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In Search of Sisterhood: Reading Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*

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Wide Sargasso Sea and Sisterhood

The term 'sisterhood' has appeared in journals and film titles in Japan in 2020. Perhaps a renewed interest in the notion of sisterhood may be connected to the issues of the Black Lives Matter movement, where some of us may have pondered how we can connect ourselves to others' pain beyond creed and colour.

Can we be sisters? I asked this question to myself when I was writing my thesis on Jean Rhys years ago. Jean Rhys pursued the reunion with the black Caribbean friend of her youth, Francine, throughout her writings. In the novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the protagonist, Antoinette, ultimately reconciles with Tia, her long lost childhood friend, in her death. In a conference paper I delivered on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, I argued that the ending of the novel indicated both a reclaiming of a lost sisterhood between Antoinette and Tia, reflecting the real-life lost sisterhood between Rhys and Francine, as well as Rhys' statement on her cry for solidarity with black women. My argument, however, encountered a gentle reprimand from the audience, who reminded me that Rhys was a white creole woman after all and she would not have understood the real experience of slavery.

The wife of CLR James, Selma James, had a similar take on reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1983 (Nakai 66). In her book, *The Ladies and the Mammies: Jane Austin& Jean Rhys* (1983), examining Jane Austin's *Mansfield Park* and Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, James equates the violence of patriarchy and imperialism. In her view, the daughter of the plantation owner, Antoinette could only be reunited with her childhood friend Tia by burning the estate of Thornfield and jumping to her death.

In other words, Selma James reads *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a text for the sisterhood beyond the constraints of race, nationality, and class. James places the novel in the historical context, stating that it was written during 'a massive movement for Third World independence and secondly, a massive West Indian immigration into Britain' (72). According to James, the rediscovery of Rhys by Francis Wyndham was in 1958, the year of the Nottingham and Notting Hill riots against black people, and those incidents became a 'source of power finally to confront all the misery and isolation and loneliness that she had worked to record and articulate in her earlier novels' (72). In other words, *Wide Sargasso Sea* was Rhys' active response to the racism in the United Kingdom in the

1950s; she, thereby, allied herself with the immigrants from the West Indies, by making her heroine burn down a master's house and reuniting the heroine with Tia, a long-lost childhood friend (72). James' theorises in her book that the novel such as *Wide Sargasso Sea* rejects and deconstructs the oppositional image of ladies and mammies created by patriarchal society and unite women beyond the race and class lines.

However, critics such as Gayatri Chakravoarty Spivak and Maria Olaussen demonstrated the limit of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. For example, in Spivak's analysis of *Wide Sargasso Sea* – in 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' – Western feminism is critiqued for sacrificing and disregarding the voices of 'third world women' and being complicit with colonialism. Describing Jane Eyre's independence and happiness as built on the death of Bertha Mason, she demonstrates that first world feminism preys on women from the 'third world' in a similar way to that in which the politics of colonisation operated. Appreciating the challenge that Rhys undertook in rewriting *Jane Eyre*, Spivak nonetheless accuses the novel of silencing the voice of the native woman, and argues that *Wide Sargasso Sea* was written for 'the interest of the white Creole'(253). Furthermore, Maria Olaussen has challenged common critical reading that equates Antoinette's patriarchal domination with slavery as a Western feminist conceptual elision, which disregards the actual, historical institution of slavery as experienced by black people (Olaussen 1993: 69, Tolan, *Andrea Levy* 104).

bell hook's Criticism on Sisterhood and Merilyn French's *Woman's Room*

The criticism and the shortcoming of *Wide Sargasso Sea* reminds one of the early feminist ideas of sisterhood, proclaimed in the second wave of feminism. The concept of sisterhood was spread by the anthology of *Sisterhood is Powerful* in 1968 when the socio-economic gap between men and women was visibly evident, and the unity of women was difficult. Radical feminism aimed to confront the men's dominance that permeated in all private and public domains, whereas women's bonds were non-existent.

However, in *Aint'I a Woman*, bell hooks claims that the concept of sisterhood disregarded the subtle differences among women and overlooked racial differences. hooks criticises the women's movement as 'it was assumed one could be free of sexist thinking by simply adopting the appropriate feminist rhetoric; it was further assumed that identifying oneself as oppressed freed one from being an oppressor' (8). According to hooks, the idea of 'sisterhood and solidarity between women' is a 'lip service' that 'dismiss black women'(8). She argues that women in the United States of America 'are socialized to be racist'; thus, being feminists does not change a society where a false assumption of women still divides them (157). According to hooks, racism is such a force, and true 'sisterhood' cannot be achieved by 'the mere saying of words'. Instead, true sisterhood can be attained through an action or ridding ourselves of racism and a 'set of myths, stereotypes, and false

assumptions that deny the shared commonness of her human experience' (157).

hooks states, 'The sisterhood that is necessary for the making of feminist revolution can be achieved only when all women disengage themselves from the hostility, jealousy, and competition with one another that has kept us vulnerable, weak, and unable to envision new realities' (157). In other words, hooks does not deny the notion of sisterhood *per se*, but underlines the importance of overcoming racism as a crucial condition for making sisterhood possible.

What I would like to address in this paper is the reading of Andrea Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon*, which offers a critique of the white middle-class concept of sisterhood, similar to that of bell hooks, and introduces different perspectives on sisterhood. The exploration of the concept of sisterhood in Levy's novel is interesting because she repeatedly examines such concept in her early novels, *Never Far from Nowhere*, through the two sisters, Vivien and Olive, and the two protagonists, Hortense and Quinee, in *The Small Island*.

Furthermore, examining Levy's writing from a feminist perspective is important, as Levy states that she started reading books on the woman's section and was greatly inspired by Merilyn French's *The Woman's Room* (1977), which portrays the lives of white middle-class women who become feminists in the US at that time (*Andrea Levy,* 122).

French's *The Woman's Room* was widely acclaimed as a feminist novel when it came out and is still worth reading to this day. One of the main characters of the novel is Mira, a middle-class white woman, who lives in the suburbia with her two sons and a doctor husband. She becomes disillusioned with her marriage and divorces from her husband, and starts attending at Harvard in an attempt to obtain a PhD. The novel depicts her encounters with students and her friendship with Val, who is the centre of their circle and whom Mira is attracted to.

The focus of the novel is on women's friendship and independence, and their struggle to achieve something in their lives. The rise of the black power movement is echoed in the story, but it is much subdued at the beginning; however, a critical turn occurs when Val's daughter, Chris, is raped by a black boy on the street. She was raped after attending a peace demonstration and called Val for help (453). Val goes to the police with her daughter, but she receives a shocking comment from the police officer. As Chris tried to outwit the rapist by suggesting to meet again and gave him her true address out of fear, the police officer tells Val that her daughter 'wanted it' and 'lots of pretty little white princesses want to try a little black meat' (464).

Val witnesses overwhelming male power in the courtroom where her daughter's statements are repeatedly interrupted and unheard, as well as a striking difference between the judge's and lawyer's treatment of blacks and whites (467). After this incident, Val's contempt is not directed at the criminal but the men in power, and she connects the subordination of women to racism through this experience.

Val falls out with her friends and, in the end, is shot by the police in an attempt to rescue Anita Morrow, a black girl from the police's hand. Anita is a domestic servant who

attends classes at night in the hope of becoming an English teacher. When she was on her way to home from her evening classes, she was dragged into an alley by a man and was about to be raped. Anita having grown up on the street and possessed a knife, she stabbed him repeatedly to save herself (507).

The man was killed and turned out to be a man of a respectable family, married, and with six children (507). The police did not believe Anita's statement and suspected that she was a street prostitute and killed him to rob him. Anita protested that she was not a prostitute, stating she was on her way back from an evening class and that her dream was to help children who were like her. Although Anita demonstrated her knowledge of literature by citing William Blake's *Infant Sorrow*, the court did not believe she was 'educable' and she was found guilty of murder on the ground of illiteracy (508).

Val's group planned to rescue her when she was to be transferred to state prison. Six women, armed with guns, surrounded the van where Anita is held, yet their plan was already known to the police, and the women were all shot dead by policemen with machine guns (509). Val's death ends the connections and the bonding of white middle-class women portrayed in *The Woman's Room*; however, her death also signifies the desire and possibility of solidarity and of forming 'sisterhood' beyond the boundaries of colour, as hooks sought in her *Ain't I a Woman*. On a similar ground, I argue that Levy's *Fruit of the Lemon* criticises inhalant racism in white-centred feminism and searches for a new way of forming a sisterhood through her narrative.

Fruit of the Lemon and Sisterhood

In *Fruit of the Lemon*, the term 'sisterhood', appears very early in the novel. The protagonist, Faith, decides to move into a shared house with her friends, two men and a woman, and she lies to her mother that she will be living with women. Her mother, Mildred, says 'A woman, be careful of living with women.' To which Faith replies, 'Nowadays, Mum, women have different relationships with each other – they are sisters' (17). However, her mother warns her to be careful with living with women and tells her that 'the worst women she had ever lived with were her sisters and that if women started behaving like sisters then God help the world' (17). Her mother's comment not only reveals her skepticism towards women's liberation and the notion of sisterhood, but also hints at a complicated history between white mainstream feminism and women of colour. Her mother's sarcasm towards the notion of sisterhood reminds one of the white feminists' failure to embrace black women in the Suffrage Movement that set the tone for the exclusion of black women in the subsequent feminist movements.

Faith is critical of on her mother for denying sisterhood and having a conservative view on gender roles. Mildred asks Faith to set the table, but not her brother Carl because he is a man. Faith's inclination toward women's liberation is clear in her

conversation with her brother, Carl. When Carl say 'So you moving in with a bird, then?, to which Faith replies pointedly 'no, a woman actually' (18). Carl retorts by saying 'Bird not good enough for you an' all your women's libber friends now?' (18) This conversation suggests Faith's interests in women's liberation, even though her brother mocks it.

Faith's friends, Marion, is portrayed as a true friend at the beginning of the novel, someone who shares similar sense of values despite the colour difference. They met on the foundation year at art school and used to meet on holidays and to spend days together, 'discussing the strange habits of the middle class people' (22).

However, Faith slowly discovers what she thought as sisterhood is not sisterhood, and her illusion gradually shatters. The first incident is the episode with her first employee, Olivia. Olivia offers Faith a job at the degree show. She asks Faith to be a textile assistant. The job starts perfectly: Faith is offered to travel to Milan so she expects her job to be a some sort of international textile troubleshooter. However, the actual job involves sitting alone in a room weaving the fabric while her employer is chatting away on the phone. Then, Olivia would cut them off, stick them on little bits of cards and claim them as her own creations (31). It might not have been a slavery, but it was an exploitation of the employees. Even worse, when Faith accidentally witnesses Olivia having an affair with a man, Olivia lays Faith off. It is an example of what bell hooks criticies as a shortcoming of the women's liberation movement and the notion of sisterhood — liberated white middle-class women sometimes exploit the women of different colours.

Fortunately, shortly after the incident, Faith is offered a job at the BBC. Although Faith is proud of her new workplace, her actual job was sticking labels on costumes. She tries to be a dresser, but her colleague, Lorraine, tells her that they do not have black dressers at the BBC and that she overheard a couple of managers saying that 'the actors may not like a coloured person putting their clothes on them' (70). On hearing these words, Faith realises the BBC might have hired her just for the sake of appearance and hidden racism does exist in her high-flying job environment.

Moreover, Faith eventually realises that the sisterhood that she thought she had with Marion deteriorates when she hears Marion's family are mocking black British people in a pejorative way. When Faith visits Marion's house, her father tells Marion that her sister is bullying a black girl at school. Her father does not believe it as the child that his daughter is said to be bullying is 'a great big six foot bloody Gorilla' (84).

The protagonist's falling out with her friends with a working-class background is depicted in Levy's *Never far from Nowhere*, but here, the author repeats the same theme once again. Faith and Marion's family go to a pub for a comedy show night out. The last act was a dub poetry reading of a Jamaican poet, and Faith realises she and the poet are the only black people in the pub (91-92). Suddenly she feels nervous for him, as 'The poet became my dad, my brother. He was the unknown black faces in our photo album. He was old man on the bus. Who called me sister, The man in the bank with the strong Trinidadians accent who could not make himself understood. He was every black man

-ever' (92). She wishes him to perform well and so he does, but Marion's father says 'good' in a loud voice when the poet says he is reciting the last one (92). Marion excuses her father's behaviour afterwards, but she does not consider his remarks seriously and dismiss them merely as 'cultural':

> She wasn't going to shut up. I hadn't smiled and forgiven her yet. In her strident Marxist phase, she assured me that all racism would be swept away after the revolution. As a feminist, we were all sisters, black and white.
>
> I mean she went on. These things can be so. Easily into internalised, and I wouldn't want you to, I mean, as a woman to this city, I think I know how you must feel. I can understand that you might be angry by what you heard in my house today, for example. It's going to take time, but the working classes are already forming allegiances with a lot of black organisations….(93)

Marion's statement above is reminiscent of the notion of 'sisterhood', as criticised by bell hooks. It is indeed a mere saying of words, as Marion does not stand against either her father or her family to hold them accountable for their behavior. Faith finally shouts Marion to stop and walk away. It is as though Faith finally denies Marion's optimistic view of their sisterhood, as Marion is indifferent to the pain Faith feels.

The incidents at the pub reveal not only a fissure between Faith and her friend Marion, but also a limitation of the Marxist ideal of the unity of working-class people beyond race. Faith's awareness of racial discrimination in the UK becomes more acute when Faith and her flatmate Simon were walking down on the street in Islington on Friday to find a bookstore is being attacked by the National Front and a woman is struck on the head and left bleeding.

> A red mist hung in the air – it was impossible to take a deep breath without choking on the heavy pear-drop stretch. The shop had been sprayed with angry red paint. And all over it said NF NF NF . The red paint was over the walls – over the spines of books – arching down the shelves and along faces on posters. Over the till and paying desk. Down round the children's corner – over the display of alphabet bricks and across the little seats. Books were strewn over the floor and an unmistakable search of piss came from somewhere. A half- full bag of shit was splatted on the table – while the other half of its contents slid down the bookcase of gay and lesbian books. And the black and Third World fiction was spray painted with 'Wog'. (151)

Police arrives at the scene, but they are not sympathetic to the injured woman; they, instead, accused the victim of being alone in the shop and inviting the trouble (151). Faith finds sympathy toward to the woman, and she remembers the victim's name, Yemi, perhaps of Nigerian background, because the ambulanceman was shouting her name and talking to her as if she were a person without intellect (151).

When they go back to their house, Simon recounts the incident to his flatmates. but

he does not tell them that the woman is a black person. Faith cuts in and adds that the victim is black like her (157). Then the flatmates, including Simon, turn the whole incident into a joke and start giggling, saying, 'Don't let them know where you live…. you better wear a mask, Simon … or a white sheet with a hood….' (157). It becomes clear to Faith that her flatmates are not similarly affected by the incident. Faith goes out of the flat and runs back home hoping to be comforted by her family, but she finds no consolation there.

The incident precipitates Faith's visit to Jamaica to visit her aunt Coral; she learns that one of her ancestors, James, who was from Scotland, was evicted from his home by the landlord because the landowner wanted to graze more sheep (239). She finds that one of her ancestors was a plantation owner who left his children to the slave mother and returned home. Faith learns that the problem of race, the issue that she is facing, is the same problem that her ancestors all suffered from in the past.

The grandson of James, William did not allow his daughters to mix with anyone who was darker than they were (248); likewise, her greatmother's sister's son, Nelson, cuts all ties with his family because he married a white woman in America (266).

In addition, Faith learns that her grandparents on her father's side, were ostentatious and superficial people who wanted to mix with the people of a high society or people with lighter skin colour; her father, Wade, and her mother, Mildred married without their parents' consent because Wade's parents thought Mildred had too much African blood in her (288).

She also learns about Constance, her mother's friends who changed her name from Constance to Afria because she no longer wanted to be identified as a white person despite her pale complexion and blue eyes.

The story Faith was told in Jamaica teaches her the complexity of issues of skin colour and the interconnectedness of black and white people. At the end of the novel, Faith claims the following:

> Let those bully boys walk behind me in the playground. Let them tell me. You are darkie. Face is darkie. I am the granddaughter of Grace and William Campbell. I am the great grandchild of Cecelia Hilton. I am descended from Kathleen, whose mother was a slave. I am the cousin of Afria. I am the niece of Coral Thompson and the daughter of Wade and Mildred Jackson let them say what they like. Because I am the bastard child of Empire and I will have my day.

Interestingly, the stories of Faith's family were told by women. It is as though the blanket woven by those women's voices wraps around Faith and cures her, making her ready to go back to her home in London. After gathering stories of her ancestors and family, Faith learns that her background is diverse, and there is no easy division between black and white. What she inherits from her family is also the history of the Empire and she deserves every right to be accepted and treated equally in Britain. Moreover, the story reveals that Faith's mother, Midred's doubt about sisterhood at the beginning is not

entirely true because she knew her sister, Coral, could cure her daughter from the start and confided everything to her from the very beginning. Put differently, the latter part of the story set in Jamaica powerfully demonstrates the strength of women who loved and nurtured children and bravely struggled against unpromising mundane life.

In a sense, *Fruit of the Lemon* can be read as a story of regaining and shaping a new form of sisterhood, which encompasses the living and the dead. As bell hooks sought for an alternative form of sisterhood, Levy's book also shows an alternative sisterhood for the women of the diasporas that extends beyond the constrains of colour line.

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