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Society of Men or the Danger of Female Forces in the Victorian Fiction of Imperialism

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ABSTRACT

Cultural misogyny has always been a high point and the 19 th century England is not an exception. Women become dangerous, destructive and even deadly forces in the fantasies of many artists, painters and writers of the Victorian culture. Fin-de-siècle fiction portrays unhappy marriages, trapped or wounded men and men who never marry.

The purpose of this research is to examine how women become a subversion of masculinity and manhood as well as of the social, political and economic structures of England and its colonies in the three adventure novels of H. Rider Haggard, R. Kipling and J. Conrad. These works portray male relationships and male bonding in exotic settings and difficult conditions, while women are either absent, labeled as dangerous femme fatales, or kept to marginal presence at best. However, as they return to England, many of these heroes are estranged from a collective identity and suffer in solitude in an attempt to achieve a meaningful masculine identity, having to come to terms with the notion of what men are and what they should be.

Keywords: gender roles, Masculinity, Femininity, sexuality, adventure novels, Victorian, Imperialism, 'Other', Quest.

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Introduction

The Greek tragedy Medea, written by Euripides in 431 B.C., contains a famous speech by Jason, a leader of the Argonauts, which sets the racial and gender confrontation between Greek and Non-Greek (the 'Other') as well as Male versus Female. In the tragedy, Euripides poses the timeless problem: can female passion and desire co-exist with male logic and rationality? Jason's monologue reveals a solution to it:

But you women

Have reached the state where, if all's well with your sex-life,You've everything you've wished for; but when that goes wrong, At once all that is best and noblest turns to gall.

Without the female sex! If women didn't exist, Human life would be rid of all its miseries. (Medea 19)

Medea touches upon the fact that cultural misogyny has always been a high point and the nineteenth century England is not an exception. Gender differences in art and literature in the nineteenth century "contributed to the construction of masculinity in culture: the exclusion of women from the homosocial male art world was necessary to establish that the artist was masculine," according to Joseph Kestner (40). Women become dangerous forces in the fantasies of many artists, painters and writers of the Victorian culture. Fin-de-siècle fiction portrays unhappy marriages, trapped or wounded men and heroes who never marry. The. purpose of this study is to examine how women become a subversion of a concept of masculinity as well as of the social, political and economic structures of England and its colonies in the novels of H. Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad.

The exclusion of females in the art and literature of *fin-de-siècle* has been based on "the increasing turbulence surrounding gender roles" in the late 1880s and 1890s, argues Tim Middleton (137). The New Woman phenomenon has emerged as a figure of fear, primarily as a threat to "hasten the refashioning of masculinity" (137). Such phenomenon caused anxieties among the British that the new feminine force would create a New Man different "from the present race" (137). The idea of a gentleman was central to the imperial concept of identity with "its policing of the border between the homosocial and homosexual" (137). According to Eve Sedgwick, these anxieties of gender caused the heterosexual panic about "homosexuality's capacity to destabilize dominant models of masculinity:" "Because the paths of male entitlement… required certain intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds, an endemic and ineradicable state of what I am calling male homosexual panic became the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement" (*Epistemology* 185). It refashions the invitation to "become us," meaning that same sex-identification is not the means of promoting homosexuality. Male bonding, which Sedgwick defines as 'male homosociality,' is the presence of "social bonds between persons of male sex" (*Between Men* 1). This pattern of male homosociality includes "male friendship, mentorship, entitlement and rivalry" (*Between Men* 1); when applied to the selected three novels it reveals a "shifting relation to class; no element of that pattern can be understood outside its relation to women" (*Between Men* 1). *King Solomon's Mines, The Man Who Would be King* and *Heart of Darkness* reflect such male homosocial as well institutional, military and artistic bonds where women are excluded or eliminated from these bonds and thus, the social and imperial order is restored.

Construction of masculinity lies in a dichotomy between "fragility of masculinity at the psychic level, rather than elaborating on its role as a foundation for man's social power" (Roper and Tosh 15 qtd. in Adams 3). The articulation "of social power works through as well as against the fragility of masculine identities" (Roper and Tosh 15 qtd. in Adams 3). Masculine regiments regulate "more than erotic desire; they are multi-faceted constructions of identity and social authority that inevitably situate the private self in relation to an imagined audience," according to Adams (3). A number of Victorian styles of masculinity both at home and on a colonial soil exemplify Judith Butler's famous claim that "gender is a doing" (*Gender Trouble* 25). Importance of masculinity is the central issue in both the literary and cultural change, these men are marked not "by … regulation of the body, but by assignments of gendered identity that circulate outside that discourse" (Adams 4).

Assertion of one's masculine identity reappears in the imperial fiction of the period, however, the models of masculinity require a different code of behavior in a colonial setting rather than a domestic one. Bravery, assertiveness, cunning, aggression and even violence become necessary qualities. *King Solomon's Mines* by H. Rider Haggard, *The Man Who Would be King* by R. Kipling and *Heart of Darkness* by J. Conrad venture into the genre of "male quests" as the heroes discover their identity, explore and penetrate Africa to prove their value as English men, and "test of [their] nation's virility." Notions of manliness abroad can be seen as a symptom of masculine insecurity within Britain and Africa becomes a testing ground of heroes' manhood along with the project of empire building.

Discussion

King solomon's mines

King Solomon's Mines, published in 1885, is a work of H. Rider Haggard's imagination although it contains actual experiences of a writer in South Africa where he met Zulus, visited a few of the Boer settlements and became well-acquainted with the country and its culture. Dark continent becomes the focus of adventure and excitement where three Englishmen, Allan Quatermain, Henry Curtis and Captain Good, set out for the self-discovery. Haggard invokes the romantic theme of a male quest and return to the original state of man, without which civilization is incomplete: "However beautiful a view may be, it requires the presence of man to make it complete" (44). The gentleman ideal is evoked by Quatermain will be acted in a colonial rather than a domestic setting:

[A]m I a gentleman? What is a gentleman? I don't quite know, and yet I have had to do with niggers – no I'll scratch the word 'niggers' out, for I don't like it. I've known natives who *are*, and … I've known mean whites … who *ain't* …. I was born a gentleman, though I've been nothing but a poor travelling trader abd hunter all my life. Whether I have remained so I know not…. Heaven knows I've tried. I've killed many men in my time, but I have never slain wantonly or stained my hand in innocent blood, only in self-defense. (22)

Quatermain is the resourceful, brave, self-reliant man for whom being a gentleman means sustaining a certain self-image and upholding his integrity and morality.

From the opening pages, Haggard invokes the idea of a woman as a threat to the male order:

I am going to tell the strangest story that I know of. It may seem a queer thing to say that, especially considering that there is no woman in it – except Foulata. Stop, though! there is Gagaoola, if she was a woman and not a fiend. But she was a hundred at least, and therefore not marriageable, so I don't count her. At any rate, I can safely say that there is not a *petticoat* in the whole history. (24)

Both women that appear in the novel are dangerous for the men: Gagool with her witch craft possesses secret knowledge about the treasure; Foulata is a black woman and therefore the racial 'Other' who can force the

white men to 'go native.' Even the image of dark Africa in the novel is a sexualized metaphor of a female body inviting male penetration:

The mountains standing thus, like the pillars of a gigantic gateway, are shaped exactly like a woman's breasts. Their bases swelled gently up from the plain, looking, at that distance, perfectly round and smooth; and on the top of each was a vast hillock covered with snow, exactly corresponding to the nipple on the female breast. (80)

The female sexuality is represented by the Breasts of Sheba, which are like volcano is ready to erupt any minute: "there was something so inexpressibly solemn and overpowering about those huge volcanoes - for doubtless they are extinct volcanoes - that it fairly took our breath away" (81). Chapter Eleven provides a solution of regulating male sexuality and desire when Quatermain and his companions are offered native women by the tyrant Twala: "'Would ye have wives from among our people, white men? If so, choose the fairest here, and ye shall have them, as many as ye will.' 'Thanks, O King, but *we white men wed only with white women like ourselves*. Your maidens are fair, but they are not for us!'" (my emphasis 146-7). Nevertheless, when Foulata is being chosen as a sacrifice for the Gods, they decide to save her as any British gentleman would do: "… she wrung her hands and turned her tear-stained, flower-crowned face to heaven, looking so lovely in her despair – for she was indeed a beautiful woman – that it would assuredly have melted the hearts of any one less cruel than the three fiends before us" (150). Foulata later returns the favor nursing Good from a wound received during the fight with Twala to restore the lawful heir, Ignosi, to the throne:

had it not been for Foulata's indefatigable nursing he must have died. Women are women, all the world over, whatever their color. Yet somehow it seemed curious to watch this dusky beauty bending night and day over the fevered man's couch, and performing all the merciful errands of the sickroom swiftly, gently, and with as fine an instinct as that of a trained hospital nurse. (198)

Quatermain is the one who perceives the potential danger in Foulata's sexuality to Good who inevitably falls in love with her: "I did not like Miss Foulata's soft glances, for I knew the fatal amorous propensities of sailors in general and of Good in particular" (200). He reflects upon fears about preserving their stable British masculinity that can be lost or ruined by the encounter with the 'Other', black Foulata, in particular.

The encounters with 'fatal' women do not end with Foulata. As the characters in the search for the diamonds find themselves locked in the treasure chamber, it is in the chamber where the witch Gagool leads them, she gets her revenge for Twala's death. Foulata tries to help them and is stabbed by the evil Gagool: "I love him, and that I am glad to die because I know that he cannot cumber his life with such as me, for the sun can not mate with the darkness nor the white with the black" (226). Foulata does not have any choice but to die. Haggard ponders if her death supersedes racial and gender differences: "If I live again, mayhap I shall see him in the stars, and that – I will search them all, though perchance I should there still be black and he would – still be white" (226). Good is permanently derailed by the black sexuality when after her death, "he never was quite the same" (240). Quatermain considers Foulata's death to be "a fortunate occurrence" as no "amount of beauty or refinement could have made an entanglement between Good and herself a desirable occurrence" (240). After the men are rescued and return to England, Good remains a captive of female power: "he is still down on his luck about Foulata since he had been home he hadn't seen a woman to touch her, either as regards her figure or the sweetness of her expression" (253). He is not the same man he once was; he returns to England a lonely, damaged man.

The man who would be king

Rudyard Kipling's 1888 *The Man Who Would Be King* considers the nature of kingship and kingly power, as Daniel Dravot and Peachey Carnehan attempt to build an empire on the blank map. Trying to transcend the white man's code in India, they fail as kings, ignoring the concepts of bravery, loyalty, honor and tradition. Instead, they bring disorder, horror, fear, and mutiny into the land. In the beginning of the novel, they are depicted as uneducated adventurers and frauds who spent most of their time in India between the jobs: "Soldier, sailor, compositor, photographer, proof-reader, street-preacher, *and* correspondent of the *Backwoodsman* when we thought the paper wanted one" (251). They decide to put their talents to work and become kings free from governmental constraints:

'The country isn't half worked out because they that govern it won't let you touch it. They spend all their blessed time in governing it, and you can't lift a spade, nor chip a rock … without all the Government saying, 'Leave it alone, and let us govern.' We are no little men, and there is nothing that we are afraid of except Drink, and we have signed a Contrack on that. *Therefore*, we are going away to be Kings'. (252)

They go into ungoverned and 'uncivilized' land, Kafiristan, the only place where 'they have two-and-thirty heathen idols there, and we'll be the thirty-third and fourth. It's a mountainous county, and the women of those parts are very beautiful.' 'But that is provided against in the Contrack,' said Carnehan. 'Neither Woman nor Liqu-or, Daniel.'

Peachey reminds Dan that women will be an obstacle to their ambitions of an absolute power: "*you and me will not …look at any Liquor, nor any Woman black, white, or brown, so as to get mixed up with one or the other harmful*" (252). Dan and Peachey imagine themselves following exploits of Sir James Brooke, who brought peace to

Borneo and became the Rajah of Sarawak. Encouraged by his first triumph, Dan's ambition is to surpass Brooke in terms of power and rule: "We shall be Emperors - Emperors of the Earth! Rajah Brooke will be a suckling to us" (269). If Brooke improved the situation as a ruler, the self-proclaimed 'Kings' bring only disaster to the country. Their view of the natives is one of an imperialist: the natives are gullible and inferior, therefore, are easy to conquer and dominate: "They think we're Gods" (263). They dehumanize the natives by re-naming them and treating them like objects: "we gave them names according as they was like men we had known in India – Billy Fish, Holly Dilworth, Pikky Kergan, and that was Bazar-master … and so on …" (266); such dehumanization becomes a part of their civilizing, imperial mission.

Using force and brutality Dan and Peachey make their imperial dream a reality: "'I'll make an Empire! These men aren't niggers; they are English! They're the Lost Tribes, or something like it, and they've grown to be English'" (269). There is only one presence missing in their empire: a woman.

'There's another thing too,' says Dravot, 'I want a wife'. 'For God's sake, leave the women alone!' I says. 'Remember the Contrack and keep clear o'women'. 'The Contrack only lasted till such time as we was Kings; You go get a wife too, Peachey – a nice, strappin,' plump girl that'll keep you warm in the winter. They're prettier than English girls, and we can take the pick of'em.'(270)

The woman is a tool to satisfy the male desire and native women are voiceless commodities, objects to satisfy male desire. Dan does not only wish to have a woman but a native wife to become his spy: "a Queen to breed a King's son for the King. A Queen out of the strongest tribe, that'll make them your blood-brothers, and that'll lie by your side and tell you all the people thinks about you and their own affairs. That's what I want" (271). Peachey tries to remind Dan of his previous misfortunate encounter with a woman and how women represent the danger from within that can ruin their imperial design: "'For the last time o'asking, Dan, do *not*,' I says. 'It'll only bring us harm. The Bible says that Kings ain't to waste their strength on women'" (271). He even invokes the Bible, which becomes itself the misogynistic text. Peachey remains suspicious of a threat, as he knows "dealings with a woman in foreign parts, though you was a crowned King twenty times over, could not but be risky" (273). The native woman, chosen for the ceremony, causes the ultimate destruction and the fall of Dan and Peachey's kingship:

Up comes a girl, and a strapping wench she was, covered with silver and turquoises, but white as death, and looking back every minute at the priests. 'She'll do,' said Dan, looking her over. 'What's to be afraid of, lass? Come and kiss me.' She shuts her eyes, gives a bit of a squeak, a down goes her face in the side of Dan's flaming red beard. 'The slut's bitten me!,' says he. (274)

Dan's bleeding proves his fraudulent identity as a King: "Neither God nor Devil but a man!" (274). Dravot's kingship is based only on power and fear; when his mortality is revealed, the natives attack him: "the priests will have sent runners to the villages to say that you are only men" (275). He volunteers to "go and meet 'em alone" and "die like a gentleman" (277), which becomes a manifestation of a false heroism; the only sacrifice he makes is for Peachey, not for the people he ruled. The empire falls with the death of Daniel who is executed by the natives: "'Cut, you beggars,' he shouts; and they cut, and old Dan fell, turning round and round … and I could see his body caught on a rock with the gold crown close beside" (277). Peachey comes back home to England a 'poor wretch,' dying later in the mental asylum. Both men are examples of the dehumanizing effects of imperial conquests, which only lead to self-destruction and death. They fail to establish benevolent rule and are punished for their greed, exploitation and fraud.

Heart of Darkness

In British society of the 1890s the women "were out of it" as the "feminine was excluded from the homosocial bonds through which such a social order is maintained" (Middleton 137). Joseph Conrad's 1899 novel *Heart of Darkness* closes the gallery of the gender crisis fiction. Conrad demonstrates the isolation of men and their opposition of women, who represent a different class of species. Women may be the cause of passion, the goals to be won, a temporary refuge or even the objects of affection but they are excluded from the novel. Sexuality and its ways "both depend on and affect historical power relationship" (*Between Men* 2-3). Sedgwick reminds us of the relation of homosociality and power relations in culture, where power is "unequally distributed" (18-19). She argues that in society men and women have different access to power and that the gender differences are based on "the structure and constitution of sexuality" (3).

Similarly to Haggard's and Kipling's novels, men leave England, a country ruled by a woman, in order to pursue a colonial project and get away from women in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In Conrad's novel as well as in *King Solomon's Mines* and *The Man Who Would Be King,* women disrupt homosocial interactions of men. With the exception of Kurtz's black mistress and his white, English fiancée at home, females are out of the picture; nevertheless, they possess real powers, which define male actions, used consciously and unconsciously. Despite Marlow's statement that "women - are out of it - and should be out of it" (49) as they "live in a world of their own and there had never been anything like it and never can be" (12, 49), men live in the world created by women.

In the beginning of the novel, Marlow joins the narrator, the lawyer, the accountant and the director of companies on the board of the *Nellie*. They escape the chaos of civilization where the homosocial bonds of friendship are strong: "there was … the bond of the sea, which holds [their] hearts together through long periods of separation" (4). The characters on the ship *Nellie* are an ironic comment of Conrad of how women's power frames the tale. Marlow's Aunt is the one who gets him the position of a captain of a trading ship in Congo yet she is "out of touch with truth". He replaces a man killed by a native chief and Marlow feels like "an impostor … as though instead of going to the center of a continent I were about to set off for the center of the earth" (13). His Aunt does not share his feelings. She perceives him as "an emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle" (12). Marlow's fears are well-founded as the Manager who hates him endangers Marlow's life. His spy, the Brickmaker, warns him that his life will not be easy: "you are of the new gang – the gang of virtue. The same people that sent [Kurtz] specially recommended you" (26). Later Marlow realizes that the Manager wrecked the ship not to relieve the ill Kurtz, or Marlow, who himself is about to die from fever. The job becomes too dangerous despite the innocent plans of his Aunt, whom he never visits again.

Marlow himself has a few encounters with women over the course of the novel. For instance, women who work outside the company's office are the dark officers of corruption and destruction:

she glanced at me above the glasses. The swift and indifferent placidity of that look troubled me. … An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful … I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall

Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again - not half - by a long way. (11) The image of a "knitting old woman" reappears later during the most dangerous moment of all for Marlow, as he fights for his life. Another, a more symbolic encounter of Marlow with a woman, occurs when he sees Kurtz's painting of a blindfolded woman carrying a torch, whose image he finds disturbing and evil.

The black mistress of Kurtz is the most powerful and controlling of all women in the novel.

As she approaches the steamer, the harlequin is afraid of her, "'if she had offered to come aboard I really think I would have tried to shoot her'" (62). Her description is fearful, powerful and dominant as

she moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman. … she carried her head high, her hair was done in the shape of a helmet, she had brass leggings to the knees, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow. … She must have had the value of several elephant tusks upon her. She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. (61-2)

Her charms, "gifts of witch-men" and her "helmet", are suggestive of a supernatural power: "she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head as though in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky, and at the same time the swift shadows darted out on the earth, swept around the river, gathering the steamer in a shadowy embrace" (62). She threatens and destabilize codes of masculinity in the novel. Women, with their potential for being transgressive and dangerous, add to the anxieties felt by men.

Marlow's last meeting with a woman is with Kurtz's fiancée when he brings Kurtz's letters back to England. Kurtz's attraction to her is fatal as well. Her family disapproved of Kurtz, "who wasn't rich enough" (77) to marry her. Her picture strikes Marlow as beautiful; though when he meets her in person, she is surrounded by death imagery. Dressed in mourning, she lives on "a street as still and decorous as a well-kept cemetery" (75). She is the only one who keeps memories of Kurtz, believing in his high goals and noble purposes: "of all his promise and of all his greatness, of his generous mind, of his noble heart" …. (76). Nevertheless, she is the force, which drives Kurtz "out there," in a way she becomes the ultimate corruption force. Marlow feels uneasy deceiving her of Kurtz's famous last words: "The horror! The horror!" Instead, Marlow makes his fiancée believe that Kurtz whispered her name. The woman becomes 'the horror' he is trying to escape.

Marlow is presented himself as a misogynist, pondering that "we [men] must help them [women] to stay in that beautiful world of their own lest ours gets worse" (49). Men construct reality as it is, fighting and dying for it, while women have no understanding of it. They force men to lie about the reality; both Aunt's and English fiancée's ignorance frustrates Marlow: "'His last word – to live with. Don't you understand I loved him …'. I pulled myself together and spoke slowly. 'The last word he pronounced was – your name'"(77). Women complicate the relationship between men; both the black mistress and the white fiancée are represented through the sexual connection to Kurtz. They are not identified by the names, yet they are both a threatening, dark force. African mistress is a dominant figure, a symbol of female sexuality that can violently erupt like volcanoes in Haggard's novel. Her sexuality is debilitating for Kurtz and leads to his degradation and death. The white fiancée is also regarded in terms of ownership, she is one of his prized possessions: "my Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my … everything belonged to him" (67). Marlow does find her "beautiful" but despite her beauty and his youth the sexual connection between them is ruled out. He is glad to escape her "sarcophagus" like house to avoid the uneasy tension he experiences in her presence.

Conclusion

The nineteenth century maintained the ideology of masculinity that all men regardless of their status or class adhered to. The art and fiction of the period stressed the standards of masculinity, including courage, strength, heroism, self-reliance, loyalty and fortitude. Such components were essential in forwarding the colonial/imperial agendas. The Victorian separate spheres ideology stressed the capacity of "reason, action, aggression, independence" for men, claims Susan Kent, while for women they were adhering by the ideals of femininity ("emotion, passivity, submission, dependence…form[ed] women's sexual organization" 30). The basis of male bonding is based on a "species-specific pattern," as in different contexts it involves "power, force, crucial or dangerous work, and relations with their gods. Males consciously and emotionally *exclude* females from their bonds," claims Joseph Kestner (18). In Victorian art, literature and culture the "emphasis is on male groups," which often become the means of dominance (18). Male bonding "catalyzes aggression, which may or may not be manifest in violence" and war and imperialism are often the "forms of such aggression" (Kestner 19).

Adventure novels of the imperial fiction depict male relationships, friendships and male bonding in exotic settings and difficult conditions, while women are either absent, labeled as the cultural Other, portrayed as dangerous, sexualized *femme fatales*, or kept to marginal presence at best. The above discussed novels by H. Rider Haggard, R. Kipling and J. Conrad are no exception. Female sexuality with its alluring yet destructive power derails men and threatens their lives physically, emotionally and socially. Victorians believed that women were governed by their sexuality and that is why they needed to be controlled, dominated and kept at bay. Even today the freedoms we take for granted came from the repression and oppression of women by men. The above discussed novels do not have happy, fulfilling relationships between men and women and heroes return to England from their imperial projects physically injured, mentally traumatized, or even dead. For men, once unmasked, a female force becomes the manifestation of the 'Heart of Darkness' itself.

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