

Estratto da

Rites of Passage:

Rational / Irrational
Natural / Supernatural
Local / Global

Atti del XX Convegno Nazionale
dell'Associazione Italiana di Anglistica

[Catania-Ragusa, 4/6 ottobre 2001]

a cura di

Carmela Nocera, Gemma Persico, Rosario Portale



Rubbettino

Michela A. Calderaro

Islands, Colours and Obsessions.

The Other and the Self in Three Creole Writers:
Jean Rhys, Eliot Bliss, Phyllis Shand Allfrey

The islands of our imagination – with their deep colours, “hot air”, “strong sea breeze” and “blazing sun” (Bliss 1984: 177) – were for three white Creole women writers very real islands – Dominica and Jamaica. Jean Rhys, Eliot Bliss and Phyllis Shand Allfrey, though very different personally, shared a common experience of the “Other”, not really belonging to any of the communities they lived in, either on their native island or across the ocean in England or the U.S.

White of British descent, Creoles were actually looked down upon by both the *real* white British-born expatriates, who occupied a higher position in the socio-economic hierarchy of the island, *and* the black community. Yet white Creole women were the subject of sex discrimination at home when facing white males. Thus they found themselves on the bottom rung of the Caribbean social ladder.

The feeling of “otherness”, the alienation and rejection in the quest of the white Creole woman for individual identity, is the common element in the works of these writers.

While Jean Rhys is well known by both the literary community and the public at large, Phyllis Shand Allfrey and Eliot Bliss are practically unknown. However, their books are just as important as Rhys’s for the understanding of the difficult and painful experience endured by such women in periods of historical change and social and economic unrest. Not only do their works belong by right to the canon of West Indies literature, but they also help understand how varied and manifold it is.

Often, there is a journey at the core of the narrative – with the heroine crossing a wide ocean, and in some cases coming back. For the physical journey away from the islands may be long, but the mental departure is even longer. The theme of ‘voyage’ or ‘passage’, both actual and symbolic, from the Caribbean to England and back, and the writers’ excruciating awareness of being Other/Different/Women, are the common subjects of *The Orchid House*

(1953) by Phyllis Shand Allfrey, who was born in Roseau, Dominica, in 1908 and also died there in 1986; *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys, also born in Roseau, Dominica in 1894 but died in England, in 1979; and *Luminous Isle* (1934) by Eliot Bliss, born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1903 and died in England.

The choices they made in their personal lives were strikingly different: just think of Phyllis Shand Allfrey, a passionate political activist, who was the "first to take the step in 1954 to write boldly about the plight of white Creoles" (Nunez-Harrell 1981: 282) and who made huge personal sacrifices for the Caribbean cause. But despite their differences, their paths often crossed. They corresponded and shared experiences and opinions.

Jean Rhys acted as the supporter of her lesser-known friends. Although they only met once in London and never in Dominica, Allfrey would regularly send Rhys copies of *The Star*, the opposition weekly newspaper she had founded in 1965 with her husband. They ran the paper to give a voice to young local writers; she would use it as, "an artistic and political weapon" (Polly Pattullo 1988: 233), and ran it until 1982 when financial problems forced her to close down. On 3 March 1979, Rhys wrote to Allfrey that she was planning to go to London and show a copy of *The Orchid House* (OH) to André Deutsch for a reprint. Unfortunately Rhys's failing health prevented her from taking the trip and she would die a couple of months later, in May.

My dear Phyllis... [Jean Rhys writes] I have been ill – cracked up a bit, to tell you the truth – and have just got back from a nursing home. I hope to be well enough to get to London in two or three weeks and it goes without saying will do all I can for the book. I have a copy of it and I am taking it up to London with me and am sure I can get it read by André Deutsch. Also I will talk to Diana Athill and she may be able to give good advice. I am supposed to rest for several months and not do any work at all but if possible I will try to write something as a preface (Campbell 1990: 237).

Jean Rhys was also a very supportive friend to Eliot Bliss, whom she would often invite for dinner. In her unpublished diaries Bliss writes:

She used to make me delightful West-Indian suppers, and we used to drink an awful lot. Well she could hold it, but it used to make me ill, frequently ill (Pringle 1984: xvii).

Another writer, Vita Sackville-West, was also extremely helpful in advancing Phyllis Shand Allfrey's and Eliot Bliss's careers. She was "instrumental in getting" *Luminous Isle* (LI) published (Pringle 1984: xv), and was a member of the jury that awarded Allfrey a second prize in an international poetry competition sponsored by the Society of Women Writers and Journalists. However small the prize might have been, it allowed Allfrey to write *The Orchid House*.

Unfortunately, besides having friends and interests in common, all three writers also have long periods of literary neglect in common.

Jean Rhys was even thought to be dead for quite a long time: after the publication of *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) she disappeared and her books went out of print. Only after the dramatization of this novel was broadcast in 1958, she was traced down in Cornwall and later, after the publication of the much acclaimed *Wide Sargasso Sea* (WSS), was acknowledged as a great writer. Rhys returned to the Caribbean only once, and stayed very briefly.

Phyllis Shand Allfrey died penniless in a "broken-down little house" (Pattullo 1988: 225). This despite the fact that at one time she served as the Minister of Health and Social Affairs in the first Federal Government of West Indies (being the only woman and the only white person in that government). Her *The Orchid House*, after various ups and downs, ended up among the 'neglected, out of print books', and as far as we know it is still there. Only recently there have been some feeble signs of interest in her work and life. However, the critical bibliography on Allfrey includes only a few articles, some reference in essays about Jean Rhys, and a single book-length study, that is Ms. Allfrey's biography by Elizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, published in 1996. Allfrey returned to Dominica, fought for freedom alongside the black community and died there.

Eliot Bliss's fate was even worse, if such thing is possible. Like Allfrey, she too was plagued by constant financial problems. Her critical bibliography consists of a *single* article, where she is considered in a group with Rhys and Allfrey but is not examined individually (O'Callaghan 1986: 74-88). There are a couple of reviews of her two books, *Saraband* (1931) and *Luminous Isle* (1934), written at the time of publication. There is no mention anywhere of her third book, *The Albatross* (1935). She died not long ago, also in poverty. By the way, her Christian name was not "Eliot". She herself changed it to Eliot after T. S. Eliot and George Eliot when she returned to England in 1925. Her real name, Eileen, appears in *The Letters of Jean Rhys*; it is not even mentioned in the *Who Was Who Among English and European Authors* – where the awfully brief entry under Eliot Bliss includes only her date of birth and the name of one of the convents where she received her Catholic education. She never returned to Jamaica.

The acute dilemma of white Creole women – the frustrated and frustrating search for a "Self" that is not always or not only an "Other" – is underscored by the different stylistic choices in the three books.

In *The Orchid House*, the story is narrated in the first-person by Lally, the black nurse of three sisters, Joan, Natalie and Stella who are returning to the island. *Luminous Isle*, though narrated in the third-person, brings the reader close to Emmeline Hibbert's struggle for freedom from the restrictive rules of colonial garrison life.

Stylistically the turning point is reached when, besides struggling with her fate, the heroine tries to understand it too. This evolution is clearly evident in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, with events rendered through the two main characters'

points of view in an alternating duet. Rhys's style is undoubtedly more complex and her mastery of the writing tools is by far more refined than her fellow Creole writers'. However, it would be unfair not to mention that Rhys wrote her book much later in life; that she did not "use Dominican material centrally until after she read *The Orchid House* [and] her Christophine and Baptiste are names, almost characters, from *The Orchid House*" (Campbell 1990: 239); and that she began her writing career under the wings of "Master" Ford Madox Ford, whose influence is quite evident throughout her writings.

The islands, where the battle for freedom is fought – and perhaps also lost – are co-protagonists of these books. And if the way these islands are described is similar in the three novels, so is the relationship between the island and each heroine.

Emmeline Hibbert in *Luminous Isle* feels that

the bleached hills seemed to run out to meet her with her calm limbo-like brows. [...] there was recognition between them and herself. It had not been imagined, it was a feeling, this understanding between herself and the hills (*LI* 100).

Antoinette, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is the island and the island is Antoinette. Rochester (though unnamed in the novel) would do anything to own both, to unveil the secret Antoinette and the island share and hide:

It was a beautiful place – wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I'd find myself thinking, 'What I see is nothing – I want what it *hides* – that is not nothing' (*WSS* 73).

And a vital part of the islands are the gardens. They stand out magnificently and dangerously:

Our garden was **large** and **beautiful** as that garden in the Bible – the **tree of life** grew there. But it had gone wild. The paths were overgrown and a **smell** of dead flowers mixed with the fresh living **smell**. Underneath the tree ferns, tall as forest tree ferns, the **light** was green. **Orchids** flourished out of reach or for some reason **not to be touched**. One was snaky looking, another like an octopus with long thin tentacles bare of leaves hanging from a twisted root. Twice a year the octopus orchid flowered – then not an inch of tentacle showed. It was a bell-shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. The **scent** was very sweet and strong. I never went near it (*WSS* 17) [my emphasis here and below].

Beauty and **disease**, **beauty** and **sickness**, **beauty** and **horror**: that was the island. A quartering **breeze** hurried eastward, over cotton tufts of clouds; the **air** was soft and hot; **color** drenched everything, liquid **turquoise** melted into **saffire** and then into **emerald** (*OH* 75).

The North **breeze** was just beginning. At the end of the garden the **mango tree** beside the fence trembled violently, and several **over-ripe mangoes** fell to the

ground. The air was full of the long shrill humming of the crickets which persisted, never even stopping for a moment, through the otherwise deeply **silent** West Indian night. [...] The North **breeze** gently stirred the **air** and blew in, in little puffs – even through the meshes of the mosquito-net with its starchy clean **smell** – the **smell of the night**. The **smell of grass**, green scented and strong, cut that afternoon, lying in little heaps in the middle of the lawn and already soaked through with night dew; the **smell of water** dripping on to a flower bed from a tap not quite turned off in the garden, and a faint **sweet cold smell** from a tree near the bungalow (LI 3-5).

The three descriptions might very well come from the same book: the orchids are there, flowering both in Antoinette's garden, explicitly connected to parasite life, and in the orchid house at L'Aromatique, in Lally's unfolding account of events; the islands with their dangerous yet irresistible attractions, beautiful and horrific loom large in all three quotes; and, most notably, the colours and the smells, of flowers, dead and alive, of grass, of water, of the night.

The disease of the islands – brought on by the parasite/English colonizers – is described in similar manner in the three novels, and it leads the heroines into a similar disastrous conclusion: exile.

Antoinette, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is taken away, deprived even of her name and identity, by her English husband and forced into exile *and* madness.

Emmeline, in *Luminous Isle*, chooses to go into exile of her own free will as a way of keeping her mental sanity. Struck by the impossibility of coming to terms with the "perfect Englishness" of the colony, she sails away leaving behind her much loved, golden colored island.

Stella and Natalie, in *The Orchid House*, go down a similar path. Only Joan, in *The Orchid House*, stays on, though with a maimed soul and forced obey such rules that would not allow a woman – a white woman – to play an active part in the island's political life nor mix with its black inhabitants (Joan is certainly a reflection of Allfrey herself).

The varying sense of place in these novels may also be related to the contrast between reality and dream. Each heroine is torn between the warm Caribbean of her "dream" – a dream that often invades reality and is in turn invaded by it – and the cold alien England or New York.

Emmeline, in *Luminous Isle*, wishes she could "go back to the Island" which is "more real than the people sitting on either side of her" (LI 100), but is driven away by the narrow-mindedness of the "perfect Englishness" of colonial society. To her,

the green – and – gold background of the West Indian home had always been there at the back of all her school days ... making her want passionately in the secret depths of her being – almost more than anything else – to go back to the Island (LI 54).

The contrast between the warmth of the Caribbean and the Grey coldness of English-speaking countries is stressed in *The Orchid House*. Joan has dreamt of life in New York and created her own myth of it, imagining the New York snow would taste like ice-cream, but then faces utter disillusion when actually living in the "straight Grey world of New York" (OH 53).

Longing to be accepted by their own, but feeling that the gap between them and the white privileged class of the *real* British is too wide to even try to bridge, the white Creole girls turn to blacks in moments of crisis. They feel closer to the disadvantaged and powerless than to their own people. Their black friends seem to represent a shelter during a storm.

The bond between Antoinette and Christophine in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the bond between mother and daughter, and in Tia she sees herself – the self she wishes she could be. Lally, the black nurse in *The Orchid House*, is the ever-present figure who offers unconditional affection, like a mother. And when Joan asks Lally whether she could rest her head in her lap, we witness the bond of love between them. Emmeline in *Luminous Isle* feels a more physical affinity with the black inhabitants than with the whites: "they fascinated her. There was something restful about black people, and nothing in the least indecent" (LI 4).

Yet the bond, however strong, must be severed. The white Creole women of these novels, in their attempt of integration, ultimately encounter rejection and are forced to face the consequent alienation and uncertain future.

Tia rejects Antoinette; Christophine is obliged to abandon her in the hands of Rochester; Joan is blackmailed into giving up her political aspirations and personal association with the island blacks, as well as with the black servant Baptiste. And although Emmeline feels strongly drawn to blacks, she never actually follows her desires. "Alienated from her beloved island by the soul-destroying white society" (O'Callaghan 1986: 84), she leaves it and its inhabitants behind, never to return.

The views, feelings and emotions expressed by these writers through their heroines are the expression of the manifold culture of the West Indies. Their voice is the voice of the white Creole woman, one among many others that contribute to the rich and complex world of 'the West Indies'.

References

- ALLFREY SHAND P., 1990, *The Orchid House* (1953), Virago Press, London.
- BLISS E., 1984, *Luminous Isle* (1934), Virago Press, London.
- RHYS J., 1968, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Penguin, London.
- CAMPBELL E., 1990, *Afterword*, in Phyllis Shand Allfrey, *The Orchid House* (1953), Virago Press, London.
- NUNEZ-HARRELL E., 1981, "The Paradoxes of Belonging: The White West Indian Woman in Fiction", *Modern Fiction Studies* 31, 2, Summer, pp. 281-293.
- O'CALLAGHAN E., 1986, "The Outsider's Voice: White Creole Women Novelists in the Caribbean Literary Tradition", *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 1, 1, pp. 74-88.
- PATTULLO P., 1988, "Phyllis Shand Allfrey Talking to Polly Pattullo", in Mary Chamberlain (ed.), *Writing Lives: Conversations Between Women Writers*, Virago Press, London, pp. 224-234.
- PRINGLE A., 1984, "Introduction", in Eliot Bliss, *Luminous Isle* (1934), Virago Press, London, pp. xi-xix.

Finito di stampare nel mese di settembre 2003
dalla Rubbettino Industrie Grafiche ed Editoriali
per conto di Rubbettino Editore Srl
88049 Soveria Mannelli (Catanzaro)