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### **Issues of Racial Masquerade: Jewish Assimilation to Englishness in Bernice Rubens' *Mate in Three***

Bernice Rubens commenced her long career of virtuoso, prize-winning works in 1960. They range across a variety of genres including thrillers, historical novels and social comedies as well as the family saga, and the success of several was increased by their adaptation to film or television.<sup>1</sup> Rubens is one of Britain's best-recognised Jewish authors, and although some of her novels have no Jewish characters at all, the first four were firmly anchored in Jewish families. They culminated in *The Elected Member*, which won the Booker Prize in 1969. The sardonic humour of Rubens' vision joyfully embraces the gothic and the surreal, delving into taboo topics such as cross-dressing, incest, rape and murder, with a gallery of monstrous mothers and eccentric bachelors. This would seem to place her alongside writers such as Beryl Bainbridge in a robustly comic tradition stemming from Dickens.

However, I want to suggest she has also contributed to the Woman's Novel, the more genteel tradition of Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamund Lehman and Elizabeth Taylor. This was a genre first identified by Nicola Beauman in 1983 with her study of books by women written between 1914 and 1939. She defined it as consisting of novels that are not concerned with adventure or dramatic action, but with "the steadfast dailiness" of (domestic) life. Olga Kenyon and Clare Hanson have extended our understanding of this "fiction, written mainly

by women, with women readers in mind” beyond World War II, as including books by such writers as Margaret Drabble, Fay Weldon and Anita Brookner.<sup>2</sup> Rubens has followed her Jewish predecessor, Betty Miller, in an attempt to politicise the genre and use it critically. In this Rubens bears an unexpected resemblance to her exact contemporary, Anita Brookner, who is one of the major exponents of the post-war Woman’s Novel. Indeed, to set their novels side by side, is to reveal precisely those gothic elements which, rampant in Rubens, are anxiously controlled in Brookner but haunt her protagonists. Brookner’s novels maintain the discreet middle-class tone which is the hallmark of the Woman’s Novel in the other British comic tradition inaugurated by Jane Austen, that of polite social satire. This upholds the liberal bourgeois values of honesty, kindness and decency that distinguish the ideology of “Englishness,” particularly its feminine form of self-abnegation, quietness and domestic contentment. However, Brookner’s characters are frequently alienated loners, anxious to conform and be acceptable, while an ardent, greedy, demonstrative eccentricity threatens to disrupt their cool calm surface.

By contrast with Brookner’s, Rubens’ characters usually come from further down the class-scale than the well-off bourgeoisie typical of the genre, and she frequently ranges far from British shores. However, Rubens’ third novel, *Mate in Three*,<sup>3</sup> is the analysis of a marriage and it is concerned with class values, two central topics of the Woman’s Novel. Like Miller in *Farewell Leicester Square*,<sup>4</sup> Rubens provides depth of vision through the extra dimension of Jewish ethnicity and she attempts to politicise the form through the question of racism. In order to demonstrate the politicisation of women’s fiction, this paper will situate *Mate in Three* in the political context of the mid-1960s, when it was written, and relate it to other novels by women, particularly one of the least discussed of Brookner’s works, *A Family Romance* (1993).<sup>5</sup> Despite her popular success, Rubens has been thrice marginalised, as both a Welsh and a Jewish writer as well as a woman (situations which in fact arguably

provide the strength for her originality); she has received little academic attention. Brookner, on the other hand, writes from the heart of the establishment. (Before taking to writing novels, she had been Slade Professor at Cambridge University and Reader at the Courtauld, University of London, and published four academic studies of French Art.) Critics treat her seriously.<sup>6</sup> Her fiction has helped to define the postwar Woman's Novel, having refined the form in over twenty novels. Their apparent Englishness, to the point of caricature, has obscured her own Jewish, Middle-European background and the Jewish identity of many of her characters. That identity forms part of a critique of "Englishness," a project that she shares with other Jewish women writers but that has not been critically recognised.

Both *Mate in Three* and *A Family Romance* treat issues of assimilation and masquerade like those in *Farewell Leicester Square*, and raise equally poignantly the resultant problem of authenticity and self-disavowal. Similar dilemmas propel the first novel by a Jewish author of the next generation, Linda Grant's *The Cast Iron Shore* (1996).<sup>7</sup> This is another book that deals with maintaining appearances. The trope of clothing/dress/costume that figures in all three novels is emphasised by Grant to indicate the masquerade engaged in by Sybil Ross, her central character. Sybil is always highly conscious of what she wears and she spends much of her life working in the dress section of department stores and reading the fashion articles in women's magazines. This is cover for her underground work as a communist and parallels her inherited secrecy about her divided background. She was born in Liverpool to foreign-born parents: her father was a naturalised Serbian-Jew, her mother a German who masqueraded as Dutch in Liverpool during the Second World War. Obsessed by clothes and appearances, parading the wealth gained from Mr Ross's business as furrier, they raise Sybil to dress as a middle-class Englishwoman.

Relevant here is Joan Riviere's theory that women masquerade as "feminine" in order not to antagonise men. She argued that "womanliness could be assumed and worn as a mask"

but, when asked “where to draw the line between genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade,’” she added that “they are the same thing.”<sup>8</sup> As Simone de Beauvoir said, women are not born, but made.<sup>9</sup> Girls are educated to dress and behave in a feminine manner. In a similar way, working-class children used to be given elocution lessons and classes in deportment in order to avoid class prejudice and escape their regional origins. Authors concerned with racial hostility often emphasise how racially insecure characters may try to “pass” for insiders, masquerading through their clothes and behaviour as assured members of the dominant order. Indeed parents may pay for a public-school education that enables their sons to “masquerade” in this way in order to succeed in society. Girls would be sent to convent in order to become “ladies.” In other words, the signs of gender, class, race or ethnicity are not all innate; most can be performed.

That does not mean that the performance will convince. Indeed Homi Bhabha argues that the “almost but not quite” standard is crucial to the power of the dominant culture.<sup>10</sup> The judgements made about the Jewish public-schoolboy by Robert Nicolls in Miller’s *Farewell Leicester Square* and by Isabella Oliver in Virginia Woolf’s 1941 novel, *Between the Acts*, can be compared with Al Alvarez’s views in his autobiography *Where Did It All Go Right?* Alvarez’s father had been educated at Dulwich College; Al went to Oundle, “the austere, non-Jewish world to which I did not properly belong.”<sup>11</sup> This was his comment on the subtlety of upper-class British anti-semitism:

It didn’t matter how well-mannered or cultured they might be, Jews, by definition, weren’t gentlemen and never could be. The Alverezes, who had all the trappings of gentlemanliness as well as an in-built Sephardic sense of superiority, found this particularly galling. After all, the family had been in England for generations; what else did they have to do to be English?<sup>12</sup>

In *Farewell Leicester Square* the first time Alec Berman is seen through the eyes of a powerful Englishman, the marks of his racial otherness are immediately discerned:

“characteristic” blunt head, black tough hair, hooded eyes and the “trace of racial sibilance” which Nicolls expects him to lose, so anxious is Alec to adapt and conform:

Five, ten years would see him talking, acting like the English public-school Jews whom Nicolls periodically encountered at the board meetings of his companies. Men who always gave him a slightly odd sensation when he conversed with them; who had succeeded in the extraordinary feat of ousting all trace of their origin, not only from their accent and behaviour, but actually from their physique. Despite which complex achievement (for which he was not without admiration) they struck him always as essentially unreal, hollow men. They existed in a curious limbo between the two races: their reality lost in the rôle they had adopted and that rôle itself without reality.<sup>13</sup>

In *Between the Acts* the judgement of Isabella Oliver, the wife of an English stockbroker, is less charitable. Looking at the vulgar Mrs Manresa, who is over-sexed and over-dressed, she reflects on the absent husband, Ralph Manresa: “a Jew, got up to look the very spit and image of the landed gentry” who, true to stereotype, supplies his wife with “tons of money” gained from directing City companies.<sup>14</sup> These judgements may damn the judges, but it is the psychological and emotional cost of such masquerade to the Anglo-Jewish characters themselves that occupies *Mate in Three* and other novels by Jewish women writers. They are concerned with the “hollow role” performed in the “curious limbo between the two races” that Miller identifies.

For instance, in *Mate in Three*, left to herself the central character, Ruth Lazarus, would look like an “ungroomable waif,” with her hair loose, an embroidered low-cut blouse tucked into a wide peasant skirt, and sandals. To meet the parents of her fiancé, Jack, for the first time, he makes her conform to his mother’s genteel expectations by wearing stockings, high-heeled shoes and white gloves (“she had drawn the line at carrying a handbag”) and putting her thick hair in a slide. The clothes signify the clash between Ruth’s “*Ostjuden*”<sup>15</sup> origins and Mrs Millar’s aspirations to middleclass Englishness. They also signify Ruth’s awkward state throughout the novel as she attempts to remain true to herself whilst also compromising with Jack’s dishonesty. Later, while staying at a hotel in South Africa (despite

her opposition to apartheid, she and Jack have accepted a free holiday there), she perceives the evening clothes, the dinner-jackets and long dresses, of the well-groomed white hotel guests as an “outward show of gentility and civilisation, as absurd as fancydress at a funeral.”<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, in Anita Brookner’s *A Family Romance*, Jane’s dazzling Aunt Dolly is originally seen as always “tremendously dressed up” in a handmade silk frock which is too tight for her bulk, with a fragrant mink coat, and carrying “a handbag like the Queen.”<sup>17</sup> Alluring and smiling artificially she urges Jane to “always make a good impression” and to “put on an act” in order to survive. Dolly’s mother, abandoned by her Jewish husband and befriended by prostitutes, had worked as a dressmaker in a Paris backstreet but Dolly rejected that shabby, self-denying life. Always vivid, tempestuous and sexily provocative, she is eventually left a poor widow in reduced circumstances in a London flat. Her stiletto heels exchanged for flat shoes, she finally learns to conform to Jane’s English moderation: “These days she dresses discreetly”—in viscose garments off the rack from John Lewis’s department store, loosely belted.<sup>18</sup>

At the opening of *Cast Iron Shore*, Sybil Ross appears as a smartly dressed international businesswoman in Vietnam, scavenging the Third World for profit at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall. (With the reunification of Germany and the collapse of communism, this led to the so-called “End of History” and the triumph of western capitalist values.) Incongruously meeting a fellow-Jew in a disused synagogue in Saigon, Sybil confesses to having been a communist. “He looks at me, at my dress, my hat, my belt, my shoes, my gold bracelets, without belief.”<sup>19</sup> He reminds her that Jews “carry our identity not in a place but in our story.” The novel recalls her story, a story of travel and duplicity, in which she continually tried to create an identity despite or through what she wore. She had been brought up by a mother who “lacked an inner life”<sup>20</sup> and who constructed her in her

own image as “a good pastiche of English society:” “If you had hung her on the wall you would have seen a collage of magazine cuttings.” Together with her parents, during her upbringing Sybil had lived “an exquisite imitation of life.”<sup>21</sup> The traditional concern of the Woman’s Novel with the psychological and emotional life of its protagonists is, in these three novels, not only related to appearance and masquerade: it becomes a critique of dominant western culture as itself an imitation, a pastiche, a hollow masquerade.

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Bernice Rubens’ previous novel to *Mate in Three*, the extraordinary *Madame Souzaatska* (1962), was made into a Merchant-Ivory film in 1988, starring Shirley Maclaine, in an adaptation by Ruth Praver Jhabvala. The novel after, which was her fourth, *The Elected Member*, won the Booker Prize in 1969, and the next one was a runner-up for the Booker. Between these, *Mate in Three* (1966) was passed over in silence. Why? At first sight it appears to be less artfully constructed, with only two main characters, a deadpan narrative voice and a straightforward plot concerning a love relationship. Yet that appearance is deceptive. The second part of the novel circles around three stubbornly allegorical events in South Africa which resist any easy interpretation, and the open ending does not resolve the dilemma of the novel or the future of its characters. A book written in the clear prose of a Mills and Boon pot-boiler, with a forward narrative drive, short episodic chapters and plenty of dialogue, it nevertheless fails to deliver the comforting certainties of popular fiction.

Mildly subversive in its refusal to keep to the aesthetic rules of the game, *Mate in Three* was outspokenly radical in drawing attention to its two interlocked themes: internalised racism and an abusive marriage in London, which it relates to apartheid in South Africa. The year the novel was published, 1966, was the year in which the National Front

was formed out of the detritus of earlier extreme right-wing groups. At that time in the mid-1960s, the anti-apartheid movement was well established in Britain, with a boycott of South African imports and support for imprisoned opponents of the regime, such as Nelson Mandela and Jewish activists like Helen Suzman. Influenced by the Civil Rights Movement in the USA and parallel with anti-apartheid agitation, there were street demonstrations in Britain by the growing Campaign for Racial Equality, and race riots against discriminatory immigration procedures, which resulted in the Race Relations Act (1976) and the Commission for Racial Equality. However, to relate anti-Black prejudice to anti-semitism in Britain was, despite the ideology of the National Front, not common, particularly in the way in which Rubens made the connection. *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon's classic analysis of racial alienation and the black inferiority complex, which related the black African and Jewish situations, was not translated into English until 1967.<sup>22</sup>

Equally revolutionary but more original was Rubens' portrayal of domestic violence, especially in a middle-class marriage where both partners had trained as teachers. The partners, Jack and Ruth, are two Jews from opposed backgrounds. Jack and his parents are German refugees from Hamburg who escaped early in the 1930s, managing to retain their possessions. They are "respectable well-heeled emigrants" who already spoke English fluently and had "through the business" been "well connected with the upper strata of English social life." They changed their name from Müller to Millar and now reside in an English suburb, "a spotlessly clean nightmare."<sup>23</sup> Their status is summed up by their monogrammed silver and the white scar on their lintel. The first thing Mr Millar had done on moving into the house was to remove the Mezuzah left by the previous owner, leaving what Rubens calls "a lie that is as revealing as the truth it conceals." In a parody of the mark made on doorposts at the time of the original Passover so that the Jewish houses would be passed by, this "white wound" shrieks: "Do not pass us over.... Include us, for God's sake."<sup>24</sup> The



implication is that these are Jews who are so anxious to assimilate to Gentiles that they would sacrifice their own first-born son.<sup>25</sup> Unlike Jack's school-friend, Helmuth Kahn, who was killed at Auschwitz along with all his family, Jack never had a Barmitzvah. Consequently he hates his mother for cheating him out of his manhood.<sup>26</sup> He also knows his parents will hate Ruth, who with her thick black hair looks undeniably Jewish, "almost ugly;" that seems to be precisely why he chose her.

Ruth Lazarus is the daughter of a tailor, himself a rabbi's son. She was born in Wales but her parents are what the Millars call "*Ostjuden*" from Lithuania. Mr Millar explains what this implies: they were like the Eastern European Jews who had arrived in Germany "in their droves" before the war, behaving as if they were still in the Ghetto, wearing long beards and sideboards [*sic*] and speaking Yiddish publicly. By making themselves conspicuous, "They were to blame for what happened to us."<sup>27</sup> By contrast, Mr Millar claims, "We've never denied we're Jews.... We just don't make an issue of it."<sup>28</sup> However, Ruth, partly angry and partly from a sense of the ridiculous, refuses to be silent and discreet in return as Jack would wish. Her response becomes the central moral of the book:

'It's not what you do or what you think. It's what other people see in you, and it's this that is your identity. It's this you have to come to terms with.'<sup>29</sup>

This view coincides with Sartre's in *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Sartre had argued that the figure of "the Jew" was socially constructed by other people, but an "authentic Jew" was one who nevertheless asserted his Jewish identity "in the face of the disdain shown toward him" rather than keep quiet about it.<sup>30</sup> Ruth's orthodox family has an "unassailable sense of identity."<sup>31</sup> They may not wear the long beards and sidecurls of Hassidic Jews, but they continue to speak Yiddish and have maintained their ethnic way of life. When Jack is first introduced to them, it is clear he does not understand Yiddish and knows next-to-nothing about Jewish culture. As the conversation about *gefilte* fish for the ritual Friday evening meal hints, Jack's Jewish identity has been filleted out of him and this has left him without moral backbone.

Demonstrative where the Millars are frigid, the Lazaruses regard Ruth's relationship to Jack as "almost marrying out."<sup>32</sup> The two families are not each other's "kind of people."<sup>33</sup> The question is how a marriage between Ruth and Jack can bridge such a gap.

Not long after their wedding, Jack erupts in the first of his "bouts of violence." It is the culmination of an argument about how Ruth is dressed. First he twists her arm. Then he throws her to the hall floor and kicks her thigh "as she lay there stupefied." He kicks her again.<sup>34</sup> Afterwards they make love violently, his verbal abuse ringing in her ears: "Grow [your hair] as long as you like.... As far as I'm concerned, you can trip over it and break your neck."<sup>35</sup> Her loose black hair is to him a sign of her physicality which "threatened him" and "fed his fears of his own inadequacy."<sup>36</sup> Instead of an apology he assuages his guilt with expensive presents of clothing that become an extensive "wardrobe of his conscience."<sup>37</sup> Ruth lives in constant fear of his anger. Then Jack's mother dies and the emotional abuse begins. He starts an affair with an artificial English rose (herself dissembling her lesbianism) and stays away from home, leaving Ruth lonely, unhappy and depressed. "As he delivered greater hurt, the threshold of her acceptance increased."<sup>38</sup> This laconic account of abuse is Rubens' answer to the problems later identified by Paulina Palmer: "How can a writer, while emphasising the horror of the crime [violence against women], avoid sensationalising and glamorising it? How succeed in depicting the complex response of the victim—her feelings of terror, humiliation and isolation?"<sup>39</sup> Rubens' dryness and her oblique metaphorical measurement of the extent of Jack's violence ("wardrobe") are her solution to the feminist aesthetic dilemma of how to represent female abuse without reinforcing the ethos of the patriarchal rape-culture.

Betty Friedan's groundbreaking analysis of the ideological subordination of women (tacitly taken to be white, middle-class wives) had appeared in 1963, but the more radical analyses of patriarchal violence by Eva Figes, Germaine Greer and Kate Millett, were only

published in 1970—and none of these considered race as an issue.<sup>40</sup> It was not until 1974 that Erin Pizzey shocked middle-England with *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear*,<sup>41</sup> revealing the extent of violent abuse (even) in middle-class families and the need for women’s refuges. This stimulated the foundation of Women’s Aid projects and the Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Violence in Marriage in 1975. Pizzey showed that “women of all areas, classes and races” were subjected to domestic violence; in 1996, a report on London’s black communities by Amina Mama agreed that “violence occurs in all creeds, cultures and classes.”<sup>42</sup> Adrienne Baker’s 1993 study of Jewish women drew on the 1990 Norwood Annual Report to show that, mirroring the wider society, one in three Jewish marriages ended in divorce, the breakdown frequently accompanied by domestic violence.<sup>43</sup> Jewish social workers spoke of a “massive denial” about this in the Jewish community, confirming Mama’s view that “women’s abuse remains a shameful and buried phenomenon.”<sup>44</sup>

The first novels by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, *The Bluest Eye* and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, specifically related the violent abuse of women by black American men to internalised racism and self-hatred. These novels both appeared in 1970 (four years after *A Mate in Three*), but their analysis did not really reach a wide popular consciousness till the success of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* in 1982. By that time the Women’s Movement was growing in confidence on both sides of the Atlantic. The 1980s saw the publication in Britain of several works concerning sexual violence within the family, including Nell Dunn’s play, *Steaming* (1981), Pat Barker’s novel *Union Street* (1982) and Fay Weldon’s *Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), all of which reached a wide audience through film adaptations. Joan Riley’s first novel, *The Unbelonging* (1985) specifically related sexual abuse in a Jamaican immigrant home to British racism. Domestic abuse is now widely recognised, as the common term “battered wives” testifies. (Roddy Doyle’s novel *The*

*Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) was notable for being written by a mainstream male author. It sensitively depicted the bruised state of mind of an abused wife.) However, when Bernice Rubens broached the topic in 1966, it was still suffering from the very taboo that enabled the phenomenon itself to continue. Rubens broke the shamed silence, and she did it bravely facing up to the paradox that women frequently continue to love their abusive husbands.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is an illuminating comparison for *Mate in Three*. This is because both authors display the ways in which racial ideas from the wider culture are internalised by an ethnic minority and result in sexual violence. In both cases the racial ideology is one of superiority and inferiority.

That which was 'white' (or Anglo, male, Christian, wealthy) was extolled and infused with connotations of benevolence and superiority, while that which was not white (or not Anglo, female, non-Christian, poor) was debased and associated with malevolence and inferiority.<sup>45</sup>

The ideology is expressed within the racialised community by sexual relations of domination and subordination, where a conflict between male pride and low self-worth erupts into sadistic violence, projecting the blame, pain and lack of self-esteem out onto a female victim who is made the object of frustrated rage.<sup>46</sup> It is not only the physical pain inflicted which satisfies the aggressor, but the psychological and emotional hurt caused. As Rubens displays it, the fact that the wife loves her husband is precisely what enables emotional pain to be inflicted that is adequate (for the aggressor) to the pain he is trying to eject from his own psychological situation. In *The Bluest Eye*, when Cholly attacks his wife, "he poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desire... [Remembrance of] humiliations, defeats and emasculations."<sup>47</sup> Above all he resents the fact that she is "witness to his failure, his impotence."<sup>48</sup> The violence results in a sense of guilt and shame which cause more internal anguish which itself then needs to undergo catharsis through inflicting more pain

and receiving comfort and forgiveness, and so the cycle of marital violence perpetuates itself.

Both Morrison and Rubens analyse this situation in terms of a racial hierarchy within the minority ethnic group. The racial hierarchy mimics the class hierarchy of the dominant society. Thus, among African Americans, “colored people” who are “neat and quiet” distinguish themselves from “niggers” who are dirty and loud;<sup>49</sup> among Jews, assimilated German immigrants feel superior to “*Ostjuden*” who retain overt signs of their Judaic inheritance. Both groups, Jewish and African American, are mentally colonised to aspire to a superior status judged by standards of Anglo-Saxon prestige, where being able to “pass” as white middle-class is the ultimate goal. Explicitly referring to de Gobineau’s thesis about the superiority of the white race, Morrison speaks of the “Anglophilia” of Soaphead Church’s mulatto family. Their “conviction of superiority” because of their descent from “a decaying British nobleman” from whom they inherit their “corrupt, lecherous, lascivious” attitudes, their alcoholism and self-deception, is her ironic rejoinder to Gobineau’s views about “the noble group” that creates a great society.<sup>50</sup> Members of a minority ethnic group whose appearance and behaviour strongly signify their ethnic “Otherness” and cannot be camouflaged not only threaten all the members with contempt but could “blow the disguise” of those who are passing. “The line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant.”<sup>51</sup> Women are particularly harmed by ideas of beauty and ugliness promoted by the dominant group. (Cholly’s wife feels impelled to straighten her hair and dislikes her baby for being born with nappy hair.) The destructive effect of this prejudice on the family unit is exemplified by Morrison’s reference to *Imitation of Life*, Douglas Sirk’s film of the novel by Fannie Hurst, where a “passing” mulatto daughter despises her Black mother and rejects her.<sup>52</sup>

Just as, according to radical feminist analysis, it is only the reminder and subtle threats of rape which are needed to keep women subordinated, the wider “white” culture does not have to do much to trigger a reaction of fear from ethnic minorities and keep them “in their place.” An unforgettable history of cultural violence, for instance of conquest, slavery or persecution, can be brought to mind in an instant by a single word. For Alec Berman in *Farewell Leicester Square* it was the contemptuous word “dago” (which summons up the history of Latin America after the Spanish Conquest and the end of the Spanish Empire): “Dago: Jew: outsider.”<sup>53</sup> In *Mate in Three* Ruth Millar hears the word “kaffir” used on her arrival in Johannesburg, and “she experienced a shock as basic as the shock of weaning, and as painful.”<sup>54</sup> The narrator comments:

There are some words. Like kike, pimp, yid, coon, that carry with their offensive sound their own degenerate meaning, and it is impossible even by caressing such words on the tongue, to lessen the impact of degradation.<sup>55</sup>

A little later Ruth and Jack see a notice board that in “large bold shameless letters” reads “THIS BEACH IS FOR NON-EUROPEANS.” Jack is furious that it doesn’t say what it means and yells his translation: “Only lousy kaffirs can come here, only lousy yids, chinks, kikes, queers, lepers.”<sup>56</sup> In the act of lumping all those words together he achieves a new perspective linking “Yids and Kaffirs” and he shouts in impotent rage. He recognises that he is as much despised for being Jewish as black South Africans are for not being European, and beneath the courtesy accorded him as a “pet Jew” he is regarded as just as much an untouchable Outsider as are lepers or homosexuals. By the word “coon” Rubens associates this phenomenon with the treatment of African Americans. That apartheid or segregation was not merely a matter of separation is demonstrated by the “obscenities” of the second notice: “BATHING IS DANGEROUS HERE.”<sup>57</sup> “Non-European” is a disguise for the genteel racial “poison” which killed Alec Berman’s marriage in *Farewell Leicester Square* and threatens Jack’s. Encountering the two signs is an epiphanic moment for both Jack and

Ruth, bringing them together in an experience of commonality: “We must stay together” Jack determines, siding with Ruth’s perceived Yiddishness rather than with his own adopted Europeaness. Previously they have been driven apart by their families’ different ideas of Jewishness; now they are drawn together by the fact that they share a reviled Jewish identity in Gentile eyes. This is the key to their marriage. Jack feels that if he could understand how “Jews and the Negro” are related to his own personal situation he would be free of his inner problems and able to love Ruth freely. It might also kick-start his unsuccessful writing career.

What he also struggles to understand is the significance of their encounter on the same beach with the rotting body of a scarred black bull-seal, half-buried in the sand at the edge of the sea.<sup>58</sup> Jack feels some affinity with this exposure of black impotence, of wounded pride; it reveals to him that “you could die from impotence.”<sup>59</sup> He senses that he has to make a connection between the two discoveries. For the reader to see the connection is to grasp one of the enigmas of the novel. This parallels Morrison’s revelation of the way in which Cholly’s experience of sexual humiliation by armed white men psychologically emasculates him; continued degradation and joblessness turn his sexual tenderness into brutality. He has no way of earning the respect which could permit him to accept love.<sup>60</sup> Instead he hates the woman who witnesses his helplessness in white culture. Similarly Ruth’s realistic observation that Jack relies on humiliating her in order to function, diminished him still further by reinforcing his sense of moral inferiority: “She had shown him to be what he feared he was, a frightened man, uncommittable, cruel, selfish, vain.”<sup>61</sup> Cholly permanently internalises his sense of the mockery of his manhood under white eyes. A similar sense of permitting a third-party judge to intervene in his marriage haunts Jack.

These men do not feel their marriages are with their equals. Neither Jack nor Cholly can admit to being emotionally dependent on a wife they are forced to judge as racially

inferior, ugly and unworthy. Part of their problem certainly stems from the diminishment of women in patriarchal society which only grants a man his status as a man from the power he wields, the perceived worth of the women he controls. However, what Morrison and Rubens are depicting is the way in which race qualifies patriarchal power relations. In fact the inherited rituals of the ethnic minority culture (such as the ceremony of barmitzvah) can serve to empower men and give them a secure sense of worth (as we see by the contrast between Ruth's and Jack's fathers). However, the very attempt to mimic the dominant culture deprives people like Jack and Mr Millar of those rituals and thus actually facilitates their depreciation and subordination.

*Mate in Three* reaches a climax when Ruth and Jack attend a costume party in Cape Town, themed as a game of chess, where the guests wear either black or white and come masked. This fancy-dress is a pretext for arbitrary partner swapping and leads to a group orgy, which embarrasses Ruth. Jack, on the other hand, is excited until he realises he has been paired off with Ruth. Losing interest he typically runs out. The evening reminds Ruth of a nightmare she had awoken from, about an English garden-party. Filled with horror she perceives the costumes as shrouds, and sees the people dressed as chess pieces, such as bishops and knights, as a grotesque parody of the deadened establishment they represent, in an "atmosphere of imposture and delusion." This perception coincides with Jack's joyful sense that the costumes simply disguise the decadence of "this rotting country, the lies, the swindles, the masterly self-delusions."<sup>62</sup> Underneath, everyone is foul and ugly.

Rubens has adapted the tropes of the masquerade and the game of chess from renaissance and restoration literature. Here too they signify "the sickness of the state,"<sup>63</sup> but with the added resonance of arbitrary racial differentiation and sexual orientation. This is an image of "whiteness as masquerade" (to adapt Joan Riviere's insight about the imposture of womanliness). Jack has tried to force Ruth to adopt the dress of a white lady, as he himself



apes being an Englishman, but the party reveals that the appearance of white civilisation, with its formal robes and regalia, is itself a masquerade of nobility and less to be respected than the “noble savage” ideologically civilised by Europeans. If womanliness and masquerade are “the same thing” as Joan Riviere argued, then so are whiteness and masquerade.

The effect on Jack is cataclysmic. The sad, decadent despair of the party-goers speaks to his own state; he hates them and is disgusted by them just as he needs to destroy the rottenness inside himself: “it was himself he hated more than anybody.”<sup>64</sup> Rushing outside, to get his fury out of his system he paints two slogans on a wall. Above “ONE MAN, ONE VOTE” he writes “MISCEGENATION IS THE ONLY SOLUTION.” He is arrested and sentenced to six months in prison.

The party seems to force Jack to recognise not only his own sexual dishonesty but also the sexual corruption of the white society, which mirrors its political rottenness. Yet this is an extreme form of the European civilisation to which he and his parents had tried to assimilate. (That England may be only apparently better than South Africa is hinted at by Ruth’s fearful nightmare of a normal English garden-party, where, of course, as at the Queen’s summer garden party, ladies will be expected to wear not only high-heeled shoes and stockings, but hats, handbags and white gloves—the costume of the Queen herself and the outfit that Mrs Millar required of Ruth.) Jack hates himself for conforming to such a hypocritical civilisation, symbolised by the comically absurd scene in the township on Christmas Day. Jack and Ruth had sung Christian carols round the piano with a black African family and their anti-semitic tour-guide, omitting the word “Jesus.” South Africa has been revealed as anything *but* Christian.

Ruth has managed to survive in the marriage by splitting herself and dissociating from her pained awareness of Jack’s duplicity and cruelty. Jack survives by fragmenting

himself, continually forced in South Africa to assert that he is a Jew, and thus despised, and yet pretending to be one of the whites, whilst realising that that makes him subject to the same political contempt with which he detests them for despising and exploiting the Black Africans. He recognises that he has a huge problem, which he pictures to himself as the need to fit the pieces of his experience together into a coherent jigsaw. “Give me time,” he has continually promised Ruth. The week he actually spends in the South African prison should give Jack ample time to reflect and solve his problem before his release.

In fact his time in prison is occupied by a surreal experience that seems to owe more to the hallucinatory fantasy of William Burroughs than to derive from the polite tradition of Elizabeth Bowen. Jack spends his time eavesdropping on an underground communication system that operates through the lavatory pipes. Listening in via the lavatory pan in his cell, which serves as receiver and mouthpiece, he overhears phone-sex between a prisoner called Joseph and his black “pen-pal,” Lena. This releases for Jack a dream-desire for black passion, a transgressive state that seems to fuel his determination to fully love Ruth. However, it is not clear whether, after they return to London, he has achieved any lasting self-knowledge. Two months later Ruth still does not find the courage to confront him with her suspicions and she remains unhappy. There the novel ends. It resonates with the prophecy from a fortune-teller who had uncannily predicted to Ruth a journey to a far country and a chess-game followed by darkness—“After the chess, there is sadness”—but he had also promised Ruth that “In a year or two, you will find happiness.”<sup>65</sup> However, he was a charlatan and some of his other claims proved inaccurate. So, is it true that she is in fact “committing herself to the uncommittable?”<sup>66</sup> The ending is not hopeful: “over the great city, one vast discordant cry of pain.”

During the novel, Jack has corresponded to Sartre’s definition of “the inauthentic Jew” who, trying to choose not be a Jew, “denies with violence and desperation the Jewish

character in himself” and “runs away from this insupportable situation.”<sup>67</sup> The violence of Jack’s denial is meted out to Ruth, who is punished for representing his Jewishness. His adultery with a gentile who falsely assures him, “You’re a man, Millar, a man, man, man,”<sup>68</sup> is a fugue from the marriage that binds him to the insupportable situation of his Jewish identity. In South Africa he had felt forced into authenticity. Although he “hated the word” and felt a “momentary hatred for the Jews in South Africa,” “[h]e faced the fact that he was a Jew” and “he felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility towards every single Jew in every part of the world.”<sup>69</sup> So he repeatedly asserted out loud, “We are Jews.”<sup>70</sup> Existentialists like Sartre and Camus believed that the nauseating encounter with absurdity impels a “moment of truth” that should provoke a crisis into authenticity. But it is more complicated than that for an individual to assume responsibility for his own freedom of choice. On return to England, the whole journey into his identity appears meaningless to Jack, “an abrupt nightmare,” and “he could not even acknowledge that it had happened to him.”<sup>71</sup> His resolution to love Ruth remains, “But how?”<sup>72</sup> Ruth has been abused, not simply to subordinate her, but in order to keep her quiet about Jack’s racial dishonesty. In a sense she *is* his repugnant Jewish self that he wishes to deny and suppress. Yet she also represents the open, loving acceptance of the Jewish tradition which he longs for.

Thus this Woman’s Novel may at first sight appear to be romantic fiction about a love match gone wrong, but it deepens into modernist gothic. Ruth is Jack’s alter ego, the “ugly” racial self he tries to repress whilst also being attracted to it. The marriage becomes an allegory for the existential state of the assimilated Jew; the novel is a study in double-mindedness, of continual bad faith, a state of uncommitted limbo masquerading as whiteness.<sup>73</sup> The whiteness includes liberal tolerance, which is itself a masquerade that does not enact any inherent nobility. Beneath the masquerade of tolerance, even of [Christian] loving acceptance, is a reality of intolerance, abuse and degradation. That is the reality Jack

has actually assimilated to through his role-playing. Rubens' originality is to link this analysis of racial masquerade and humiliation to an analysis of the subordination of women. Thus the marriage figures as an allegory both of a racist society which camouflages its own internal violence, as well as of the divided self of a man who hides from himself his own racial humiliation. At the same time, the novel displays the mechanics of an actual marriage. As a woman's racial markers are fetishised and used as excuses for sexual punishment, so she is forced into accepting the eroticisation of her own violent subordination.

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<sup>1</sup> *I Sent a Letter to my Love* was made into a film in France in 1981, directed by Moshe Mizrahi and starring Simone Signoret; *Mr Wakefield's Crusade* was made into a television series for ITV in 1985; *Madame Souzatska* was directed by John Schlesinger in a British film, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel, 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983); Clare Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions: The 'Woman's Novel' in the Twentieth Century* (Harlow: Macmillan, 2000); Olga Kenyon, *Women Novelists Today: A Survey of English Writing in the Seventies and Eighties* (Brighton: Harvester, 1988). Kenyon discusses Rubens in Olga Kenyon, *Writing Women: Contemporary Women Novelists* (London: Pluto, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Bernice Rubens, *Mate in Three* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1966). References are to the Abacus paperback edition, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Betty Miller, *Farewell Leicester Square* (London: Robert Hale, 1941). Reprinted with an introduction by Jane Miller (London: Persephone Books, 2000). References in the text will cite the Persephone edition.

<sup>5</sup> Anita Brookner, *A Family Romance* (London: Cape, 1993). Page references in the text will be to this edition.

<sup>6</sup> See studies of her work by academic critics such as: John Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview* (London: Methuen, 1985), and John Skinner, *The Fictions of Anita Brookner: Illusions of Romance* (London: Macmillan, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Linda Grant, *The Cast Iron Shore* (London: Granta, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' reprinted in Shelley Saguaro, ed., *Psychoanalysis and Women: a Reader* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 70-78.

<sup>9</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949) translated as *The Second Sex* (London: Quartet, 1982) and discussed in Lisa Appignanesi, *Simone de Beauvoir* (London: Penguin, 1988), chapter 5.

<sup>10</sup> Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 85-92.

<sup>11</sup> Al Alvarez, *Where Did It All Go Right?* (London: Richard Cohen, 1999), 93.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-5.

<sup>13</sup> *Farewell Leicester Square*, 38-9.

<sup>14</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 37.

<sup>15</sup> "Ostjuden" was a German term for Jews from Eastern Europe, implying Hassidic Jews from *shtetls* in the former Pale of Settlement in the western margin of the Russian Empire, who still spoke Yiddish [see below, later in the text].

<sup>16</sup> *Mate in Three*, 132.

<sup>17</sup> *A Family Romance*, 56.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>19</sup> *The Cast Iron Shore*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>22</sup> The British version was not published until 1968. Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noir, Masques Blancs* (Paris, 1952), translated as *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Grove, 1968). Fanon referred to Jean-Paul Sartre's *AntiSemite and Jew* [1946] which had only been published in English translation in 1960. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur*

*la question juive* (Paris, 1946), translated as *AntiSemite and Jew* (New York: Grove, 1960). Sartre's theories are discussed by David Brauner in "The Gentile Who Mistook Himself for a Jew" (*EnterText* 2.1, 2002), 55-82.

<sup>23</sup> *Mate in Three*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-2.

<sup>25</sup> *King James Bible, Exodus* Ch. 12.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 69, 91.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 51, 49.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>39</sup> Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1989), 85.

<sup>40</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963); Eva Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes* (London: Faber, 1970); Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: McGibbon and Kee, 1970); Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Hart Davis, 1971). (The first book of black British feminism, Beverley Bryan *et al.*, *The Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (London: Virago) appeared in 1985, following on the black feminist chapters in Bill Ashcroft *et al.*, *The Empire Writes Back* (London: Routledge) in 1982.) Figes did link anti-feminism to anti-semitism, but she spoke of "the Jew" and Jewish patriarchs without considering the specific position of Jewish women. Other races she did not mention.

<sup>41</sup> Erin Pizzey, *Scream Quietly or the Neighbours Will Hear* (London: Penguin 1974).

<sup>42</sup> Amina Mama, "Woman Abuse in London's Black Communities" from *The Hidden Struggle*, reprinted in Kwesi Owusu, ed., *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 108.

<sup>43</sup> Adrienne Baker, *The Jewish Woman in Contemporary Society: Transitions and Traditions* (London: Macmillan, 1993).

<sup>44</sup> Amina Mama, 107.

<sup>45</sup> Joanne M. Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin, *Wild Women n the Whirlwind: AfroAmerican Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1990), 53.

<sup>46</sup> The same phenomenon was recognised by Naomi Jacob in *Barren Metal* (London: Hutchinson, 1934), when a Jewish husband, Meyer Pardo, beats up his *Ostjuden* wife, Rachel, shouting:

'You were born in the Ghetto, and you don't take no trouble to climb out of it. You want to bring Whitechapel and everything about it, up to the West End. You let everyone know you're a Jewess, you can't forget it, you won't let other people forget it. All right! Cut off your hair, wear a *sheitel* and go to *shool*, live *kosher* - I don't care. Only you damn well do it without me!' (136-7)

<sup>47</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Norton, 1970). Page references are given to Sandra B. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (New York: Norton, 1986), 2089.

<sup>48</sup> *The Bluest Eye*, 2152.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 2115.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 2162.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 2115.

<sup>52</sup> The film and the novel are discussed in E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>53</sup> *Farewell Leicester Square*, 107.

<sup>54</sup> *Mate in Three*, 129.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 143-4.

<sup>58</sup> With regard to this symbolic seal, Rubens gradually dissociates herself from the genteel tone of voice of the Woman's Novel. At first "dead" (149, 150) later the seal "would rot" (166) and then "a foetid smell" would arise from it (226) until finally the corpse is "a stinking denial of burial" refusing to be hidden (231).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>60</sup> *The Bluest Eye*, 2158.

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<sup>61</sup> *Mate in Three*, 82.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>67</sup> Sartre, 84,93.

<sup>68</sup> *Mate in Three*, 74.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 139, 167, 150, 168.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 168, 173.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>73</sup> The peculiar status of Jews in the racial ideology of whiteness is discussed in Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997).