task of philosophizing over the nature of things and existence. His philosophical wanderings yield a vision of humanity in the end. The whole novel is written in the form of diary entries. He writes down his day to day experiences in a diary. He attempts to 'piece together and argue out' the variety of impressions he receives from the outer world. He attempts to find an exact focus of vision. The idea of writing a diary seems to have arisen from his desire to organize the contents of his psyche. The diary writing detaches him emotionally from the surrounding objects of observation. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Sasha rummages through the contents of her memory. The narrative keeps shifting from the present to the past, and vice versa. Sasha is a mature woman in her middle years. Her conversation with other characters especially the Russians and the painter reveal that she is capable of intellectual talk. The other people she meets seem to be intellectually inferior to her. We are told in the text that she used to write stories for a rich woman. Near the end of the novel, while talking to Rene, she comments upon herself: "The true cerebrale is a woman who likes nothing and nobody except herself and her own damned brain or what she thinks is her brain" (Rhys, 2000, p. 136). She is interested in her own mind as a befitting subject of inquiry. She knows that communication and understanding are not possible; language has become a means of non-communication. She does not show great interest in communicating with others. She tries to avoid human contact but moves among them. Roquentin's response to others is not different from Sasha's except that he is even more reserved than her. He likes to talk occasionally to one character in the novel, the Self-taught man. The other character he likes to meet is Anny, his beloved. Toward the end of the novel, they stop meeting each other.

Sasha, like Roquentin, is self-conscious to a highest degree. She buys painting from Surge not because of artistic interest but she sees in the painting the reflection of her own misery, and the human misery in general. She is presented as a lonely wanderer in Paris. Is her loneliness the result of special historical circumstances or is it caused by the contingency of existence? She comes here from England at the suggestion and financial support of her friend, Sidonie. She is re-visiting Paris after the gap of five years. She plans to stay here for a fortnight. She attempts to reconstitute her fragmented self by "piecing it together, arguing it out..." (Rhys, 2000, p. 45). Roquentin does the same by writing the events of his life on daily basis. Sasha finds it important to contextualize her suffering at a place which almost wholly sucked forth the fluid of life inside her. She thinks that she could get a chance to look into the repressed contents of her psyche, and face it with full consciousness. She reflects over her relation to this place: "Here I belong and here I'll stay" (Rhys, 2000, p. 34). She comes to Paris with a determination to "drink myself to death" (Rhys, 2000, p. 30).

Roquentin is not presented as a character caught up in the web of domesticity and traditional family relations. Like Sasha, he has no special mental or spiritual association with any religious creed or ideology. He is terribly alone. He, like

Sasha, is his own subject and lives massively from within. His introspective analysis of himself and things around him begin to challenge the sovereignty of his former way of life. He calls into doubt his perceptual procedures; consequently, the familiar view of the world collapses. Roquentin reflects: "I am illumined within by a diminishing light" (Sartre, 1962, pp. 24-25). This 'diminishing light' refers to an existing idea of reality. Sasha realizes this 'diminishing light' as a result of a personal crisis of acute suffering and isolation. The nature of Roquentin's perception begins to change when he is suddenly overtaken by a strange fear. The objects he views starts to assume an independent existence of their own. He becomes aware of the consciousness of objects. Even his relation to his own body makes him react in a strange manner. He registers the sensation of change within him, "Something has happened to me..." (Sartre, 1962, p. 11). He examines his last six years' unheeded existence. To top it all, he discovers that he is no longer free. He registers this overpowering feeling when he fails to pick up a paper from the ground. It is reinforced on another occasion when he could not throw a pebble into the sea. This feeling of being limited generates nausea and disgust about his existence. Consequently, he feels sick at heart: "the disgust and fear felt by a conscious being when he contemplates the viscosity or stickiness of things" (Warnock, 1970, p. 111).

What is the status and position of Roquentin with regard to other major personages of modern European novels? In one sense of the word, he may be grouped under the category of *Bildungsroman* tradition of novel writing. The term has come down to us from the novels written during the eighteenth century Germany. It is a novel of self-education; the hero of the novel undertakes to explore the esoteric mystery of life; he encounters frightful ordeals of experience before he is initiated into a timeless mode of being; his quest in the end yields a vision of the future of humankind (Beddow, 1982). To cite a few notable examples of such heroes from the tradition of modern European novels: Hans Castorp, Stephen Dedalus, and Rupert Birkin. Roquentin belongs to the line of seekers who attempt to explore the enigma of existence. It is understandable to comprehend wits that life is a continuum; it is a mystery. Woolf states in her essay "Modernist Fiction" (1919/1925) that "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (Cited in Rainy, 2007, p. 899).

What is the status of *Good Morning, Midnight* in the context of what is written above? Is it simply a tale of acute suffering in the wake of a cold and heartless world? Does the protagonist rise above her tragic circumstances? Why does Rhys fill up the pages of her novel with an atmosphere of 'viscosity and stickiness of things'? Does Sasha's tale embody an apocalyptic end to the political Europe through bloodshed and war? Does she represent the forces of destruction about to be unleashed? Europe is certainly heading towards another catastrophic war: "The unhappiness which Sartre sees as symptomatic of human condition can be made more intense by political disasters or historical accidents" (Thody, 1992, p. 33). Is *Good Morning, Midnight* about the essential human condition just before the beginning of World War II? What kind of values and pattern of life has been suggested through Sasha's tale? Sasha does not declare any intention of exploring the enigma of existence as Roquentin does. She is similar to Roquentin in terms of

her secular outlook on existence. Both view existence from the atheistic standpoint. She mocks at the idea of God: “God is very cruel, very cruel. A devil, of course. That accounts for everything – the only possible explanation” (Rhys, 2000, pp. 116-7). Toward the end of the novel, she proclaims the death of God: “Venus is dead; Apollo is dead; even Jesus is dead” (Rhys, 2000, p. 156). In one sense, she stands in sharp contrast to the explorers of the esoteric mystery of life. For example, Siddhartha’s process of discovery yields the bliss of nirvana in the end. Castorp proves a genius in the realm of experience. Stephen, at the end of the novel, after being disillusioned by the rigid categories of experience, declares: “Welcome, O Life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (Joyce, 1968, p. 257). Sasha is no Faustian character but she suffers patiently and endures on a grand scale – a modern counterpart of Prometheus. Her acute suffering and loneliness suggest that her existence is meaningless: “the long night, the interminable night....” hovers over the edge of her consciousness (Rhys, 2000, p. 49). How does she arrive at this conclusion? It is worth mentioning Silenus’s words: “Oh, wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery, why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is – to die soon” (Nietzsche, 1967, p. 42). If existence is ‘ephemeral’ and governed by ‘chance’, then what is the status and position of a human? We are told in the text that Sasha inhabits a cold and indifferent world with “no exit sign” (Rhys, 2000, p. 12). Sasha affirms Roquentin’s judgement about his existence that “I lost the whole game” (Sartre, 1962, p. 210). She sees herself in relation to the world: “for I am an inefficient member of society, slow in the uptake, uncertain, slightly damaged in the fray, there’s no denying it” (Rhys, 2000, p. 25). She looks at herself as a negligible entity with regard to the world at large: “And this is my plane....and mind you don’t trip over the hole in the carpet. That’s me” (Rhys, 2000, p. 11).

Sasha quite mockingly sums up her state of life which she keeps referring to from time to time in a dilly-dallying manner: “Here this happened, here that happened” (Rhys, 2000, p. 15). It looks comical but this surface comedy implies essential human condition. She faces it with tragic humour. The social world denounces her in cold blood when she was heartlessly abandoned by her husband in Paris. The whole burden of shame and disgrace falls upon her shoulders. The solicitor in London speaks to her as the self-proclaimed voice of the normal world: “We consider you as dead. Why didn’t you make a hole in the water? Why didn’t you drown yourself in the Seine” (Rhys, 2000, p. 36)? Instead of being treated with sympathetic understanding, she was unjustly castigated for bringing ruin upon herself and shame upon others. She views the world from afar and moves inside it as an insignificant nothing. She wears an expression of philosophical calm except for certain times when her drunkenness makes her cry. She makes a mockery of the world when reduces herself to a mechanical fixation in her daily existence: “Planning it all out. Eating. A movie. Eating again. One drink. A long walk back to the hotel. Bed. Luminal. Sleep. Just sleep – no dreams” (Rhys, 2000, p. 15). Her interminable suffering offers her no other reasonably satisfying possibility except ‘to drown herself to death’. She seems to know her course. She disengages herself emotionally from the world: “Now I no longer wish to be loved, beautiful, happy

or successful. I want one thing and one thing only – to be left alone. No more pawings, no more prying – leave me alone....” (Rhys, 2000, p. 37). She expects very little from this world. She is reconciled with her loneliness at present. She realizes that “The passages will never lead anywhere, the doors will always be shut....No hospitable doors, no lit windows, just flowering darkness” (Rhys, 2000, p. 28). She generalizes about the state of human beings: “Human beings are cruel – horribly cruel” (Rhys, 2000, p. 41). She sizes them up: “Everything in their whole bloody world is a cliché. Everything is born out of a cliché, rests on a cliché, survives by a cliché. And they believe in the clichés – there is no hope” (Rhys, 2000, p. 36). Their banal standards and narrow moral yardsticks condemn and banish her as a transgressor. Consequently, she is left to suffer like her fellow sufferers, the angels of the dark. She reflects upon herself as a psychological wreck: “everything is gone out of me except misery” (Rhys, 2000, p. 87). She understands others’ callous and cold response to her suffering: “you jump in with no willing and eager friends around, and when you sink you sink to the accompaniment of loud laughter” (Rhys, 2000, p. 10). She registers her protest through silent resistance. She feels herself thrown into the abyss of darkness against her wishes as a result of a genetic accident. She brings to mind the young Russian’s words: “I didn’t ask to be born; I didn’t make the world as it is; I didn’t make myself as I am; I am not one of the guilty ones” (Rhys, 2000, p. 58). The words reverberate in her mind as if they were floating on the surface of her consciousness.

Sasha cherishes no hopes of her future: “There is no past, no future, there is only this blackness, changing faintly, slowly, but always the same” (Rhys, 2000, p. 144). She cannot think of beginning anew in relation to her social world. She seems to have learnt from her experience of life that once a woman is bogged down, she cannot get another chance to redeem herself. She could not piece herself together after her husband deserted her. She feels herself at the mercy of the cold and hostile world. It is no less than a miracle that she did not die; the crude vigour of existence kept her barely alive. There was none who could have comforted her broken heart. She turned into a stone like the mulatto woman in the Jewish painter’s tale. Roquentin reflects that “Stones are hard and do not move” (Sartre, 1962, p. 37). She becomes a living dead: “One thing? It wasn’t one thing. It took years. It was a slow process” (Rhys, 2000, p. 146). Being a woman made it more vulnerable for her to fall victim to the menace of existence. She had very little choice to be other than what she has become, a psychological wreck. Toward the end of the novel, when Rene forces himself upon her, he halts for a moment and asks: “If you are so strong, why do you keep your eyes shut” (Rhys, 2000, p. 152)? She replies: “Because dead people must have their eyes shut” (Rhys, 2000, p. 152).

In a sense, Sasha feels herself freed from the bondage of existence. She attains a state of being where menace from the outside world is diminished because she has little to lose or attend to: “I haven’t got a care in the world” (Rhys, 2000, p. 15). She relaxes hold of things. She does attain peaceful moments but they remain precarious and short-lived: “It’s alright. Tomorrow I’ll be pretty again, tomorrow, tomorrow....” (Rhys, 2000, p. 48). Sasha’s tomorrow never comes: “But when I think ‘tomorrow’ there is a gap in my head, a blank – as if I were falling through

emptiness. Tomorrow never comes....” (Rhys, 2000, p. 133). She allows herself to be an automaton, a drift-wood. She consoles herself with the thought that “We can’t all be happy...” (Rhys, 2000, p. 26). She begins to understand the role of chance in the affairs of existence: “being the accidental product of a blind evolutionary process governed by a mixture of genetic chance and selective necessity” (Thody, 1992, p. 24). Sartre’s philosophy of existentialism reveals that “there is no good and sufficient reason for anything to exist at all” (Thody, 1992, p. 22). Sasha is fed up with existence when she says: “I have had enough” (Rhys, 2000, p. 25). She is sick at heart. This sickness is a consequence of her futile existence. She questions: “I am asking myself all the time what the devil I am doing here. All the time” (Rhys, 2000, p. 45). She receives an answer to her query that existence is absurd. At the heart of existence lies emptiness: “I am empty of everything” (Rhys, 2000, p. 48). She understands the necessity of suffering for those who are condemned to suffer: “There must be the dark background to show up the light colours. Some must cry so that the others may be able to laugh the more heartily. Sacrifices are necessary....” (Rhys, 2000, p. 26). She believes that suffering is the result of an unjust social and political system. She recognizes her little niche assigned to her as a result of the contingency of existence. She does not blame anyone for bringing ruin upon her own life. She pinned up all her hopes of love on her husband who did not find her a compatible companion, and thought it appropriate to dispense with her altogether. He joined hands with the social forces of mobility and action. At the beginning of her expectations it appeared to her: “My beautiful life in front of me, opening out like a fan in my hand....” (Rhys, 2000, p. 99). She sums it up in a dilly-dallying rhythm of words: “What happened then?.. Well, what happens?” (Rhys, 2000, p. 99). She was arrested in that moment of time. Time suspends for her: “Hours and hours and hours yet... ‘centuries of time’” (Rhys, 2000, p. 49). She felt her womanhood shamelessly abused and her status as an individual denied her. Her son dies and the incident is reported in a casual manner. She keeps alive the memory of her son and resorts to drinking: “It was then that I had the bright idea of drinking myself to death” (Rhys, 2000, p. 37). She could appreciate life if “it is reduced to its essentials” (Rhys, 2000, p. 73). Life revives within her when she desires: “I want more of this feeling – fire and wings” (Rhys, 2000, p. 73). The Christian idea of salvation does not enter into her thoughts. She is determined to drink herself to death: “Drink, drink, drink....As soon as I sober up I start again. I have to force it down sometimes” (Rhys, 2000, p. 37). She vomits out the nausea of existence: “what do I care about anything when I can lie on the bed and pull the past over me like a blanket? Back, back, back....” (Rhys, 2000, p. 49). She begins to attain a sense of joy in her suffering: “People talk about the happy life, but that’s the happy life when you don’t care any longer if you live or die” (Rhys, 2000, p. 75). She begins to see herself as “something that no longer quite human, quite alive” (Rhys, 2000, p. 80). She is gone beyond cherishing any illusion. She says: “I don’t deceive myself” (Rhys, 2000, p. 89).

Sasha seems to have gone beyond repair; she fails to find any satisfying means to resurrect herself from the damage done to her. She conceded to her friend’s suggestion of visiting Paris with a vague and battered unconscious hope that some sort of miracle might happen to her or an unnamable Messiah might come to her deliverance from nowhere. In order to avert the nausea and the anguish generated by her existence for the time being, she deliberately feeds herself on false hopes of

normalcy: "I am trying so hard to be like you. I know I don't succeed, but look how hard I try" (Rhys, 2000, p. 88). She is extremely self-conscious about her ageing and appearance: "Besides, it isn't my face, this tortured and tormented mask" (Rhys, 2000, p. 37). She keeps looking at herself in the mirror: "There are hollows under my eyes" (Rhys, 2000, p. 48). She wears the mask of a lady to create a false impression on others; it also helps her conceal her real state of feeling lying beneath the debris of her existence. She started calling herself Sasha to bring good luck upon her. Her dilapidated state of existence has already reduced her hopeless about leading normal life. She seeks disintegration to sink into the quagmire of existence. She realizes it very strongly that nothing significant could ever come out of her battered hopes. She stands outside the action of normal life and perceives it insignificant and meaningless. She seeks deliverance through alcohol and self-destruction. Her state is caused by suffering over a long period of time: "You only get there after a long time and many misfortunes. And do you think you are left there? Never" (Rhys, 2000, p. 76). She affirms Roquentin's inference about existence: "How serpentine is this feeling of existing" (Sartre, 1962, p. 135). She broods over her sense of the fragmented self: "Except, of course, that there always remains something. Yes, there always remains something" (Rhys, 2000, p. 10). She concludes that in spite of everything, something remains unfulfilled.

Toward the end of the novel, after Anny's departure, Roquentin sheds the last remnant of illusion – love: "I am free: there is absolutely no reason for living, all the ones I have tried have given way and I can't imagine any more of them" (Sartre, 1962, p. 209). It is paradoxical to say that the freedom he valued above all other things during the course of the novel brings him to a sense of futility. Earlier in the novel, he felt disgusted, fear, nausea and anguish at the lack of freedom but now he faces the futility of it: "My past is dead... I am alone in this white, garden-rimmed street. Alone and free. But this freedom is rather like death" (Sartre, 1962, p. 209). He says: "In a vacuum all bodies fall at the same rate of speed" (Sartre, 1962, p. 211). He sorts out his means of redemption by writing a book: "Another type of book... A story, for example, something that could never happen, an adventure. It would have to be beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence" (Sartre, 1962, p. 237).

Conclusion

Unlike Roquentin, Sasha does not undertake to write a novel to 'make people ashamed of their existence'. Sasha understands what Roquentin questions: "Will there never be an end to it" (Sartre, 1962, p. 229)? Her last act in the novel raises speculations. Why does she surrender herself to a disgusting character like the commercial traveler who was looking for an opportunity to satisfy his male pride and lust? She keeps referring to him as a disgusting figure and he appears to the reader a modern version of satyr. During the course of the novel, she, to the best of her intentions, tries to avoid any kind of social contact with him. Is she sexually starving? She could have fulfilled her sexual desire with a more eligible, potent and handsome young man, Rene. She allows herself to slide along the trap set by the commercial traveler. It was always written on his face what he had wanted from her. She knew what he thought of her. The commercial traveler is a witness to what passes between her and Rene, and she is afraid that he might create

difficulties for her. It seems probable that Rene's physical touch and his act of kindness may have reawakened the submerged sensation of life within her. The deeply buried impulses may have come to the fore and whet her appetite to desire once again: "My mouth hurts, my breasts hurt, because it hurts, when you have been dead, to come alive...." (Rhy, 2000, p. 153). In addition to that, she is profoundly touched by Rene's generosity and kindness towards her; she encouraged him to take her money but he did not take the money so generously offered to him. In the midst of large-scaled moral indifference and coldness of the world, her faith in humanity is reaffirmed. She is deeply moved when Rene shows his marks of injury all over his body. But why did she give herself over to a most despicable person? Roquentin aptly describes the nature of existence: "The essential thing, for all of us, was the black pit just in front of us, in the bottom of it there were people you didn't see" (Sartre, 1962, p. 204). Her whole life has been a spectacle of misery and absurdity; she allows herself to fall deeper in 'the pit of existence'. She allows herself to be re-baptized by "the priest of some obscene, half-understood religion" (Rhys, 2000, p. 30).

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