Lush fur coat, velvet hat, beads of amber, lisle thread stockings with clocks up the side, flowers coming to life on flowing chiffon, short hair, powdered nose, false eyelashes – the devil is in the fashion details for modernist texts like Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) and Jean Rhys’s *Voyage in the Dark* (1934). Fashion consciousness, admittedly, is not exclusive to this period, but as a significant populace moved from traditional communities to cosmopolitan anonymity, the novels of the period also increasingly placed their narratives within the consciousness of characters “not so much to explore the social or moral meanings of dress as to convey what it is like to wear, to observe, to ‘undergo’ dress” (Hughes 8). Fashion was being employed by women in daring new ways in the early twentieth century; to be individually and collectively transgressive, to articulate the private self in highly consumerist metropolitan spaces, to push the boundaries of social propriety and ensure their voices are heard, to assert so as to subvert.

Studies of fashion in literature invariably have to contend with the ontological and epistemological divide of the body and its crafted shell. Fashion theorists and literary critics have pursued the Foucauldian approach of reading fashion as discourses. Structuralists and semioticians like Roland Barthes deliberately study fashion as text, ignoring its importance as practice; in fact, the text itself becomes practice. In *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes discusses the image-clothing and the written garment in the fashion magazines, calling the real garment they represent as a third structure which can
only be technological and “constituted at the level of substance and its transformations, not of its representations or significations” (3-5). Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson have been critical of this rather disembodied representation and study of dress, the complete failure to take into account the historical, anthropological and emotive facets, arguing that any study of dress, as social and intimate activity, should not only study the body and self divide – the former as a physical space for the latter’s representation – but also the unity of the two. Entwistle writes in The Fashioned Body, “[t]he experience of dress is a subjective act of attending to one’s body and making the body an object of consciousness and is also an act of attention with the body” (30). This approach is useful for my study of Larsen and Rhys, especially from the perspective of agency, the possibility of resistance and not just consumption.

If we accept Elizabeth Wilson’s interpretation of modernity as a world of “spectacle and mass communication” (12) then sartorial fashion becomes indispensable to its motivations. Wilson describes a triple ambiguity that we live as far as clothes are concerned: the ambiguity of capitalism, the ambiguity of our identity and the ambiguity of art, all of which contributes to making fashion a “modernist irony” (14-15). The complexity to this irony is better understood when we take into consideration modernism’s fascination and engagement with the metropole, and with clothes as “a kind of visual metaphor for identity” (Davis 25). The fashion industry set up its stage and extended its domain from metropolitan spaces, where individuals had easy access to new socioeconomic personae that often could be appropriated and flaunted through clothing.

The novels, Passing and Voyage in the Dark, embrace the inherent instability of fashion to depict the instability of the metropole and their socio-cultural realities. This article will bracket the different national settings of these novels, choosing instead to focus on the emergence of common tropes of visibilization and performativity. The challenges of visibility and the politics of performance have been addressed by feminist scholar Peggy Phelan, who, in particular, draws attention to visibility as a trap (6-7). Phelan emphasizes how
the concept of visibility summons the related concepts of surveillance and the law, and provokes voyeurism, fetishism, and the colonial/imperial appetite for possession.

I would like to argue that Larsen and Rhys challenge the ideology of the visible in the metropole, the ideology that “erases the power of the unmarked, unspoken and unseen” (Phelan 7). They celebrate empowerment in visibility but with an acute awareness of the underlying exploitation, sexual and consumerist, of the visible self. The economic motivity embedded in any exploration of fashion, particularly in the context of the modern self which is experiencing fragmentation and loss of social certainty is evident in how buying power travels from money to clothes to body (as in the process of shopping and wearing a product); and just as often travels in the opposite direction as well, from body to clothes to monetary gain, as I hope to demonstrate in this essay.

In *The Empire of Fashion*, Lipovetsky writes about the ability of fashion to bring together two seemingly divergent needs: the increasing demand for originality on the one hand and the imposing of uniform standardized norms on the other (Lipovetsky 63-64). Both Nella Larsen and Jean Rhys provide fascinating insights to this inherent contradiction in fashion, especially in its potential to provide what Lori Harrison-Kahan calls “alternative models of identity to the ones expressed in the dominant ideology” by allowing a “convergence of masculinity and femininity, whiteness and racial difference, leisure and working class identities” (315). Whether fashion as product or fashion as construct, whether the dress or the act of dressing, *Passing* and *Voyage in the Dark* evoke critical stereotypes, of race, class, gender and sexuality, and then dismantle them with precision. Clothes and accessories are no longer just details to flesh out characters, but are often symbols, insights, and even modernist manifestoes. Comfortable with fashion as both commodity and aesthetics, Nella Larsen and Jean Rhys celebrate what women choose to project to the world through their appearances. They also offer a commentary on the compulsions, the politics that dictate those choices, and ultimately how the signifier and the signified can come together in new empowering ways.
Nella Larsen’s methodical detailing of fabrics and accessories in her fiction, of characters getting dressed or parading their dress in public, of comparisons between different fashion choices, make for richly layered text and subtext. Sherrard-Johnson, who studies the visual and literary culture in the Harlem Renaissance, argues for a painterly rather than a writerly reading of Nella Larsen’s work, identifying her text as a “tableau” that revises “the black female subject in modernist works of art and popular visual culture – in effect, modernizing the mulatta figure” (22). In *Passing*, where there are many tools and strategies employed by the ‘mulatta’ to cross the nebulous race lines, there is none so effective or important as the visual marker of clothing and fashion.

A close look at how Clare enters Irene’s consciousness after many years of disconnect is revealing: we first hear Clare’s husky voice, followed by an awareness of her sweet scent, but the initial visual encounter is of her “fluttering dress of green chiffon whose mingled pattern of narcissuses, jonquils, and hyacinths was a reminder of pleasantly chill spring days” (148). With Clare is a white man who stands while she sits down, “abstractly pinching the knot of his bright blue tie,” as constrained in his formal attire as she is fluid in hers, and while Irene continues to study the beautiful ‘stranger’ her thoughts keep gravitating back to the clothes of the other woman, “nice clothes too, just right for the weather, thin and cool without being mussy, as summer things were so apt to be” (148). When she is conscious of staring, Irene quickly looks away, her mind returning to “her own affairs” which turns out to be “the problem of the proper one of two frocks for the bridge party that night” (149). It is only when the problem of the dress has been resolved in her mind, she is aware of being at the receiving end of a stare. As Irene panics at the thought of being found out and evicted from the Drayton, her first concern is with her appearance. She guardedly touches her hat to see if it has been placed backwards, then considers if there is a streak
of powder on her dress, and then worries about her dress, till she is able to reassure herself that everything is “perfectly all right” (149). Irene’s anxiety can be quite revealing, particularly when one takes into account her consecutive thoughts that mock white people and their attempts to ‘read’ race by ‘reading’ the body – “finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth and other equally silly rot” (150). The power of fashion is not just in empowering women to walk across such dubiously assessed race lines but in possibly being the one thing that could expose or betray their biological identities.

Entwistle elaborates on how ideas of embarrassment and stigma play an important part in the experience of dress, sometimes becoming the source of shame (35). The race debate in America during the early part of the twentieth century was invested in visibility and physical attributes not only as a source of pride but also as something to mask. As Harrison-Kahan writes, “women may at first employ fashion in order to confirm to a white ideal, but their self-fashionings ultimately serve a different end. Through fashion, they unseat whiteness as an ideal and establish a model of hybridity in its place” (329). Seeing Clare for the first time in her own house, Irene notices how she is wearing a thin floating dress of the same shade of blue as the draperies “which suited her and the rather difficult room to perfection” (165). Blue fabric here indicates it is not just the room that is difficult. The affluence and racial superiority that Clare has aspired to and for which she has played a dangerous game of secrecy materializes as a problematic space mirrored on her body.

Clare had managed to pass as white from a young age although she was of mixed racial heritage because of her appearance and the white family members she lived with. Even in Irene’s early memories of Clare, clothing is prominent, the first image being of “a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of red cloth together” (143). Clare’s rebellion in taking money from her weekly wages to buy the material for “that pathetic little red frock” (144) results in an outburst from her abusive father and seems to Irene to demonstrate
Clare’s selfishness, her investment in “her own immediate desire” (144). An instance of fashion employed as resistance. Clare’s affiliation with fashion, both with the making and the final product, had begun early. And significantly, Irene’s last memory of Clare would also be of a red fabric, as though Clare’s love of expressing herself through clothes formed the sustaining strand through Irene’s narrative of her, with Clare paying with her life for her love of the luxurious and the forbidden.

After Clare’s disappearance as a young woman, the rumors that had circulated in the community included her having been seen in a fashionable hotel and the shock expressed by them is centered on the fact that she was “dressed!” (153). It is significant that Larsen italicizes and drops emphasis on the word ‘dressed’ while keeping the details vague and open to interpretation. For the people that Clare and Irene grew up amidst, Clare’s light skin and her wardrobe are seen not just as complementary but almost synonymous in this instance, a means to alter her class and racial identity.

Clare’s conversations with her old friends Gertrude and Irene touch upon the dressmakers’ openings in Paris in the same breath as “wartime in France, of after-the-wartime in Germany and the general strike in England” (170) – national and class conflicts presented with the same seriousness or flippancy as the fashion industry. In her study of consumer self-fashioning in the fiction of Nella Larsen, Meredith Goldsmith argues that narratives in which bourgeois African-American women vacillate between the role of consumer and object of consumption offer an example of how black middle-class female selfhood may be both enabled and endangered by the possibility of consumerist masquerade (265). Personal space and personal acquisitions are closely related to larger race issues as well as (inter)national conflicts, all of it boxed in by an unsympathetic capitalist milieu.

Larsen continues to explore class issues through fashion during this meeting of old friends. Irene is quite disparaging of Gertrude whose “over-trimmed Georgette crêpe dress was too short and showed an
appalling amount of leg, stout legs in sleazy stockings of a vivid rose-beige shade” (167). Apart from the clothes that aspired to boast of affluence but ended up looking garish, the stockings, as repeatedly demonstrated in this novel, turn into a second skin, one that displays fabricated color so as to mask skin color. Ironically, Irene finds herself turned into “a slightly more sophisticated version of Gertrude” (Goldsmith 282) when she leaves for the Negro Welfare League dance with Clare, “exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet,” and Irene feels “dowdy and commonplace” in her own knee length rose-coloured chiffon frock (203). She has already lost the battle of clothes, in her mind, and this puts her at an emotional disadvantage.

Jacquelyn McLendon draws attention to the structural and thematic significance of Irene and Clare as psychological doubles. There is a strong element of performativity as well as homoerotic undertones to their relationship. The interest in each other’s bodies and fashion choices often crosses over from social posturing to wanting to be intimately validated by the other. When Clare arrives for the fateful Christmas party at the end of the novel and enters Irene’s dressing room, she kisses her bare shoulder, the intimacy of the space and the act of getting dressed providing a final erotic moment between the two women.

Fashion that “acts as a vehicle of fantasy” (Wilson 246) also functions as a bridge between psychological and physical spaces, and this is particularly conspicuous in the ways that Larsen employs Irene’s dressing room in the novel, offering both limitations and new possibilities. The dressing space in the novel encapsulates overlapping themes of race, fashion, gender relations and sexuality. When Clare, whose overtures Irene has been ignoring, turns up at the Redfield household, Irene is in her dressing room preparing to face Clare by “smoothing out the tumbled green and ivory draperies of her dress with light stroking pats” (193). She also powders her nose and brushes her hair at the mirror. That she has to work at her appearance, whether with clothes or skin and hair, to face the perceived superiority of Clare
is made all the more conspicuous when Clare walks in and tosses Irene’s admiring exclamation aside like she does her furs and small blue hat. As Entwistle explains, “[t]he space imposes its own structures onto the individual who, in her turn, may come up with strategies of dress aimed at managing this space” (34-35). Later, Clare confesses her isolation behind her racial masquerade to Irene, her tears spilling into the “priceless velvet of her dress” (196). Irene’s almost obsessive control of her appearance, her clothes carefully modeling her social standing, is contrasted by Clare’s giving in to the spontaneity of her emotions without worrying about ruining her expensive velvet.

Later, stricken by suspicions of an affair between Clare and her husband, Irene, who is socializing with her friends, attempts to mask her true feelings behind her chatter about fashion. She tells Felise that her clothes “are the despair of half the women in Harlem…how do you do it?...Lovely, is it Worth or Lanvin?...Oh, a mere Babani…” and Felise who sees through the charade offers a solution to cheer Irene, “buy yourself an expensive new frock, child. It always helps” (219). Both Clare and Irene have demonstrated these preferences in their choice of husbands and/or lifestyles, as well as their personal appearances. The importance of these labels or signifiers in providing women with the gratification that comes from choosing certain categorical and nuanced portrayals of their selves is unmistakable. Being stylish and trendy thereby becomes an empowering and subversive tool.

Of all the fashion images that Larsen manipulates in this novel, the close identification of red fabric with Clare Kendry, through Irene’s consciousness, is the most penetrating and illustrative. When Irene and Felise run into Clare’s husband who becomes aware for the first time that Clare has black friends, and Irene confesses to having been “disguised as a white woman,” Felise points out a red coat and asks, “[i]sn’t it a dream?” (227). As fragile as a dream, as fragile as Clare on the verge of being discovered by her husband, who turns up at Irene’s house “radiant in a shining red gown” (233), a figure of celebration and rebellion, and becomes in the moment just before her fall “a flame of red and gold” (239). Her racially divided consciousness merges
Gayathri Prabhu

completely into her clothes at that critical point in the plot or rather her clothes and hair are suddenly all that is left of her. Nella Larsen holds and extends the tragic moment entirely through reducing Clare to the only thing that had been available to her in a racially insensitive and unaccommodating world, her defiant and emphatic sense of her physical attributes and the fashion that alternatively masked and enhanced it.

**Voyage in the Dark and Why Clothes Cost More Than the Girl Inside Them**

Having to learn to “swank a bit” (10) as Maudie advises Anna Morgan, is a continual, explicit, and finely modulated concern through *Voyage in the Dark*, the story of a Creole woman trying to earn a living as a chorus-girl and a kept woman in London, the seat of the British Empire, at the threshold of the First World War. Barely a couple of pages into *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys’s concerns with sexuality, imperialism, and class politics are articulated in repeated engagement with clothing. Anna’s friend Maudie is wearing her nightgown and a torn kimono – the kimono as a symbol of sexual licensure is more explicit later in the novel in a china figurine of a geisha in a kimono – and the landlady takes offence to her wearing it downstairs. But of course, the kimono is far from being a fine erotic garment at this point, the tear in it suggesting quite the opposite. At this moment, Anna is reading Emile Zola’s *Nana*, the cover image of which is “a stout, dark woman…sitting on the knee of a bald headed man in evening dress” (9). Numerous critics have commented extensively on the demimonde figure of Emile Zola’s *Nana* being aligned with that of the ‘Hottentot’. Veronica Marie Gregg suggests that “Anna is constructed not only as a sexualized object but specifically as a black sexualized object” which in turn is seen as defining the male/female, black/white, master/slave dialectic of her relationship with Walter Jeffries (118). Even during Anna’s first meeting with Walter, the female body becomes the currency that has to be paid to acquire this ladylike fashion, as Maudie and Anna allow complete strangers to walk into a shop with them and pay for their stockings. This shopping episode leads to Anna’s first dinner with Walter, both conscious of the possibility that it could end in sex. Anna and Walter’s relationship,
however, is not consummated that night and Anna returns to her cold and dark room and starts to think about her clothes, too sad to cry, following which is probably one of the most significant passages in the novel:

About clothes, it’s awful. Everything makes you want pretty clothes like hell. People laugh at girls who are badly dressed. Jaw, jaw, jaw… ‘Beautifully dressed woman…’ As if it isn’t enough that you want to be beautiful, that you want to have pretty clothes, that you want it like hell. As if that isn’t enough. But no, it’s jaw, jaw and sneer, sneer all the time. And then the shop-windows sneering and smiling in your face. And then you look at the skirt of your costume, all crumpled at the back. And your hideous underclothes. You look at your hideous underclothes and you think, ‘All right, I’ll do anything for good clothes. Anything – anything for clothes’. (25)

In Anna’s soliloquy-like passionate outburst, Rhys is highlighting many of her thematic concerns; fashion as a trend fades in the face of its transformative powers; fashion becomes a lens through which to project the racial, financial, sexual and social pressures faced by a chorus-girl from a distant colony; shop-windows are consumerist traps; in the face of the ubiquitous rhetoric and refrain of the “beautifully dressed woman” not even underclothes can escape scrutiny; the despairing refrain of “as if it isn’t enough” painfully exposes the notions of beauty that demean the body; fashion is a masquerade and the fashioned woman is a mannequin, a trope that anticipates the masks and costumes of the carnival at the end of the novel. Maroula Joannou, who draws from the above quoted passage for the title of her essay, “All Right, I’ll do anything for good clothes’: Jean Rhys and Fashion”, argues that fashion in Rhys “is a marker of changes in women’s symbolic lives, bringing women new performative possibilities for sensual self-expression in the form of scopic pleasure
and somatic fantasy” (464). In the case of liminal figures like Anna, to confront and cope with unrelenting pressures to be fashionable, the body that has to dress itself must then offer itself to moneyed men.

The underlying narrative of inadvertent prostitution by numerous girls in such situations is made conspicuous by their clothes, as is insinuated by Anna’s landlady who makes it clear that she doesn’t approve of how Anna goes out, “dressed up to the nines” (30). Meanwhile, Anna’s declaration that she will do anything for clothes is endorsed by a letter that arrives from Walter in the morning accompanied by five five-pound notes and directions to buy stockings. Anna soon forgets about feeling ill and is dressing to go out shopping, thinking of nothing else but clothes.

The acceptance of the situation displayed by Anna even as she goes about buying clothes and accessories, including a skirt that shows the shape of her thighs, is striking. She comments on how the woman in the shop dressed her as if she “were a doll” (28). The expensive clothes combined with the purchasing power to become a fawned upon customer are empowering as Anna finds out when she steps back into the street and notices “the streets looked different that day, just as a reflection in the looking-glass is different from the real thing” (29). The metropole has become the transformatory space, Anna’s relation to it changing when she changes her clothes, giving her access to fluid personae. Understandably Anna crosses the road to do more shopping, for shoes, underclothes and stockings.

The reinvention of Anna’s selfhood has thus begun, with the shopping event becoming a symbolic deflowering. The physical intimacy follows soon after. It is perhaps no surprise that when Anna gets up to dress after losing her virginity to Walter the ribbons in her chemise looked silly to her. In judging her own clothes, she comes close to censuring her moral fabric, and her inability to fully articulate the absurdity of her situation is poignant. Characters being represented entirely by the clothes they wear, the clothes often becoming the character, is a strong recurring motif in *Voyage in the Dark*. 
Anna’s present and future security depend entirely on her relationship with Walter and as the relationship grows, so does her anxiety, palpable in her constant wondering if she looked all right. “If he had said that I looked all right or that I was pretty, it would have set me free” (76). It is a freedom that is forced on Anna when Walter ends his relationship with her. And it is a freedom that is going to cost her dearly. All her investment in apparel and accessories means nothing without male validation. Lipovetsky’s theory of the triple operation that specifically defines fashion – ephemerality, seduction and marginal differentiation (131) – is almost literally played out during this momentous year in Anna’s life.

Early in the novel when her friend Maudie had advised the sexually uninitiated Anna that she should always look ladylike, she had retorted, “[o]h God, who wants to look ladylike?” (10). But with the acceptance of Walter’s money and after spending it on underwear and clothes, Anna has embraced the tacit understanding that she is to be his mistress. The paradox of looking “ladylike” or creating a visual representation of social respectability but not necessarily accompanying it with behavior that is socially acceptable is a game that Anna is willing to play in order to find her moorings in a city that can be punishing to young women without money. After her relationship with Walter progresses, standing at a doorstep and putting on her gloves, she finds herself thinking, “a lady always puts on her gloves before going into the street” (34). This preoccupation with being ladylike continues like a refrain through the novel. Meeting Maudie again, following the consummation of her relationship with Walter, the conversation predictably veers around to ‘swanking’ and being a lady. Examining Anna’s clothes, Maudie repeats, “[v]ery lady-like. I call that one very ladylike indeed. And you’ve got a fur coat. Well, if a girl has a lot of good clothes and a fur coat she has something, there’s no getting away from that” (45). Anna’s value in the metropole now reduced to that of a coat, Rhys manipulates the image through the rest of the novel, especially in the shrewd Ethel’s constant and vocal admiration of the coat when Anna has little else to rely upon.
Kristien Hemmerechts points out there are but two categories of women in *Voyage in the Dark*: either lady or tart (231). Anna’s friend Laurie, who is called a tart by her date, sports bright dresses, hennaed hair, thick makeup and heavy scent. She pins on long hair when she wears nightgowns and leaves it short in her pajamas, the preoccupation with appearance implying a sexual context to these choices. Similarly, at the movies with Ethel, watching ladies and gentlemen in evening dress walk about with strained smiles on the screen, Anna has to listen to Ethel’s tirade about the “soft, dirty way that foreign girls have” (109). The foreigner on screen whose race or nationality is not revealed has stuck red curls in her black hair which Ethel keeps insisting an English girl would not have done. All Anna notices is that the girl was very pretty. This scene makes an interesting contrast with Laurie’s talk about fashion in Paris, where it is trendy to emulate the foreigners, the women wearing false eyelashes “sticking out yards” (117) and hair trendily cut short. Postcolonial scholars like Urmila Seshagiri consider Jean Rhys to be an uneasy participant in the modernist movement whose radical aesthetic gestures are seen as growing out of “metropolitan perception” and thereby “inseparable from imperial praxis” (490). Rhys negotiates these power lines by closely aligning Anna’s outlook as a colonial subject, often identifying with the non-white perspective, alongside her situation as a white woman without any economic standing who has to give sexual favors for material gain.

Watching the women, dressed, undressed or in the act of dressing, are many looking glasses in the novel, often during moments of seduction, like a shadow, a ghost, that can look beyond the clothes to produce a split subjectivity. Helen Tiffin who analyzes the mirrors and masks in the novels of Jean Rhys considers Anna Morgan’s life in England as mirroring her Caribbean colonial history of conquest, flirtation, desertion and dependence (334). As Tiffin suggests, later in the novel, masks replace mirrors and make a fascinating tool for self-assertion and for questioning the uneasy relationship between the colonizers and the colonized in the tropical island.
During the Caribbean carnival scene that Anna remembers after her blotched up abortion in far-away London, black people are dancing in the streets, flashing bright clothes, wearing masks that mimic their white colonizers and through which they stick out their tongues. Here clothes and appearances function as parody and a cultural indictment. Conversely, when Hester brings jumbie-beads from another culture where they are considered lucky and sets them in a gold brooch to be given to a British rector’s daughter, “this short exchange becomes a synecdoche for imperialist exploitation tied to religion, capital, race, and gender” (Gregg 124). These geopolitical and sociocultural dissonances reflect their violence within the script of Anna’s life choices. Maudie’s anecdote about the man who told her that a girl’s clothes cost more than the girl inside them because “people are much cheaper than things” (45) then becomes a narrative of a debasement and devaluation that is laced with defiance; a commentary on the economic disadvantages of working-class girls in the metropole, often leading to their sexual exploitation. Maudie proceeds to say that horses and even dogs are more expensive than people, extending the animal imagery that is closely aligned with fashion and women through the novel, especially in multiple references to the animal smell in fur coats. Representing the life of security and luxury that the young women cannot have without a rich male patron, the fur coat, or even the aspiration for it, becomes a trap. Having offered their bodies in order to acquire products of the fashion industry, there is always the knowledge that the same objects could create cash flow when in need, often to feed or treat the body it clothes. However, the fur coat, Anna’s most precious possession, is unable to bail her out when she needs help the most. The abortion she wants to have costs more than the proceeds from selling the coat and she has to turn to Walter again for help. The cycle of dependency and survival continues.

That Anna’s story echoes an entire generation of working class girls in the metropole is reinforced when Anna runs into Maudie towards the end of the novel. Still counting on her looks to buy her security and respectability, Maudie laments the impossibility of her situation, of needing resources to buy the kind of clothes that will interest a man
who will then provide for her. Fashion is the road to money, but sadly one needs money to get the clothes. Maudie knows this well, telling Anna about her Fred who notices a girl’s legs and shoes. She laments, “[w]ell, my legs are all right, but look at my shoes” (160). The body continues to be devalued, of no public worth without clothes and accessories that act as class levelers, or perhaps class camouflageers, and open the doors to social mobility.

The (Little) Black Dress and Why It Tells a Different Story Each Time

The black dress has an eloquent and compelling role to play in both novels and effectively illustrates shared concerns in the deployment and depiction of fashion by Larsen and Rhys. “The color black in the twentieth century had come to take on multiple connotations in fashion, associated variously with elegance, evil, impurity and rebellion” (Harrison-Kahan 324). Black clothing also implies maturity, hinting towards sexual allure, mystique and availability. The black dress that Coco Chanel put on the cover of *Vogue* in 1926 became iconic during the same time period as the publication of *Passing* and *Voyage in the Dark*. It was valued for its simplicity, elegance, and most of all, its ability to transform from casual to eveningwear, a pliability and ambiguity that these writers exploited to the hilt. With the black dress, the color affiliation is made to run deeper, beyond the sophistication it implies, beyond fabric to the skin beneath.

In *Passing*, the black dress features in both a commonplace and a glamorous context. The letter that Irene receives from Clare, after her insulting encounter with Jack Bellew, ends up in a “small heap in her black crepe de Chine lap” (178) and is resurrected in the form of Clare making her first appearance among the Harlem crowd wearing a striking black silk gown. Irene regrets not having counseled Clare to wear something ordinary and inconspicuous and her thoughts move to her husband: “[w]hat on earth would Brian think of deliberately courting of attention?” (203). This attention-grabbing ability of the black dress encapsulates Clare’s flamboyant personality as well as her first effort to perform her own black identity.
Anna Morgan, in *Voyage in the Dark*, is nearly obsessive about her black dress, her life often hanging in balance over it. During her first dinner with Walter Jeffries, he asks her, “[d]o you always wear black?” (19). At the end of that meal, during which Walter complains to the waiter about the wine, a moment loaded with feudal undertones (for it is less about the wine than about bossing over a social inferior), Walter and Anna move closer to the fire. Anna feels better and starts to think about “his clothes - especially his clothes. It was a pity about my clothes, but anyway they were black” (22). While Anna does not elaborate on this, the disparity in their implied economic and social positions, the colonial subject from a tropical island and the wealthy Englishman, is indisputable, black fabric helping to mitigate it to some extent. Like a coda, black clothing is evoked again in the lines of a writer Anna recalls as “Coronet’ or a “Peer”: “[s]he wore black. Men delighted in that sable colour, or lack of colour” (22). Anna’s thoughts are interrupted by Walter who continues to talk about her appearance, how she looked “awfully pathetic” when she was choosing “those horrible stockings so anxiously” before starting to kiss her (22). The dark color, or “lack of color,” becomes a referential frame for the young woman whose anxieties about choosing stockings, inconsequential to Walter but significant for her, will escalate with time into tragic life-death decisions.

Months later, when Anna realizes Walter intends to withdraw from her life, she again turns in desperation to her black velvet dress, this time coloring her cheeks with rouge, a combination of red and black that Elaine Savory considers as signifying “a dangerously willing yet conflicted sexuality” (97). For Anna, the only thing that could dissuade Walter from abandoning her is her appearance, for that is what drew him to her in the first place. A parallel can be drawn with the climactic scene of *Passing* where Clare Kendry falls down to her death in a red dress, the redness of the dress emphasized by Larsen, indicating that racialized blackness has connotations of a dangerous sexuality, just as it was for Anna in *Voyage in the Dark*. 
Elaine Savory, who has written a chapter on the politics of color in *Voyage in the Dark*, analyzes in detail the coding in the complex color palette of the novel. According to Savory, black or black and white clothes are indicative of disguise in the novel (98). Black can also be read against Rhys’s race concerns, the Creole perspective that always felt the weight of the hatred that the majority black community in Dominica harbored towards the descendants of white slave-owners. Anna articulates this binary when she declares that “being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad” (31). That the association goes against popular and traditional perception of black and white helps accentuate the emotional and cultural isolation experienced by Anna Morgan who finds comfort in her black clothes.

The black dress that elevated Anna to an object of desire during her first meeting with Walter, which she puts on for her last meeting with him, is torn when she runs into her friend Laurie with Joe and Carl, the two Americans. Anna has to slip out of her dress and borrow one of Laurie’s, a pink dress with dangling silver pieces, and with this she seems to slip into another phase of her life, one without any patronage unless one is soliciting. The rest of that episode encapsulates Anna’s descent into a life of poverty and promiscuity. Fashion is again the staple topic of conversation. Joe claims to like how American girls dress better than English girls, and Carl, who is interested in Anna, says that “it doesn’t matter so much” (119). Carl then puts his hand on Anna’s hand, a moment of empathy that is made possible only when fashion has been brushed aside as a judgmental factor. Maudie’s comment about clothes being more important than girls is enacted when Anna is feeling unwell but Laurie does not let her lie down without taking off the dress. Even when Anna wants to leave, Laurie does not let her wear the dress and the girls start to tug at it while Joe laughs at them. Far from becoming a fashion statement that catches the attention of the opposite sex, the dress is an object of ridicule to the women, a demonstration of their pitiful circumstances. The significance Rhys attaches to fashion serves to contest the relegation of fashion, and by extension the women who valued it, to the realm of the frivolous and lightweight (Joannou, 470), which this dramatic moment seems to exemplify.
As if to mock her downfall, when Anna is walking back to her room at four in the morning, she spots a black velvet dress in a shop window, “with the skirt slit up so that you could see the light stocking. A girl could look lovely in that, like a doll or a flower” (130). The choice of imagery, neither doll nor flower being sentient, is a critique of this preoccupation with costume. It is also an acknowledgement of Anna’s past self on the day Walter’s money enabled her to be fitted with new clothes like a doll. Dress being not just fabric but rungs on the social ladder is never more obvious to Anna than at that moment in the street. Rhys’s layered writing with its outsider’s skepticism of objects, people and spaces, is brilliantly summarized at this point: “[t]he clothes of most of the women who passed were like caricatures of the clothes in the shop-windows, but when they stopped to look you saw that their eyes were fixed on the future” (130). No matter how hard the girls tried to emulate the latest fashion in Paris or compromised themselves to become attractive to men with money, they were doomed to remain caricatures. Nonetheless, for Anna and her friends there was the future, the hope that kept everyone in the game. The real danger then was this: “[w]hat happens if you don’t hope anymore, if your back’s broken?” (130). Anna is dangerously close to that breaking point when she looks up at the black dress in its display case.

Their societies’ obsession with race and on skin as the visible representation of race, which critics like Phelan point out as a form of feminizing those races that are not white (10), is manipulated to fascinating ends through fashion by Nella Larsen and Jean Rhys. In Voyage in the Dark, Anna is white but inscribed as colored by those around her. In Passing, Clare Kendry is able to fool a racist man like John Bellew into marrying and having a child with her though she is of mixed-race. The extreme preoccupation with fashion is the ticket to new possibilities, whether access to physical spaces like restaurants that are race-exclusive, or the status of mistresses to rich men. And the women in these novels use fashion’s power without qualms, morality playing second fiddle to survival.
Although both Larsen and Rhys are writing within different sociohistorical contexts, many of their critical gestures aimed towards the Harlem Renaissance or the British Empire. There are numerous insights to be gained from studying them in conjunction, especially on the rather dubious standards of viewing the female body in patriarchal societies obsessed with hierarchies of race and materiality. These texts reiterate the value of fashion to modernist writers in their quest to question an old order, experiment with new ones and turn human consciousness inside out like a stylish coat.

WORKS CITED


