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INTERNATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND ALIENATION OF CHARACTERS IN *VOYAGE IN THE DARK* BY JEAN RHYS AND *ISOLATION* BY JERZY PETERKIEWICZ

"Alienation" juxtaposed with "international consciousness" may seem to be a contradiction in terms since the word "international" usually associates with frequent contacts of people from different countries and possibilities of establishing relationships with others.

Yet the two novels with which the present paper will be dealing, Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and *Isolation* (1959) by Jerzy Peterkiewicz, have shown that the international situation of an individual can indeed have a deeply alienating effect. The novels present the problem all the more convincingly as their authors have drawn on their own experiences.

Before starting their literary careers as English novelists, both Jean Rhys and Jerzy Peterkiewicz had come to Britain from other parts of the world, bringing with them their memories of different cultural backgrounds.

Jean Rhys was born in Dominica in 1894. Her father was a Welshman living in the West Indies, her mother a Creole. She arrived in England at the age of sixteen, then left it after marrying a Dutch poet and lived in various countries on the Continent for a period of ten years until her final return to Britain where she eventually died in 1979. Her literary career began with the publication of stories about artists in Paris (*The Left Bank*) in 1927. Her four novels published between 1928 and 1939 were not very successful at first, and it was only when her best work *Wide Sargasso Sea* won literary awards in 1966 that Jean Rhys became famous and her earlier writings were rediscovered.

Unlike Jean Rhys, Jerzy Peterkiewicz had no roots in either Britain or one of its colonies. He was born in Poland in 1916. His education and his literary career began in his native language. During the Second World War, however, in 1940, Jerzy Peterkiewicz came to Britain, settled in the country, and became, like his great predecessor Joseph Conrad, an English writer.

Isolation made Peterkiewicz's name as a novelist. Commenting on it in *Contemporary Novelists*, Patricia Merivale calls the novel "probably his best book".[1] She finds Peterkiewicz's work sometimes too "mannerist" and spoiled by the "too frothy champagne" of his style, but Bronisława Bałutowa, a Polish historian of literature, who has written a book on the English novel of the 20th century, believes that the true value of his writings is still to be discovered, and that his work deserves more critical attention.[2]

The biography of Jerzy Peterkiewicz, an English writer of Polish origin, who is also known as a critic and university lecturer, differs considerably from that of Jean Rhys – a woman novelist from the West Indies, former chorus girl, "mannequin", artist's model, and their two novels *Voyage in the Dark* and *Isolation* are separated by a quarter of a century, but the shared experience of the "international situation" has led the two novelists to similar conclusions about the nature of the problems that their characters in the two novels have to deal with.

Of Jean Rhys's heroines it is often said that they embody the same type of personality enjoyed by the novelist herself. Francis Wyndham, for instance, remarks that "essentially the first four novels deal with the same woman at different stages of her life, although her name and minor details of her circumstances alter from volume to volume"[3] and Arthur Ravenscroft says the following about the presentation of Rhys's heroine:

> Jean Rhys's dedicated craftmanship, drawing much upon her own experience without being merely "autobiographical", achieves extraordinarily clear-sighted understanding of uprooted, insecure, intense, life-seeking but defenceless personalities.[4]

The close relationship between the writer's life and her fiction is also highlighted by Diane Athill, who assures us that Rhys's novels "were not autobiographical in every detail, as readers sometimes suppose, but autobiographical they were".[5]

In view of the strong autobiographical element it is not surprising to find that the heroine of Jean Rhys's third novel *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna Morgan, goes through a series of experiences that are patterned on those in the life of the novelist. After her father dies in the West Indies, Anna

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[1] P. Merivale, "Jerzy Peterkiewicz", in D. L. Kirkpatrick (ed.), *Contemporary Novelists* (London: St. James Press; New York: St. Martin Press, 1976), pp. 1078–80.

[2] B. Bałutowa, *Powieść angielska XX wieku* (Warszawa: PWN, 1983), pp. 270–73.

[3] F. Wyndham, "Introduction", in J. Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 6.

[4] A. Ravenscroft, "Jean Rhys", in H. Blamires (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Literature* (London, New York: Methuen, 1983), p. 235.

[5] D. Athill, "Foreword", in J. Rhys, *Smile Please. An Unfinished Autobiography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 6.

is brought to England by her stepmother Hester, at the age of sixteen. When Hester refuses to support her financially, she joins a touring company as a chorus girl. She becomes a "kept woman" and when her lover Walter Jeffries leaves her, Anna, overcome by despair, sinks into complete inertia. She moves in with Ethel, a masseuse of shady reputation, who expects Anna to help her receive her clients. Thus Anna gradually drifts into a world of "easy virtue".

She has more or less got used to life in England, but she does not enjoy it. The cold climate of the country and the monotony of the grey towns she has toured depress her. She misses the colourful West Indies of her childhood and often thinks and dreams about her native land. And yet she also felt uncertain about where she really belonged while in the West Indies. Her confusion about her identity was partly due to her being a Creole since "in the West Indies, the Creole belongs to neither white nor black".[6] Rhys's novels show that, unlike the descendants of black slaves, West Indian white people of British origin have not quite learnt to regard their new country as "home"; to them "home" still means Britain. They often derive a sense of superiority from the conviction and ignore the fact that their way of life has long since ceased to be British.

As a young girl, Anna absorbed an impressive amount of knowledge about a far-off England (she recalls: "I read about England ever since I could read"[7]); English values were instilled into her and she felt obliged to admire and imitate English ways. Hester, with her ladylike manners, often reminded her what she should or should not do if she wished to be approved of by English people. On one occasion she says to Anna, who has expressed her lack of fondness for dogs: "People in England will dislike you very much if you say things like that".[8] Anna feels guilty and unhappy because of this threat of rejection, but she does not really share Hester's aspirations and does not fully identify with the Creoles who are alienated by their schizophrenic attitudes. She envies black people because they have warmth and the ability to enjoy life, and would like to be black herself, but she knows she cannot change the colour of her skin, which is an insurmountable barrier between her and black West Indians. Even the generally friendly servant Francine occasionally shows hostility towards her. Years later Anna reminisces:

> I knew that of course she desliked me too because I was white; and that I would never be able to explain to her that I hated being white. Being white and getting like Hester, and all the things you get – old and sad and everything.[9]

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[6] N. Braybrooke, "Jean Rhys", in D. L. Kirkpatrick (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 1162.

[7] J. Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 15.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Anna's estrangement from Creoles, the threat of being rejected by the English and the negative attitudes of black people towars her, place her in an in-between world. Her lack of certainty about her identity resembles the state of mind of Rhys's other heroine, Antoinette Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, who, after hearing a song sung by "a little half-caste servant", muses:

> It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders, and I've heard English women call us white niggers. So ... I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where I do belong and why I was ever born at all.[10]

Feeling related to her West Indian environment and to English traditions, but at odds with them at the same time, Anna suffers so intensely that she wishes she were dead and her wish is nearly fulfilled when she deliberately exposes her head to the tropical sun and makes herself very ill.

When Hester takes Anna to England she does so believing that she is giving the girl "a real chance", but it soon becomes obvious that "life in England is not agreeing with her very well"[11] and Anna has an acute sense of not belonging to the new place either. Her former life has ended definitely as if, indeed, her old self had died in accordance with her wish, and she starts a new life floating on its surface, passive and helpless, dreaming about her past. Again she finds herself in an in-between world. She says:

> Sometimes it was as if I were back there and as if England was a dream. At other times England was the real thing and out there was a dream, but I could never fit them together. (p. 7)

This indeterminacy of reality and dream, past and present, corresponds with Anna's uncertainty about her identity. Her divided mind and her estrangement from herself are reflected in the scene described by Anna as follows:

> I walked up to the looking-glass and put the lights over it and stared at myself. It was as if I was looking at somebody else. I stared at myself for a long time, ... I felt as if I had gone out of myself, as if I were in a dream. (pp. 20–7)

Anna realizes she is not going to adjust to life in England as soon as she sees it for first time:

> – This is England Hester said and I watched it through the train-window ... this is London – hundreds of thousands of white people rushing along and the dark houses all alike frowning down one after the other all alike all stuck together ... oh I'm not going to like this place I'm not going to like this place ... . (pp. 15–6)

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[10] J. Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 85.

[11] J. Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark*, p. 52. All further page references in the text are to this edition.

She is not enthusiastic about the place even after she gets used to England; she longs for the lush lanscapes of the West Indies where "The colours are red, purple, blue, gold, all shades of green. The colours here are black, brown, grey, dim-grey, pale blue, the white of people's faces – like woodlice" (p. 47). When she remembers her mother's family home she thinks of it as beautiful but is unsure of her standards:

> On the other hand, if England is beautiful, it is not beautiful. It's some other world. (p. 45)

Anna continues to inhabit two different worlds without fully belonging to either. England depresses her not only because of its climate and architecture but also because of its people whom she finds rather unsympathetic and often hypocritical. Her father believed that "This place stinks of hypocrites if you've got a nose" (p. 53) and Anna appears to share his opinion when she remarks ironically:

> This is England, and I'm in a nice, clean English room with all the dirt swept under the bed. (p. 27)

Anna's acquaintance with Ethel Matthews certainly does not prove the accusations wrong; Ethel goes out of her way to keep up appearances, but she secretly hopes that Anna will attract men to her establishment. She has a strong sense of superiority derived from her belief in the superiority of the English. Criticizing a girl's hairdo she says:

> An English girl wouldn't have done that. An English girl would have respected herself more. (p. 94)

And she asks Anna, "Don't you hate foreigners" (p. 95)? Anna does not, however, because her contacts with people of different races have made her open-minded and tolerant. Neither do Ethel's views fill her with moral indignation; she is too meek and passive to oppose them actively, even though she does not approve of them. But she seems to side with the half-French girl Germaine, who complains that England makes her feel claustrophobic and that "most Englishmen don't care a damn about women. They can't make women happy because they don't really like them" (p. 70). Anna is not particularly taken by English women either. She finds an embodiment of what is unpleasant about their superior, genteel ways in Hester, who has "an English lady's voice with a sharp cutting edge to it. Now that I've spoken you can hear that I'm a lady. I have spoken and I suppose you now realize that I'm an English gentlewoman" (p. 50).

Rejected by black people in the West Indies because she is white, Anna is a misfit also in England where she has been teasingly nicknamed "the

Hottentot" (by other chorus girls). Anna's inability to adjust to her environment, her alienation and loneliness become too much for her when her lover deserts her, and she escapes into dreaming and sleep – a substitute for death of which she says:

> Really all you want is night, and to lie in the dark and pull the sheet over your head and sleep ... . It's as if you were dead. (pp. 120–21)

She drifts towards self-destruction without trying to prevent it. Her voyage in the dark ends in a crisis after which she finds herself in a hospital. When a doctor says that Anna will soon be well and ready to start all over again, his words could be interpreted as giving hope for a kind of re-birth after Anna's near death, but they can also mean that she will continue her loose life, get pregnant again, get another abortion and repeat the pattern.

Anna, like Rhys's other heroines, is embittered by the circumstances of her life: her helpless position as a woman, lack of money, disappointment in love. However, at the core of most of her problems are her sense of uprootedness, loneliness and uncertain identity caused by her confused perception of herself. The international perspective, which she owes to her particular situation, helps her to understand others better, but it does not help her to understand herself and to manage her own life adequately.

Jean Rhys's book begins with a curtain falling on the heroine's past. Jerzy Peterkiewicz opens his *Isolation: A Novel in Five Acts* by preparing "the stage" for the "play" about to take place. Both novels concentrate on a series of dramatic events which constitute distinct phases in the lives of their main characters and reveal important truths about them.

Alexander Arnin, the main character in *Isolation*, is a spy; when the book begins he has decided, after completing a job in a distant part of the world, to treat himself to a holiday in London where he has a house. In London he meets a beautiful woman, a South American diplomat's wife, and falls in love with her on the day his own wife Kira commits suicide. Arnin continues his relationship with the beautiful stranger, Dolores. At first he wants it to be kept apart from the rest of their lives, so they get to know hardly anything about each other. Gradually, as he is drawn to Dolores more and more, Arnin develops a passionate curiosity about his lover and resorts to spying on her. At the same time he discovers hitherto unknown facts about his wife Kira. As he talks to the people who nursed her and kept her company before her death and reads letters that Kira once wrote to herself, he begins to understand her better. Althrough he ceased to love Kira years ago, he now realizes that he misses her. When Dolores, whose husband has been appointed an ambassador, leaves Alexander

to go to Sweden, he finds himself alone, questioning the value of his isolation which has always been his need and obsession.

The need for isolation, the fact that he is a spy as well as his international background, are all closely connected. His links with various countries and cultures make it easy for Alexander to become a spy. His father mastered the technique of spying, too. "In a way he had inherited the technique from his father, who was half Turkish and half something else. ... The son was well equipped to take over his sideline interests; brought up in London by his English mother, he had the advantage of starting his career as a gentleman with an odd assortment of languages to his credit. Besides English and Turkish, he knew modern Greek, Spanish, Portugese and Arabic. To keep these languages fresh in his mind, Alexander Arnin was constantly on the move, collecting and supplying information".[12] Arnin can easily pretend that he is somebody else, assume different nationalities and personalities, since he has mastered the art of mimicry. "In Greece Alexander could pass for a Greek from nowhere in particular, in Turkey for a Turkish immigrant; in Chile for a native of Irish ancestry, and in Ireland for an Anglo-Irishman" (p. 75). An old photograph taken in Italy shows that he can also look Italian.

Adapting himself to his surroundings like a chameleon, Arnin merges into crowds and disappears wherever he is and, in this way, he paradoxically isolates himself from others, who do not really see him. It is only in England that "he could he his own ambiguous self, giving his adaptable mind a rest; only in England did he sometimes dare to let the spy out of his system ... On one condition, however: he had to satisfy his basic need for isolation" (p. 75).

It appears then, that Arnin, whether in disguise and spying or himself and relaxing, is always isolated. His complex personality, a truly international "cocktail" which allows him to simulate identification with others, in reality prevents full identification with anyone. He expertly creates the appearances of belonging to a community, but is secretly aware of being outside it, alienated from his environment. When there is no need for him to play a role he has to be surrounded by a *terra incognita* so that no one has access to him. Arnin's preocupation with spying follows almost naturally and logically from the ambiguity of his character which places him in the position of a person living in a borderland and, because of this fact, considered a "born traitor" by everyone else.

In spite of his adaptability, Alexander never completely belongs anywhere; he is always an outsider, an observer rather than participant in what goes on around him; he collects information about life instead of living it.

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[12] J. Peterkiewicz, *Isolation. A Novel in Five Acts* (London: Heinemann, 1959), pp. 19–20. All further page references in the text are to this edition.

Arnin's father warned him against yielding to a weakness that could destroy him as a spy. It transpires that his "weakness" consists in his ability to love. His passion for Dolores nearly overcomes his passion for isolation: it fills him with the desire to know more about her and he is ready to tell her his secrets. Love makes him more human and reveals the falsity of his seemingly humanitarian attitudes. Peterkiewicz suggests that if Arnin's international consciousness makes him tolerant of others, this tolerance is due to the absence of close bonds between his hero and other people:

> He was by every human standard exceptionally tolerant, he never blamed a race or a nation for an individual's stupidity or malice; and his very tolerance led to his estrangement from the person he had married for love. (p. 24)

Kira realizes that Alexander's tolerance has its roots in indifference and she writes in a letter to herself that he "is truly cosmopolitan in his indifference to nations, religions..." (p. 221). Arnin's shallow humanitarian attitude depends on lack of involvement, real interest in people and on noncommitment which is responsible for his estrangement from Kira. Arnin has colected a great amount of information about the world, but has no true knowledge and understanding of it.

It is arguable that Arnin can help being what he is: both his spying and his alienation have their source in his particular international situation. There is no doubt, however, that Kira has alienated herself by her conscious choice to sever her ties with her race and religion; she hopas to solve in this way the problems she has as a result of her Jewish origin. Instead of solving them, however, she multiplies them, since, as Arnin says, "it's hard for a Jew to separate his individual problems from those of his race. Very hard, if not impossible" (p. 228). Kira deliberately adopts cosmopolitan attitudes but her rejection of her Jewish identity fills her with an acute sense of guilt. She too, like Alexander, has inherited her "technique" from her father, who "was a Pole in Warsaw, a Czechoslovak in Prague, and an Austro-Hungarian in Vienna; and he thought all those triple compatriots of his adored him foir being such a universal friend" (p. 220).

Kira's father did not live to see World War II, but her mother did experience it before she died in a gas chamber of a concentration camp. She had given all her money in bribes to have little Kira sent abroad. Kira feels guilty for having survived and subconsciously waits for her own "overdue" death, yet at the same time she wants to erase the memories from her mind and this makes her feel guilty again because she believes it is wrong to wish to forget them.

Kira's inner conflict is reflected in the fact that she writes a long letter to herself just before she dies. She addreses herself as a "cosmopolitan charmer" in it, and says:

> You are a Viennese in Swiss Cottage, a Russian Kira in Child's Hill, a Warsaw flirt in South Kensington, a mysterious European in bed with Ali ...; you are even a quarter Hungarian at the dreadful paprika place in Finchley Road. But, in point of fact, my Darling Illusionist, you are just a lucky Jewess who did not choke to death, but instead married a prosperous spy. ... Why did you not bother in your lazy comfort to teach me some Hebrew so that I might pray for those dead millions ...? You were lazy, Kira, in a wistful cosmopolitan manner just as those living 'others' are lazy all over their adopted London, Paris, New York or what have you .... (pp. 220–21)

Kira considers her Jewishness a burden, but her refusal to carry it destroys her own personality. Convinced that she has betrayed her people, she suffers intensely and her tormented mind cannot find peace. Kira's neurotic state of mind causes her illness and, eventually her suicide. Death liberates her from her pain: it gives her peace through the "isolation of the body from the mind" (p. 226).

Both Kira and Alexander try, in their different ways and for different purposes, to cut their bonds, to isolate themselves and to identify with many nationalities and cultures rather than choose one. What they achieve is a false freedom, a superficial life and alienation from their kin as well as people in general.

Unlike Kira, who is an "off-stage" character appearing in the novel only via letters and people's memories of her, Alexander's lover Dolores directly participates in the "performance" of Peterkiewicz's fictional "play". The reader, however, does not learn much about her since her role is strictly limited to scenes of passion because Alexander refuses (at first at least) to let external life (his and hers) interfere with this relationship. Dolores therefore remains the kind of mysterious woman that Kira wanted to be for Alexander.

Dolores is yet another "displaced person" in the novel. As a diplomat's wife she lives like a nomad frequently changing houses and countries. Her perfectly spoken English only emphasizes her cosmopolitan character. Her not belonging fully to a place or a people is also underlined by the fact that she has mixed blood. Alexander finds traces of the Indian "subjugated race" in her features. Peterkiewicz describes her face as "dramatically indetermined, the Spanish blood still trying to conquer the Indian, in every expression and mood" (p. 5). Her mixed blood and her cosmopolitan life make the personality of Dolores elusive and intriguing. Because her life lacks stability, her relationships with other people seldom last long. Dolores is isolated, too, but how alienated she feels is difficult to judge.

Peterkiewicz views isolation from a number of different angles, he writes about psychological, social, and physical isolation, about the isolation of fragments of experience, a spy's isolation, isolation from one's roots and

one's past, isolation of the body from the mind. Isolation may also have a metaphysical dimension which can be clearly seen in the answer given to Alexander's question:

> Why am I so obsessed by the desire to live in isolation, yet, when isolated, why do I experience this unspecified feeling of absence, as if someone else was about to enter? (p. 232)

Father Murphy tells Arnin that this is so because he feels the need to talk to his own soul which may lead to a dialogue with God. Arnin obviously has a subconscious desire to understand himself better in relation to the absolute. His alienation due to his cosmopolitan situation concentrates his attention on the essence of his individual existence.

Both *Voyage in the Dark* by Jean Rhys and *Isolation* by Jerzy Peterkiewicz make the theme of the alienation of racially and nationally uprooted individuals an aspect of man's existential loneliness, inseparable from the human condition. In a more specific sense, alienation resulting from the loss of ties with one's own people and culture is seen as leading to the spiritual sterility of the modern Wasteland.

Neither Rhys nor Peterkiewicz suggests that nationalistic attitudes which generate hostility to the people of other countries are desirable. Far from it. They certainly disapprove of intolerance and national prejudice and present the fact that international consciousness is usually free of them as its more positive aspect. They believe, however, that national identity and cultural roots are an important factor in the life of an individual and that undetermined identity can cause grave problems which the individual is not always able to cope with.

Neither Jean Rhys nor Jerzy Peterkiewicz points to the negative attitudes of others as the main cause of their characters' problems. It is true that Anna Morgan, for instance, suffers because she feels, when a young girl in the West Indies, that black people do not like her, but she is not really a victim of racial persecution. Peterkiewicz's characters are not directly affected by nationalistic prejudice, either. The problem lies elsewhere. Rhys and Peterkiewicz turn their attention to the impact of the international status of their characters on their own mentalities. The internalisation of the problem manifests itself in inner conflicts, schizophrenic duality, neurotic responses to difficulties such as withdrawal from active life, spiritual inertia, superficiality combined with indifference, sense of guilt, insecurity and, above all, the feeling of not belonging and of loneliness.

The fact that the problem exists in the minds of the characters rather than in objective reality provides evidence for the strength of the pressure of the generally accepted values such as tradition, continuity, roots, "home" and the conviction that it is necessary to be able to identify with a nation,

to love one's native country, participate in its culture and help create its history. Because these values and beliefs are almost unquestioningly accepted by most societies it is obvious that national identity must be an important part of every individual identity.

For all the differences between the two novels, Jean Rhys's *Voyage in the Dark* and *Isolation* by Jerzy Peterkiewicz lead to the same conclusion: where national roots are cut off, ignored, rejected or uncertain, the resulting state of mind defined by international consciousness causes, as a rule, not only one's alienation from other people but also from oneself.

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ALIENUJĄCY WPŁYW ŚWIADOMOŚCI MIĘDZYNARODOWEJ W *VOYAGE IN THE DARK* JEAN RHYS I *ISOLATION* JERZEGO PETERKIEWICZA

Angielskie powieści *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) i *Isolation* (*Odosobnienie*, 1959) dzieli ćwierć wieku. Ich autorzy reprezentują odmienne rodzaje pisarstwa i mają bardzo różne biografie. Jean Rhys urodziła się na Dominice i przyjechała do Anglii jako młoda dziewczyna, by tu po różnych perypetiach zostać pisarką. Polak Jerzy Peterkiewicz (Pietrkiewicz) znalazł się w Wielkiej Brytanii z powodu wojny, tu osiadł i tu kontynuował swą pracę twórczą pisząc po angielsku.

Rhys łączą z Peterkiewiczem przede wszystkim doświadczenia związane z opuszczeniem stron rodzinnych i włączanie się w obcą kulturę, a także fakt wykorzystywania tych doświadczeń w twórczości.

Bohaterka Rhys w *Voyage in the Dark*, Kreolka, czuje się rozdarta wewnętrznie z powodu antagonizmów rasowych i sprzeczności kulturowych, które nie pozwalają jej w pełni identyfikować się z żadną społecznością. Z kolei postaci występujące w *Odosobnieniu* tracą korzenie i tożsamość narodową z wielu powodów takich, jak: wielonarodowe powiązania rodzinne, rodzaj wychowania i częste podróże (wszystko to sprawia, że główny bohater staje się szpiegiem wyłączonym z życia zwykłych ludzi) czy też świadoma próba zerwania więzów z tragiczną przeszłością własną i własnego narodu (żydowska żona szpiega) na rzecz pozornie łatwego acz płytkiego kosmopolitycznego stylu życia.

Pomimo wszelkich różnic między nimi, autorka *Voyage in the Dark* i autor *Isolation* dochodzą do zaskakująco podobnych wniosków na temat wyobcowania spowodowanego utratą tożsamości narodowej, przedstawiając ten problem w kontekście bardziej ogólnego zjawiska alienacji jednostki tak często obecnego w literaturze XX w.