



Reconstructing the “Moments of Being”: Time and Space, Trauma, and Gaze in Jean Rhys’ *Good Morning, Midnight*

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Abstract

This essay examines Jean Rhys’s novel *Good Morning, Midnight* in relation to Virginia Woolf’s concept of “moments of being”. The study argues that, on the one hand, *Good Morning, Midnight* presents “moments of being” in a more explicit way; on the other hand, in the context of trauma writing, the novel introduces a new dimension to the understanding of “moments of being”. The paper analyses Woolf’s interpretation of “moments of being” and the process through which this interpretation was formed, and conducts a close textual analysis of *Good Morning, Midnight*, focusing in particular on the forms of “moments of being” presented in the text. A comparison of the meanings given to “moments of being” by Woolf and Rhys shows that the latter questions this concept, which originally represented the exploration of the true self, from the perspective of a lost, unstable, and meaningless self. In doing so, Rhys contributes to the shift of the core meaning of “moments of being” from modernism toward postmodernism.

Keywords: Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf, Moments of being, Self, Trauma.

Introduction

In her novel *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), British writer Jean Rhys explores an experience of being that cannot be integrated or understood, and this exploration is often regarded by relevant researches as an interpretation and reconstruction of the concept of “moments of being”. In this essay I argue that sorting out how Rhys reconstructs the “moments of being” and its results will deepen the cross-author and cross-context understanding of this concept,

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and explain how Rhys promoted the transformation of the modernist narrative tradition towards the more “uncertain” postmodern. In previous researches, the “moments of being” has rarely been used as the core perspective for interpreting *Good Morning, Midnight*. This essay instead returns to the original meaning of “moments of being” given by the British writer Virginia Woolf, and through close reading and comparative analysis, explores Rhys’s response and extension of above concept in *Good Morning, Midnight*. This essay contends that, by combining typical modernist techniques such as stream of consciousness writing and subjective narrative, as well as her personalised techniques including spatial ambiguity, fragmented narrative, and the establishment of unstable self, Rhys reshapes the “moments of being” from a moment of enlightenment to a moment of trauma. On this basis, she broadens this concept, and further reflects on the interaction between reality and the self.

1. Woolf’s “Moments of Being”: Rebellion, the Theory of the Fluidity of Time, and Life Writing

The “moments of being” is a concept with dual attributes of literature and philosophy proposed by Woolf, and it has a complex background of formation. First, Woolf’s rebellious tendency against realism is a key element. At the beginning of the 20th century, although the Victorian literary tradition – which focused on rational criticism and maintaining moral order, still lingered, the innovation of the modernist were also already emerging. Writers such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, including Woolf, have turned to the exploration of consciousness, memory and perception. In her essay *Modern Fiction* published in 1919, Woolf (1929) criticised materialist realist writers who were overly “concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us” (p. 185). She advocated that novel should depict the essence of life – “a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (Woolf, 1929, p. 189), that is, the inner flow of awareness. This focus on the individual’s subjective experience laid the foundation for the “moments of being”. Meanwhile, the narrative structure experiments that Woolf conducted in her works, which “to explore new ways of representing time, space and consciousness” (Jensen, 2007, p. 112) also helped her to refine this concept.

Although Woolf herself avoided this, relevant researches generally hold that she was also influenced by the theory of the fluidity of time proposed by the French philosopher Henri Bergson. May Sinclair has innovatively “introducing the term ‘stream of consciousness’ in a review of Dorothy Richardson’s narrative experiments” (Ffytche, 2010, p. 416). However, unlike the psychological concept proposed by William James, this literary writing technique is more based on Bergson’s philosophical view – time is the subjective flow within consciousness, shaped by memory, emotion and perception, forming a continuous whole. The fluid style of narrative language, the overlap and extension of subjective time in Woolf’s works all point to her possible acceptance of above idea. This has a significant enlightening effect on similar practice which uses introspective narrative to present time within consciousness, that is, achieving epiphany through the “moments of being”.

Furthermore, the “moments of being” is also originated from Woolf’s desire to confirm her self-existence to repair personal psychological trauma. And Rhys revealed a strong resonance with this in *Good Morning, Midnight*. The childhood sexual abuse by her brother was an experience that made Woolf (1976) always “remember resenting, dislike it” (p. 69). From 1895 to 1906, during her teenage years, Woolf (1976) suffered several family members’ death, especially the death of her mother, which she described as “a latent sorrow” (p. 124). Relevant researches suggest that “the devastating losses of this period haunted Woolf’s psyche and her fiction for decades” (Seshagiri, 2021, p. 20). During her life in London after marriage, Woolf also recorded in her diary the physical and mental trauma caused by the war. Yet, on the

other hand, Woolf also tried to organising the fragments of her past and arranging them into a whole. Thus “in the reflective, mature consciousness which is continually searching and probing the past for meanings” (Schulkind, 1976, pp. 12-13). In the process of coexisting with trauma, the “moments of being” works as a psychological repairing mechanism: through taking advantage of the enlightenment given by the moment of discovering the meaning of the world by cutting through pain and numbness, Woolf attempts to regain the order of life, as well as finish temporary self-healing and transcendence.

Although the “moments of being” was not formally named until Woolf’s late semi-autobiographical memoir *A Sketch of The Past* (1940), she had been attempting the narrative practices related to it in throughout her earlier works. In *The Voyage Out* (1915), the hidden truths’ revealing is suddenly interrupted, and they are covered up after the characters’ private thoughts are oppressed, which confirms the existence of the “moments of being” that is disturbed by the outside. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), the comparing with the suicide victim shows more directly that the enlightenment from the “moments of being” is the key for one to resist to be overwhelmed by the “cotton wool” (Woolf, 1976, p. 70) of the past – the “non-being” – and thus survive.

These descriptions and examples related to the “moments of being” were gathered and summarised in *A Sketch of The Past*, where Woolf finally defines this concept. She takes “non-being” as a reference to explain “moments of being” as a state of conscious living that is often suddenly appear. In this state, a self becomes unusually clear and aware, can “realise something that I have never realised before” (Woolf, 1976, p. 71), thus forming a temporary unity with the world. Woolf (1976) describes the “moments of being” has the following characteristics: “separate”; associated with pleasure, interesting things and positive emotion; “every day includes much more non-being than being” (p. 70). The “non-being” is “one walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done” (Woolf, 1976, p. 70). And “being” contradicts it, only “were scaffolding in the background; were the invisible and silent part of my life as a child” (Woolf, 1976, p. 73).

Based on its origins and connotations, we argue that Woolf’s “moments of being” was originally a concept with a positive tendency of impulse toward renewal, as well as an idealistic and transcendent color. And it is connected with Bergson’s relevant philosophical theory. This identity makes the “moments of being” plays a key role in the development of modernist literature, which values the self and “already raise issues of reflexivity quite centrally” (Jervis, 2019, p. 23), as well as in the transformation and extension of the theory of the fluidity of time to a literary writing technique. And while promotes Woolf’s pursuits of self-awareness and “a sense of separate identity that is also a sense of oneness with the surrounding world” (Marcus, 2021, p. 222). This “starting point” creates a framework which can be compared with Rhys’ interpretation of same concept in *Good Morning, Midnight*.

2. “Moments of Being” Written and Rewritten in *Good Morning, Midnight*

As a novel first published in 1939, *Good Morning, Midnight* was written around the same time as *A Sketch of The Past*, but relevant researches generally agree that Rhys inherits the conceptual tradition of Woolf’s the “moments of being” during this creative period. What has been adopted is not the terms itself, but the literary context behind it. First of all, as discussed earlier, Woolf had already explored the core ideas of the “moments of being” in a series of works such as *The Voyage Out*, *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *Mrs. Dalloway*, which makes Rhys’s continuation possible. Secondly, in terms of exposing the connection between surface reality and deeper perception of the world, Rhys has the similar gains as Woolf. As Moran (2010) notes, the idea of the “moments of being” expresses the “wordless potential” of the unknown consciousness, “as in Rhys’ sense of the interplay between controlled surfaces and

roiling undercurrents” (p. 8).

The female protagonist Sasha Jansen in *Good Morning, Midnight* is also an individual committed to her own subjective world, who constantly searching for the “moments of being” while lives among a large number of “non-being”. During the intervals when the outside world’s noise subsided, Sasha was left alone in her life, repeatedly asks and tells herself in front of the mirror – “What do I want to cry about?”, “What more do I want?” (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 4), “... I haven’t got a care in the world” (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 9) – trying to perceive the source of her confusion and rebuild a clear self. She consciously reminds herself, “Yes, perhaps I had rather be myself ...” (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 11) yet she also has to confront the reality that in order to survive, “you must make your mind vacant, neutral, then your face also becomes vacant, neutral – you are invisible” (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 12). Sasha discovers and escapes the oppression from “non-being”, yet also remains distant from “being”, which shaping her as a character who struggles to capture the “moments of being” but never being able to actively reach it.

Rhys made Sasha to be passively struck by “being”, rather than allowing to successfully capture it by herself, thereby revealing another side of this concept: when the epiphany of reality comes suddenly, the self that is pierced can only experience the pain of “being”, rather than transcendence. Sasha, “as narrating voice, she recurrently offers herself to the reader in states of dreaming, drunkenness or narcotised unconsciousness” (Simpson, 2005, p. 88), which means that the “moments of being” often comes when she is far from clear mind. “The terrifying specter of aging and the possibility of a life of chronic destitution and aimlessness” (Simpson, 2005, p. 88) are the objects mobilised by the “moments of being”, and also the realities that Sasha needs to confront when awake. When “being” becomes a sudden gaze and entanglement from unresolved wounds toward the present self, the long-standing numbness she has carried only thus transform into an emotional breakdown.

To give the “moments of being” a new identity, Rhys simultaneously rewrites the spatial form and temporal structure that originally supported this concept. In terms of space, in *Good Morning, Midnight*, the physical spaces become one of the elements that oppress Sasha’s consciousness. Overly narrow and dark rooms, washrooms, etc. squeeze her living and existence space. When she projects this suffocation, transforms it into “How can she stay in that coffin for five minutes without fainting? ... Sorry for her? Why should I be sorry for her?” (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 86) – the text also implies that Sasha’s lack of self. The “open” space, which seems opposite, forms a cycle. The restaurants, cafés and other places she visits mechanically and repeatedly are spacious but indifferent, providing an illusion of available escaping like false “metro exits” that prevent Sasha from truly perceiving her self-being. They erase Sasha’s direction and purpose of action, forcing her to engage in restless movements, constantly going forward but then return again, remaining stuck in the same place. Corresponding to this cycle is the most representative spatial structure in the text: the specular space. Rhys utilises the pressure released by the constantly exchanging gazes between the mirror image and real self to tears the Sasha apart. When Sasha is gazed back at by the reflection, the past “that there always remains something. Yes, there always remains something ...” (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 4) is reflected and entwined around her consciousness. When the real Sasha gazes at the mirror, she found herself “circles under your eyes, your hair getting straight and lanky, the way people look at you ... I didn’t think it would like this” (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 100). The powerlessness of being unable to distinguish between real and unreal, past and present, has caused “a compulsive self-haunting” (Fraser, 2018, p. 487) for it.

The blocked and overlapping spaces thus form barriers that prevent perception, leaving only the self that continues to disintegrate, against this backdrop, the “moments of being” is

rewritten as an awareness that alienates and fractures the mind. Rhys's "moments of being" does not represent awakening, nor does it bring "a revelation of some order" and "a token of some real thing behind appearance" (Woolf, 1976, p. 72). Instead, it reminds Sasha to notice the disorder of her surroundings and forcibly reveals the unrepairable essence of her self. The result of this revelation – as Linett (2005) pointed out, "helplessness can spark dissociation, a splintering of the experiencing self" – is that when "being" becomes a fall into disillusionment, Sasha's inner emptiness and wandering sense have nowhere to hide (p. 444). And individual consciousness also becomes trapped in the same state as the physical environment around her, being closed and difficult to integrate.

In terms of time, the narrative of *Good Morning, Midnight* is "incongruous and disjointed" (Simpson, 2005, p. 89), past traumas constantly invades, destroying the continuity of time and been replaced by breaks, returns and stagnation. The linear, life writing style's narrative in the novel is repeatedly interrupted when the character is struck by painful memories. These sudden the "moments of being" causes Sasha's loss in Paris, the mockery she faced, and her failed love to invade the present, shifting her usual narrative into a habitual cycle of emotional self-release, comfort, and warning. Time points jumps between past recollections and the fantasies about future – such as "Tomorrow I'll be pretty again, tomorrow I'll be happy again, tomorrow, tomorrow..." (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 44) - and loses coherence and reliability. The present events still ongoing are ignored instead. In other words, her reality becomes flat and repetitive, lacking change and development. In contrast to Sasha's fluctuating emotions is her daily life that has lost the depth of time. Even the city environment is "wearily in sardonic recognition of Sasha's circular, repetitious existence" (Baillie, 2020, p. 230). This kind of life is also one of the reasons of the self of Sasha cannot confirm its being through the present. Since not been fully experienced, "The history that a flashback tells ... is, therefore, a history that literally has no place" (Caruth, 1995, p. 153), and fragments of memory thus forcibly intervene in the present, to regain "being" through the momentary awareness of them. But at the same time, "this propulsion into the past is part of a larger propulsion into timelessness" (Linett, 2005, p. 454). So, in fact, the flat reality is simultaneously pulled and cut by both the past and the endlessly imagined possibility of "Eternity is in front of me ..." (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 70), resulting in completely fell apart.

These narrative strategies transform the "moments of being", which originally followed the natural flow of time to integrate enlightenment to illuminate the present, it becomes a sudden attack that besieges the consciousness, while the self is consumed in the meaningless chaos created by "being". Rhys reveals that the essence of this attack is the non-present striking the present; the stimulated subject is forced to be aware of the negative experiences and empty fantasies long been avoided, repressed and abandoned. When Sasha says, "Always the same stairs, always the same room. The room says: 'Quite like old times. Yes? ... No? ... Yes,'" (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 119) her consciousness during a "moment of being" shows is different from the Woolf-style moment of leaping out of the flow of time. Rhys's "moments of being" cannot step outside the daily life rhythm filled with "non-being", or it may form its own type of "moments of being", which can be equated with "non-being" – the "anti-moments of being".

3. The Inheritance and Reshaping of the "moments of being" in *Good Morning, Midnight*

Rewriting is not a complete criticism or overthrow, and the same applies to *Good Morning, Midnight* in relation to the "moments of being"; the former tends more toward inheriting and reshaping the latter. When exploring the connection between the Rhys-style "moments of being", which is submerged by the memories of "non-being", and Woolf's original defining of the "moments of being", Moran offers a reminder based on aesthetic analysis: "aesthetic moments are not always beautiful or wonderful occasions – many are ugly and terrifying but nonetheless profoundly moving because of the existential memory tapped" (Bollas, 2018, p.

29). This not only highlights the similar essence of the two kinds of “moments of being” – that they both display the recovery and reappearance of perceptual and emotional memory by narrative – but also points out that *Good Morning, Midnight* extends the original concept of the “moments of being” by discovering, emphasising and confronting negative self-being.

Firstly, in terms of narrative technique, *Good Morning, Midnight* does not avoid the using a series of typical stream-of-consciousness techniques, and these techniques themselves were partly shaped by the influence of Woolf’s exploration of the “moments of being”. The narrative of *Good Morning, Midnight* is filled with dream depictions such as “I am in the passage of tube station in London” (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 6), with self-talk such as “But careful, careful! Don’t get excited” (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 8), and with exaggerated expressions such as “Today, this day, this hour, this minute I am utterly defeated” (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 20), which are captured from the flow of consciousness, memory and feelings within the character. These become the subjective filters for the vast majority of objective events, replacing the traditional plot logic to pushing forward the novel’s content. This is similar to the consistent stance in Woolf’s (1976) writing: “I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy of the feeling of rapture” (p. 67). The self that has not yet attained enlightenment is not present, but the flowing perception has already enveloped the world experienced by the subject.

Secondly, in terms of the subject, Sasha in Rhys’ writing and the subjects associated with the “moments of being” in Woolf’s writing are similar, both being sensitive women who have been ignored by society and oppressed by discipline. Sasha is sharply aware that in the environment she inhabits, “Everything is born out of a cliché, rests on a cliché, survives by a cliché” (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 31), while she herself has “no pride, no name, no face, no country. I don’t belong anywhere” (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 33). The suppression and loss of discourse power in past experiences is one of the roots of characters’ trauma. Sasha’s sensibility brings her close to Mrs. Ramsay of *To the Lighthouse*, but the former shows a possibility that the latter does not experience – fails to resist the erosion of reality and instead being destroyed by sensibility. And Sasha’s predicament makes her the ‘eve’ of Lily’s enlightenment, while long-term negative avoidance such as drinking and indulging in pleasure leave Sasha powerless to struggle with pressure or reconcile with the past. In this way, Rhys presents her own exploration of similar issues: how individuals marginalised by the material and cultural structures of modern society experience “being” and “non-being”.

In terms of background, Rhys also inherits from Woolf in using daily life as the key site for the experiencing of being in *Good Morning, Midnight*. On the one hand, similar to Woolf’s way of presenting the “moments of being” through life details – walking, admiring scenery, reading – Rhys also realised that the subtle instants of daily life most clearly reveal the inner “being”. On the other hand, daily life itself takes on a completely different appearance by Rhys. The dialogue in *Good Morning, Midnight* – “‘Life is difficult,’ ‘Yes, life isn’t easy,’ ‘One needs a lot of courage, to live,’” – and Sasha’s action of “planning it all out” (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 9) only to kill time, express Rhys’s opposite conclusion based on the “daily reveals being”. That is, the daily life is not the source of enlightenment but a trap that crushes self-awareness.

Good Morning, Midnight’s writing of the “moments of being” resembles Woolf’s in the above aspects, is partly because both Rhys and Woolf were strongly affected by deep psychological trauma, which is also reflected in the text. The sense of instability in subconscious brought by “family upheaval” (Angier, 1992, p. 17) in childhood, the experience of being socially excluded due to poverty, the breakdown of marriage and the loneliness that followed, all constitute “Jean’s oldest and deepest fear” (Angier, 1992, p. 377) reveals in *Good morning, midnight*. Sasha’s emotional instability, her constant entanglement in loves, her lack

of financial resources, and the early death of her child all echo Rhys's real experiences to a certain extent. According to Angier's (1992) interpretation, by showing readers to see Sasha "her drunk, humiliated, stupid," the "shameful, squalid truth" about her, Rhys seeks "to evoke intense and exclusive pity for her heroine" (p. 379). Similar to Woolf, she also attempts to delve into consciousness in writing, to confront and heal traumas, restoring the fragmented pieces of a disintegrated self. The two have the same starting point in trying to recover "being".

However, in terms of the narrative of *Good Morning, Midnight*, Rhys actually reshapes a her individualised "moments of being", portraying the opposite of transcendent being – stoicism being. Toth (2014) argues that *A Sketch of The Past* already demonstrates this tendency: When the "moments of being" arrive, "though a 'shock' creates access to 'truth' or 'reality,' this reality cannot be directly assimilated; it overwhelms the subject who is thereby made vulnerable and is incapable of absorbing its significance" (p. 4). That is, the awakening of consciousness does not completely mean looking out at reality from a detached spiritual realm, feeling that "it seemed suddenly plain that ..." (Woolf, 1976, p. 71), but may instead cause the subject being trapped in the self-predicament under simultaneous social and pressures. *Good Morning, Midnight* explores precisely this logic concerning the persistence of consciousness. It reveals that within the extension of the "non-being" constituted by oppressive space and fragmented time, the self actually becomes aware of its being through disintegration. Sasha's experiences thus become an exposure of the endurance state under the distress of "being" – "I've had enough ... , of hostile people, of crying my self to sleep every night. I've had enough of thinking, enough of remembering" (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 32-33) – and an attempt to explore how to end this endurance, face "being", and achieve the goal of "While we live, let us live" (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 33).

These exposures and attempts extend the boundaries of the concept of the "moments of being", emphasising that such moments, beyond being flashes that unify the self, are also traumas that shatter the self. In *Good Morning, Midnight*, Rhys uses techniques such as constructing specular space to "cover over and points up the fractures in self-construction," exposing the existence of the "moments of being" which invades the present with traumas, and character therefore continually long for "a mechanism for the control and management of emotional pain" (Moran, 2010, p. 6). Space that magnify self-loathing and trigger trauma, and the time that no longer converge to integrate memories, together provide the necessary conditions for the emergence of the "moments of being" as trauma. Sasha's experience – "the beseeching self wanders alone and forever unintegrated in a universe of rejection and exile" (Moran, 2010, p. 7) – also reflects the injurious impact that the "moments of being" can generate, that is, causing the subject to lose connection with reality and the self to gradually dissolve.

The mechanism of the "moments of being" in *Good Morning, Midnight* that results in "disconnection – dissolution", makes the concept's interpretation of the relationship between reality and the self more complete. The gaze mentioned in the previous section is a form of intense intervention from reality in Rhys's writings, and is also the starting point of self's dissolution. When Sasha is exposed to reality, she is often told that her desires are not valued, that she has no qualification to pursue things, and so on. The surrounding environment causes "her identity is here reduced to a number of discrete, dehumanised images that are presented stylistically as a rigid, structured list" (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 81), and in the end "dry leaves are blowing along. Swing high, swing low, swing to and fro ..." (Rhys, 1939/2000, p. 21) implying the confusion of the self. The "meaning" in Woolf's (1976) "exposed to a whole avalanche of meaning that had heaped itself up and discharged itself upon me, unprotected ..." (p. 78) is extended here into a version of meaninglessness. *Good Morning, Midnight* thus demonstrates that the self can illuminate reality, but can also be destroyed under the judgment of reality, and the active-passive relationship between the two is variable rather than fixed.

Conclusion

The “moments of being” is a concept derived from modernist literature that values consciousness flowing, the theory of fluidity, as well as from Woolf, its proposer’s, active posture in seeking self-awareness. Rhys’s *Good Morning, Midnight* rewrites and reconstructs this concept, on the basis of continuing Woolf’s presentation form and original implications of it. The spiritual transcendence of leaping from “non-being” to “being” is turns into the spiritual trauma that results from being repeatedly submerged by “non-being” after having entered “being”. This reshaping, through its depiction of disordered time and space, the gazed-upon subject, and the indeterminate meanings, expresses a reflection on “being” and the modes consciousness’s persistence, completes the duality of self’s unity and fragmentation, and develops a new direction for the interpretation of the “moments of being”.

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