

## **Fracturing the Occidental Mirror, Renouncing the Myth of the Terrorizing Oriental: Contesting the Imperial Representation of the Oriental Female “Other” in Rider Haggard’s *She***

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### **Abstract**

*This paper studies Rider Haggard’s *She*, a late Victorian imperial adventure novel, uncovering the imperial representation of the female “Other,” Ayesha. Throughout the novel, Rider Haggard attempts to orientalize the female protagonist Ayesha, representing her from an imperialist viewpoint. In this context, this paper attempts to fracture the Occidental mirror of megalomania and self-aggrandizement to the detriment of the Oriental, who is relegated to a stance of marginality and is preposterously stigmatized as the “other.” In reading the novel from a postcolonial standpoint in the light of Edward Said’s book *Orientalism*, this paper develops an anti-imperial stance, or more specifically an alternative reading, directed towards the contestation of the imperial discourse and the subversion of stereotypical representations of the “Other,”<sup>1</sup> precisely the Oriental woman in canonical imperialist texts, most notably in imperial adventure tales. In a similar vein, this paper exposes the ideological process of othering the Oriental female is subject to. It also unfolds the way in which the queen Ayesha is textually constructed as an Oriental woman, as Haggard stigmatizes her allegedly oriental attributes, notably her tyranny.*

**Keywords:** Rider Haggard, the Oriental female “Other,” the ideological process of othering, tyranny.

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<sup>1</sup> Boehmer states in his book *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*, that the “Other” is recognized as the non-European in general and the non-British in particular. The latter is disdainfully perceived and conceived as such, because he/she is assumed to be different from the European in many respects, notably race, intellectual capacities and civilizational attributes.

Despite the fact that Rider Haggard was not heralded as a canonical writer in literary circles because of his limited fame, he was recognized by a large array of literary critics as an imperialist writer whose imperial adventure novels or quest narratives contributed to the entrenchment of the British empire. Like other As an imperialist writer, Haggard ideologically sought to sustain British hegemony. In this respect, Elleke Boehmer asserts in her book *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* that 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialist writers, in particular novelists, were “the most active and impassioned disseminators of imperial dreams” of British might and magnitude (18).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, these imperialist writers resoundingly celebrated the grandeur of the British empire that sought to revitalize and solidify its imperial project through overseas annexation and expansionism. These overseas annexations were destined to maintain the British expansion of dominion, and more importantly, to confirm the British self-conception. In this particular vein, Boehmer contends that “British imperialists cherished an unambiguously heroic image of themselves as conquerors and civilizers of the world.”<sup>2</sup> In actuality, when imperialism reached its heyday in the Victorian age, the British saw themselves as a conquering race and civilizing nation with a grandiose “colonialist mission.”<sup>3</sup> This imperial mission aims indeed, at civilizing and enlightening the benighted primitive, who is encrusted in barbarism. It also aims at westernizing the “savage” native and propagating the ideals and values of the English civilization. Accordingly, and in line with Edward Said’s argument, “the continuity of British imperial policy throughout the nineteenth century” is embattled with the “novelistic process,” whose main purpose is “to keep the empire more or less in place.”<sup>4</sup> Hence, the durability of the British imperial project rests, to a great extent, on the production of a sizeable body of novelistic writings, oriented towards the enlargement of the imperial sphere of influence. By the same token, Boehmer maintains that literary texts which were produced in the Victorian fin-de siècle, “helped sustain the colonial vision, giving reinforcement to an already insular colonial world.”<sup>5</sup> Across the colonial spectrum, most of late 19<sup>th</sup> century literary texts, notably imperial adventure narratives, articulated a set of racist ideologies and tautologies that foregrounded, on the one hand, the racial, intellectual and cultural superiority of the British man, and emphasized, on the other, the inferiority and backwardness of non-British people. Correspondingly, the imperialist literature of the late Victorian era was governed by racial stereotypes and dogmas that celebrate the supremacy of the British imperial subject in stark contrast to the degeneracy of the indigenous native. In this connection, Boehmer argues that colonial writing, in particular the late 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial literature, reveals the ways in which the colonial system conversely operates through the magnification of the British imperialist and “the degradation of other human beings as natural, an innate part of their degenerate or barbarian state.”<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting to note that imperial adventure fiction that pervades most of 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialist literature insinuates an imperialist discourse which centers around the adventurously heroic experience of the white masculine imperialist in the colonial periphery. In fact, from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which witnessed the rise of imperial adventure novel till the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, imperial adventure fiction remained the most rigorously dominant literary genre which encapsulated the energizing ideals of the British Empire. More significantly, imperial adventure fiction underpinned the monolithic discourse of imperialism or orientalism that sought to obliterate the Oriental “other” textually and imaginatively.

Rider Haggard's *She* (1887) is categorised as a typical 19<sup>th</sup> century imperial adventure novel that infuses an imperialist discourse which derives its force and vigor from the Orientalist ideology. The latter tends not only to portray the Oriental woman, from Eurocentric lenses and optics, but also tends to reduce her to a subordinate position. As an imperial adventure story, *She* entrenches the Manichean dichotomy or binarism that celebrates the arresting qualities of the male protagonists, Horace Holly and Leo Vincey, who are seen as two prototypical imperialist figures. Indeed, the male imperialists undertake a thrillingly dangerous journey to the African interior, precisely to the land of Kor, in quest for the white queen Ayesha, who is the mystery to be unraveled. More centrally, *She*, as an imperial adventure narrative, inculcates an Orientalist ideology which is founded on the discursive representation and construction of the Oriental "Other" from an ethnocentric vision. In this perspective, Haggard places the Occidental characters, Horace and Leo, at the centre, stressing their formidable qualities, such as male strength, manhood, courage and avidity for adventure, exploration and conquest. In opposition, he obtrusively accentuates the Oriental characters' otherness and subalternity.

Accordingly, and in line with Terence Rodgers's contention, it is possible to conceive of *She* as an Orientalist text that tends to emphasize "the Egyptian origins of Ayesha," underscoring her "sexual and cultural otherness."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Haggard endeavors throughout the narrative to intensify the eccentricity and alterity of the Oriental female Ayesha, who is attributed disagreeable Oriental traits, namely tyranny. Hence, it is tenable to argue, in the light of Said's view of Orientalism, that *She* embeds an Orientalist narrative which tends to gloss over discursively the Oriental woman Ayesha, incarcerating her in a textual panopticon, governed by a wide range of stereotypical images and clichés about the Orient.

My reading of Haggard's *She* is premised on postcolonial theory. In this respect, Lois Tyson defines postcolonial criticism in his book *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* as a contestatory theory or framework which seeks to question the colonial enterprise.<sup>8</sup> It is an oppositional theory that aims at interrogating and dismantling "the colonialist ideology" which derives its force and vigor from the Manichean dichotomy.<sup>9</sup> Tyson proceeds to argue that the colonialist ideology or discourse is predicated upon "the colonizer's assumption of their own superiority, which they contrasted with the alleged inferiority of native (indigenous) peoples, the original inhabitants of the lands they invaded."<sup>10</sup> In other terms, the colonialist discourse is anchored in the Manichean opposition that sharpens the contrast between the colonizer, foregrounding his racial supremacy and cultural superiority, and the colonized, consolidating his Otherness and subalternity.

My reading of Haggard's *She* is predicated on Said's seminal book *Orientalism* as it presents a useful framework to examine the way the Oriental "Other," precisely the Oriental woman, is textually represented and constructed. Said's seminal *orientalism* was and still is critically acclaimed for its enriching contribution to postcolonial field. In this regard, Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams argue in their book *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A*

Reader that Said's *Orientalism* inaugurated a new area of study known as colonial discourse analysis. Loomba, in her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, points out that colonial discourse analysis is principally oriented towards the contestation of the colonial construction of knowledge about the Orient, as well as the ideological representation of the oriental "Other" (51).<sup>11</sup> Loomba goes further to note that colonial discourse studies "are not restricted to delienating the workings of power-they have tried to locate and theorise oppositions, resistances and revolts (successful and otherwise) on the part of the colonized."<sup>12</sup> In other terms, colonial discourse analysis seeks to question and interrogate the totalizing colonial discourse, and to induce resistance and dissent among colonized people. To put it differently, colonial discourse analysis examines colonialism or imperialism as if it is a text composed of representational patterns and exclusionary discursive practices, which are materialized in a large range of cultural, historical, literary and scientific discourses. Besides, colonial discourse studies diagnose the operation of imperial discourse, exposing how this hegemonic discourse interpellates and manipulates Oriental subjects. In other words, colonial discourse analysis underlines the fact that imperialism or colonialism is an oppressive discursive structure that incarcerates the "Other" in a framed representational system.

From this vantagepoint, I intend to study Rider Haggard's *She* as an orientalist narrative that unfolds the representational project. The latter tends to place the imperial subject at the foreground, and to fix the oriental "Other" in a perpetual state of otherness and alterity. Thus, my major task as a postcolonial reader, who attempts to call into question imperial ideologies, is to point out in the analytical section, to the operation of imperial discourse in *She*. I will also demonstrate in the analytical part, how the female protagonist Ayesha is "orientalized," to adopt Said's terms, and is relegated to a peripheral stance as an "oriental Other." To put it more concretely, I will attempt to trace the othering process in *She*.

Haggard represents *She* as an empress who rules the Amahagger tribe so as to deepen and consolidate her "Otherness." The Oriental queen Ayesha or she is viewed as an Oriental woman, who is subject to the ideological process of imperial representation or configuration. It is tenable to argue in this regard that Ayesha represents the image of the female "Other" with her tyranny.

Ayesha or "the mysterious queen" is frequently referred to by the Amahagger people, especially by Billali, as "she-who-must-be-obeyed."<sup>13</sup> The appellation is indeed quite telling, as it represents Ayesha as a tyrannical Oriental queen with despotic drives. Besides, the male protagonists Horace Holly and Leo Vincey, view the latter as a despotic matriarch, who is entitled to the exercise of personal autocracy and coercion in the Amahagger tribe. In fact, Ayesha is portrayed throughout the narrative, as a tyrannical white queen, who rules the Amahagger subjects, whom she considers "a bastard brood of the mighty sons of Kôr"<sup>14</sup> and sees as "gloomy-visaged folk."<sup>15</sup> In fact, the Amahagger people are the hybrid lineage of the Arabs and "the mighty sons of Kor," whom Ayesha views as "great people" in comparison with the "barbarians" or Arabs.<sup>16</sup>

Haggard patronizingly represents Ayesha as a tyrannical potentate, who rigidly exercises personal autocracy in the Amahagger tribe. By the same token, he portrays Ayesha as a matriarchal monarch who has despotic drives and retaliatory schemes that cast her as a “mighty avatar,” to use Evelyn J. Hinz’s terms.<sup>17</sup> In this sphere, she notes in her article “Rider Haggard’s *She: An Archetypal “History of Adventure”*” that: “She [Ayesha] is an avatar of Isis, the great goddess of vegetation and the seasonal cycle, when Kallikrates refuses to obey her he repeats his initial disobedience to Isis.”<sup>18</sup> Hinz draws a parallel between Isis and Ayesha, who is seen as a vengeful goddess, who exacts vengeance on Kallikrates, because he transcends her commands to forsake his wife Amenartas, whom she loathes spitefully.

Much in the same vein, the Oriental queen Ayesha is depicted by Horace as a despotic queen, whose “word overrides all rights.”<sup>19</sup> The Amahagger subjects are supposed in turn, to comply with her strict rules and commands. Yet, if any one of the Amahaggers attempts to cross the boundaries or to trespass his/her limits, he/she is doomed to death.

Correspondingly, Ayesha is portrayed as a despotic ruler, who is eager to thwart any potential for resistance or dissidence. Similarly, Ayesha’s eminent power allows her to preclude any subversive or disruptive energy on the part of the Amahaggers. Therefore, it is tenable to argue that Ayesha’s relationship with the Amahagger subjects is premised upon the master slave dialectic. In so doing, Ayesha becomes a tyrannical governess, who is intent on subjugating the Amahaggers, attributing to them debasing characteristics such as wickedness and bestiality. Indeed, she abhorrently refers to the cannibalistic violators as “dogs and serpents,” and more grossly, as “Eaters of human flesh,” because of their monstrosity and “lust for blood.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, Ayesha assumes that the Amahagger people are regressive “savages” who are enmeshed in cannibalism and barbarism.

The white queen Ayesha is endowed with an overarchingly domineering power that allows her to subjugate the Amahagger people who are thoroughly monitored and controlled by her. Indeed, in the chapter entitled “Ayesha Gives Judgment,” Ayesha addresses Horace Holly, asserting the fact that she rules the Amahagger people by terror and intimidation. In this respect, the former proclaims: “How thinkest thou that I rule this people ? I have but a regiment of guards to do my bidding, therefore it is not by force. It is by terror.”<sup>21</sup> It is clear that Ayesha not only indoctrinates the Amahagger subjects, but also terrifies them with her repressive power. Besides, Ayesha’s hegemonic power oppresses the Amahaggers, who become subservient to her strict laws and impositions.

Furthermore, the Oriental white queen Ayesha tells Horace that the Amahaggers are but “savages who lack imagination” and that she is so weary of their worship and terror that she wants to blast them.<sup>22</sup> It is quite obvious that Ayesha loathes the Amahagger people, whom she conceives of as submissive slaves, and more abominably, as “dogs to do [her] bidding.”<sup>23</sup> Much in the same vein, in the chapter entitled “Ayesha Gives Judgment,” Ayesha delivers a speech addressing the cannibalistic dissidents:

Dogs and serpents [...] Eaters of human flesh, two things have ye done. First, ye have attacked these strangers, being white men, and would have slain their servant, and for that alone death is your reward [...] Hath it not been taught to you from childhood that the law of *She* is an ever fixed law, and that who breaketh it by so much as one jot tittle\*shall perish? [...] And is not my lightest word a law? [...] Well, do ye know it, ye wicked one. But, ye are all evil- evil to the core- the wickedness bubbles up in you like a fountain in the spring time.<sup>24</sup>

This passage underscores Ayesha's tyranny and confirms her unchallenged authority as an absolute ruler. Besides, it translates Ayesha's abhorrence of the Amahagger's "wicked" practices of cannibalism and savagery. Moreover, Ayesha asserts in this passage that her laws are unalterably and unquestionably fixed. She proceeds to state that anyone who dares to infringe or break her rules "shall perish". Hence, Ayesha is seen by Horace, as a tyrannical potentate, who wields absolute power in the Amahagger tribe.

Moreover, Horace and Leo view Ayesha as a tyrant, since she accuses the cannibalistic dissenters, who dare to hot-pot Leo and Horace along with their servants Job and Mahomed of treachery, savagery and above all disobedience. In point of fact, hot-potting is identified as a customary ritual, practised by the Amahagger people who capture and entrap any white European penetrator, who dares to enter the land of Kor. When Ayesha learns about the deed of the "wicked villains," she convicts them of dissent and recalcitrance. Indeed, she condemns the cannibalistic dissenters to a terrible death by torture. Within the same chapter "Ayesha Gives Judgment," She declares:

And now, because ye have done this thing, because ye have striven to put these men, my guests, to death, and yet more because ye have dared to disobey my word, this is the doom that I doom you to. That ye be taken to the cave of torture and given over to tormentors, and that on the going down of tomorrow's sun those of you who yet remain alive be slain even as ye would have slain the servant of this my guest.<sup>25</sup>

This passage starkly represents Ayesha as an authoritarian monarch who is eager to eradicate and annihilate any subversive potential on the part of the Amahagger people, who are expected to abide by Ayesha's rules and regulations.

Additionally, Ayesha is portrayed as a despotic potentate, whose tyranny not only induces her to condemn the cannibalistic outlaws to a fatal death by torture, but also to murder Ustane, the Amahagger girl who is deeply devoted to Leo. Indeed, She orders Ustane to leave Leo and to disappear: "Go from hence back to thine own place, and never dare to speak to or set thine eyes upon this man again. He is not for thee. Listen a third time. If thou breakest this my law, that moment thou diest. Go."<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Ayesha tells Horace that if Ustane will not submit to her will, she will slay her. Indeed, she exclaims: "As for this woman, she must die; for though I can take her lover from her [...] No other woman shall dwell in my lord's thoughts; my empire shall be all my own."<sup>27</sup> In these two passages,

Ayesha threatens to kill Ustane if she dares to meet or speak to Leo, under the belief that the latter is her own lover. Significantly, these two passages portray Ayesha as despotic ruler and, more importantly, as a vengeful matriarch who is avid for retaliation and revenge. Indeed, Ayesha vengefully marks Ustane, leaving “her finger marks upon her rival’s hair” to intimidate her.<sup>28</sup> Ustane becomes thereupon so frightened that she surrenders to Ayesha’s command to leave Leo. But later, the former shows up in the hope of reuniting with her husband Leo. When Ayesha learns about that, she blasts her “into death by some mysterious electric agency or overwhelming will-force”<sup>29</sup> This scene makes Horace and Leo utterly appalled because it testifies to Ayesha’s “diablerie,” which instigates her to murder Ustane ruthlessly.<sup>30</sup> Correspondingly, Ayesha is viewed by the Occidental characters, Horace and Leo, as a monstrous woman, who has retaliatory impulses and diabolical plans.

Following this understanding, it is possible to argue that Ayesha or She shares some affinities with the figure of the “New Woman” in terms of subversion, vengeance, female power and potency. In this particular vein, Terence Rodgers contends in his article “Restless Desire: Rider Haggard, Orientalism and the New Woman” that most of Haggard’s fiction, in particular *She*, is profoundly engaged in gender issues of the 19th century fin-de-siècle.<sup>31</sup> This explains why it draws upon the themes of female identity and sexual licentiousness. In this sphere, Rodgers notes: “Haggard’s important delineations of the imperial self, female identity and sexual desire, and, more generally, directed critical attention to his deep textual engagement with the gender politics of the *fin de siècle*.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, most of Haggard’s novels rest upon the keynote of sexualized female identity and the motif of unrestrained femininity. Rodgers goes some length to contend that the female protagonist Ayesha epitomizes the figure of the Orientalized New Woman with her uncontrollable Eastern femininity and subversive aspirations that further consolidate her “Otherness.”

Therefore, Ayesha’s tyrannical drives and retaliatory proclivities demonize her, confirming her subalternity as an Oriental “other.”

To recapitulate, it is possible to conceive of Haggard’s *She* as an orientalist text that essentially subscribes to the genre of imperial adventure fiction. As an imperial adventure narrative, *She* forges and constructs an orientalist discourse that functions in conjunction with the ideologically saturated discourse of imperialism. Hence, the novel insinuates two intersecting dominant discourses that interlock in terms of scope, objectives and principles.

These two discourses are identified as two master-narratives that are motivated by the desire to appropriate and incorporate the Oriental “Other,” specifically the Oriental woman, textually and discursively. It is in this scope, indeed, that I attempted to read the novel from a postcolonial standpoint, offering an anti-imperial framework that aims at questioning the dichotomised Manichean model which sharpens the division between “Self” and “Other” and widens the chasm between the Orient and the Occident. This revisionary framework aims also at subverting the western hegemonic construction and identification of the Oriental “Other.”

In this perspective, I attempted to trace the ideology of alterity and othering that surfaces openly in the novel. This should come as no surprise since *She* is categorised as a colonialist text, which is imbricated in the orientalist discourse and which is steeped in imperial stereotyping and prejudice.

## Notes

1. Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 18.
2. Boehmer, *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*, 21.
3. Boehmer, *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*, 23.
4. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 88.
5. Boehmer, *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*, 44.
6. Boehmer, *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature*, 21.
7. Terence Rodgers "Restless Desire: Rider Haggard, Orientalism and the New Woman." (New York: Knopf House, 1993), 35-46.
8. Lois Tyson. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 419.
9. Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 419.
10. Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, 419.
11. Ania Loomba *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 51.
12. Loomba *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 51.
13. H. Rider Haggard, *She* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991),43.
14. Haggard, *She*, 181.
15. Haggard, *She*, 254.
16. Haggard, *She*, 181.
17. Evelyn. J. Hinz, "Rider Haggard's She: An Archetypal "History of Adventure."" (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1972), 421.
18. Hinz, "Rider Haggard's She," 421.
19. Haggard, *She*, 115.
20. Haggard, *She*, 144.
21. Haggard, *She*, 175.
22. Haggard, *She*, 145.
23. Haggard, *She*, 153.
24. Haggard, *She*, 174.
25. Haggard, *She*, 175.
26. Haggard, *She*, 206.
27. Haggard, *She*, 202.
28. Haggard, *She*, 208.
29. Haggard, *She*, 227.
30. Haggard, *She*, 208.
31. Rodgers "Restless Desire," 36.
32. Rodgers "Restless Desire," 36.



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