

Oppression and Silence in Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* and Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching*

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This essay will examine, using two contemporary texts, the modes of control and oppression used by authority figures to exert and maintain their power. Such authority figures include those who have power because of their formal roles (e.g., teachers, politicians, managers and priests) but also individuals in various social, romantic, familial or sexual hierarchies (e.g., fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, siblings and lovers). Although modes of authority can be expressed in many different religious, political, social and gender contexts, they all involve control by emotional, legal, psychological or forcible means to maintain a structure of hierarchical domination. bell hooks eloquently describes one such mode:

Patriarchy ... insists that males are inherently dominating ... and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence. (hooks, 2004, p. 18).

This discussion will consider how a more general expression of hooks' perceptions can be seen in two contrasting texts – within the familial relationships found in the Indian diaspora, as depicted by *Unaccustomed Earth* (Lahiri, 2008), and in the historical, racial, post-colonial societies explored in the supernatural world of *White is for Witching* (Oyeyemi, 2009).

While both texts examine common themes of place, location, home, belonging, displacement, immigration and patriarchy, they employ radically different styles and perspectives. Lahiri's safe pair of hands demonstrate elegant constraint, fluid and seamless

prose, subtle nuance and the masterful use of the revelatory epiphany typical of the short story. Oyeyemi adopts a much more experimental post-modernistic style using multiple points of view that blend traditional Gothic (showing the “peculiar unwillingness of the past to go away” (Sage and Smith, 1996, in Cousins, 2012, p. 49)) with Fairy Tale tropes (e.g., the use of poisoned apples and Miranda as a Snow White figure who often sees herself and her world through a mirror, (Oyeyemi, 2009, p. 28-29, 32, 53, 71, 92, 94, 112, 147, 162)).

Compared to Lahiri, Oyeyemi’s prose style has a surfeit of imaginative imagery and metaphor (e.g., “the professors didn’t have features, they were learnedness dressed up as people and housed in armchairs” (Oyeyemi, 2009, p. 42)). This vivid, dynamic and extravagant style is nevertheless appropriate for her sensational and supernatural subject.

Lahiri uses a more realistic tone but still employs eloquent imagery in describing commonly shared everyday experiences - (e.g., “finally, one of the professors, white hair like a snowy wreath around his otherwise naked head, put out a hand, as might a policeman stopping traffic” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 182)).

hooks takes the view that rather than being silent, it is crucial for “advocates of feminist politics to challenge any rhetoric which placed the sole blame for perpetuating patriarchy and male domination onto men” (hooks, 2004, p. 25). Her position is that both men and women participate in patriarchal oppression, even though men are the primary beneficiaries. As will be shown in the following discussion, not only men and women, but sons and daughters and others also participate in maintaining silence in the presence of more general forms of authority, with both advantage or detriment to themselves or others.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri uses an epigraph from the nineteenth-century Massachusetts writer Nathaniel Hawthorne to position her text within American literary traditions and to summarise her basic thesis - that ‘home’ and ‘roots’ can be quite different

things. The themes of migration, culture translation and metamorphosis of personal and cultural identity through the migration experience are foregrounded in the quotation by its imagery of transplantation into unaccustomed earth, with its association of newly encountered nutrients and consequent revitalisation. Lahiri also transplants the form of the short story collection into new soil, by combining the initial five individual (but thematically linked) stories with three final stories that share the same characters and which could be viewed as a novella in their own right. Taking Milan Kundera's view that the novel is "a meditation on existence as seen through the medium of imaginary characters" (Kundera, 1988 p. 86), then *Unaccustomed Earth* can be seen as a new experimental form that lies somewhere between a short story collection and a novel and in which each component short story is a meditation on a different aspect of the experiences of those who are national and cultural immigrants.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri uses the claustrophobic nature of the family relationship as a way of exploring how the Indian migrant deals with the dominant nature of the new culture they find themselves in and how, by breaking the bonds they had to their homeland, parents and children need also to revise their own familial hierarchies. Between siblings, too, dominance and interdependence must be negotiated as each sibling encounters new and differing adult experiences. While Lahiri draws on her own experiences whereby her identity was silenced:

For much of my life ... I was always falling short of people's expectations: my immigrant parents', my Indian relatives', my American peers', ... How could I want to be a writer, ... when I did not wish to be myself? (Lahiri, 2011)

she also argues that such experiences have a more universal truth:

... the stories are universal, and it doesn't matter if they are taking place in rural Canada, New England, Ireland, or Ruma's India - there is something linking them: the human experience. (Lahiri, 2013)

In Lahiri's titular story, "Unaccustomed Earth" (2008, p. 1), Ruma is aware of the emotional silence that existed in her parent's marriage. "Ruma knew that her parents had

never loved each other in that way....if anything, he seemed happier now; her mother's death had lightened him, the opposite of what it had done to her" (p. 33). However, her father "had endured his daughter's resentment, never telling Ruma his side of things, never saying that his wife had been overly demanding, unwilling to appreciate the life he'd worked hard to provide" (p. 40). In his silence to his daughter regarding his feelings about his wife, the father takes the position of a well-meaning patriarch, protecting his daughter from the emotional stress of knowing the true state of his marriage: "He wanted to shield her from the deterioration that inevitably took place in the course of the marriage" (p. 54).

We learn that when Ruma was young, her father was "Oblivious to her mother's need in other ways, [and] had toiled in unfriendly soil" (p. 16). Instead of tending to emotional needs, he cultivated the Indian plants that Ruma's mother used in her Bengali-oriented cooking, such as "chili peppers and delicate strains of spinach" (p. 16). He may have symbolically provided physical sustenance to the marriage (in the form of food), but he does not provide the emotional engagement his wife truly needs. In Hawthorne's terms is not the new American soil that is "unfriendly" but the father's determination to re-use "same worn-out soil" (representing the traditional Bengali arranged marriage) that symbolises their arid marriage.

When Ruma is pregnant with her second child, the father toils once again at the soil, planting flowers such as phlox, azaleas and clematis. Here the flowers are purely for pleasure rather than for sustenance. He no longer provides Bengali food ingredients but has migrated to the American cultural tradition of growing plants for pleasure. This is a silent cultural translation as he never explicitly discusses his motivation with his daughter in rejecting the traditions of his Bengali past.

Lahiri shows how the migration process often dissipates the modes of authority originally imposed by the home country on the migrant. For example, Ruma rejected her parents'

authority in selecting her college education: "Ruma knew that she had disappointed [her father], getting rejected by all the Ivy Leagues..." (p. 37). Ruma also rejected aspects of her Bengali matriarchal society. Though "her mother had never cut corners; even in Pennsylvania she had run her household as if to satisfy a mother-in-law's fastidious eye" (p. 22) Ruma is quite happy to do so – she is no longer subject to the Bengali familial oppression to that made her mother prepare the traditional labour-intensive Indian meal. In Ruma's new cultural soil: "[Ruma] could afford to be lazy" (p. 22).

Eventually, the process of migration is completed, and the modes of authority of the homeland are fully dissipated. When Ruma's father shows his grandson how to garden the grandson "plants" his own symbolic tokens: toys, pens, pencils and pennies. The grandson has no interest in the Bengali notion of growing food to eat but seeks to reproduce the material trinkets of the American way of life.

In "Only Goodness", Lahiri explores non-patriarchal relationships – examining the dynamics of the brother-sister hierarchies of control. Throughout her youth, Sudha has held her silence about her brother's alcoholism and never told her parents. Similarly, when she moves to London, she does not tell her new English husband about her brother's alcoholism. Even though she wears "a diamond ring from Roger concealed on a chain beneath her sweater, and this made her feel dipped in a protective coating from her family", her allegiance to the unwritten rules of her sibling loyalty prevents her from telling her new husband of her brother's alcoholism. This is another example of a mode of authority being facilitated by silence – she cannot quite escape the familial rules of her upbringing. Her husband however sees no justification for her sibling loyalty: "I would never have kept something like this from you" (p. 171). As an outsider to her family, he does not recognise the validity of that particular mode of sibling authority. Sudha has chosen silence, but, as hooks suggested above, such silence continues to enable the oppression found within existing

hierarchies.

While Lahiri employs a realistic narrative style which recalls writers such as Hawthorne, Hardy, Chekhov and Mansfield, Oyeyemi seeks to push back against the natural realism of the pre-modernists and the objective truth of modernism. Shilling says: "... her technical skill as a novelist is remarkable, her range of reference formidable and her use of language virtuosic" (2009). However, O'Grady sees Oyeyemi 's writing as "stunts", "dumpsters of deconstructed ... rubble", and suggest that readers will not enjoy "revelling in the postmodern tangle of antic narrative strands" (2019). Porter provides a rather more balanced and measured assessment: "Despite the overt pessimism depicted through racism and purity discourses ... [Oyeyemi creates] ... an affirmatively hybridized, transcultural narrative that reveals the resemblances and continuities among the transatlantic cultural traditions it invokes" (2013, p. 23). Porter sees Miranda's struggles with the 'repressed female ancestors who dwell within her" and to resist "their urgings to ... consume flesh for them" as a way to "keep her ancestors 'alive' with her" as a form of matriarchal oppression (p. 38). Miranda's struggle for "individual agency" is expressed as "she also allows her body to slowly waste away in her refusal to consume nutritious food" (p. 38). In this sense, Porter suggests Miranda's only escape is in the silence of death.

The colour white has important significance throughout the book (as signalled in the book's title). The white chalk that Miri is compelled to consume is poisoning her and in an image of a corpse that appears in the book's opening, a chunk of white apple blocks its throat. Whiteness is the unmistakable symbol of the harsh and violent authority of racial oppression that pervades the book. Colonial white racism is shown by Miranda's connection to her mother Lily, her grandmother Jennifer and her great-grandmother grandAnna. Thus, Oyeyemi suggests that not only males maintain such modes of oppression. The arrival of

Kosovan refugees seeking asylum by entering the UK under the symbolically white cliffs of Dover is woven into the story. A Kosovan boy is stabbed, and Miranda is suspected. Miranda's grandmother, GrandAnna, was the violent perpetrator of a racial stabbing incident 150 years ago. Somehow, through familial memory, Miranda has inherited the burden of her ancestor's white guilt, even though she is innocent of the stabbing and unaware of the burden that has been passed to her. The implication is that the colonial spirit manifested in the Dover House, in its desire for racial purity, is attacking the Kosovan immigrants through Miranda. Eliot tells us he had "The duty to speak when Miri couldn't, to make sense when she didn't" (p. 82). In doing so, he acts to deflect the modes of authority of her accusers, as she is silent, unable, because of her condition, to speak for herself.

At the book's climax, Ore (Miranda's Nigerian lover) attempts to release Miranda from the oppression of her family history. Ore fantastically splits Miranda open, and inside the skin shed from Miranda's body, a girl is revealed. When asked by Ore as to who owns the skin around her, Miranda replies "It's the goodlady" (p. 158). Despite Ore's pleas, Miranda "clutches desperately" to the skin, saying: "I don't want to come out. Put me back in...I need her" (p. 158). In this terrifying way, Oyeyemi shows the reader how hard it is to escape the oppressions of the past.

The Dover house is a mode of authority, representing the white social establishment that reaches back to colonial days. It exists to keep out all but the white progeny of the Silver women, killing and torturing everyone else. Miri cannot shed the house (i.e., her skin) just as the white establishment cannot shed the skin of colonial and racial oppression. In maintaining its modes of authority over its inhabitants, the Dover House must reject or destroy those it sees as non-white invaders (e.g., Ore, Sade, the Kosovans), thereby silencing these potential voices of change.

The Dover house shows its white racism in its reaction to Ore during Ore's visit to

Miranda at the house. When Ore showers after making love to Miranda, she sees that her towel:

...was striped with black liquid, as dense as paint (don't scream) there were shreds of hard skin in it. 'The black's coming off,' someone outside the bathroom door commented. Then they whistled 'Rule, Britannia' and laughed. Britons never-never-never shall be slaves ... by the time I'd put the towel on the rack to dry and opened the door, the passageway was empty (p. 147-8)

The implication that Ore's blackness is just skin deep, not part of her intrinsic self, and can thus be washed off is countered by the passing guests reiterating the jingoism of British colonialism. The house tells Ore to be silent "(don't scream") and the reader is left wondering if there really were guests whistling outside the bathroom door or if that was an invention by the house in its oppression of Ore (and Miranda).

Towards the novel's end, the house reveals its true nature. In response to Miri's declaration of love for Ore, the house responds (speaking as the spirits of the three generations of women before Miri):

The squashed nose, the pillow lips, fist-sized breasts, the reek of fluids from the seam between her legs. The skin. The skin... Anna was shocked. Jennifer was shocked. Lily was impassive. Disgusting. ... When clear waters moves unseen a taint creeps into it – moss, or algae, salt, even. It becomes foul, undrinkable. It joins the sea. (p. 223)

This language expresses a racial mode of authority - the concept of tainted water being ruined represents the fear that the purity of racial whiteness may be diluted and contaminated by coming into contact with any other material. Once polluted, the water enters the sea, a metaphor for the pool of common, mixed up, impure, racial characteristics. The Dover House's response to Miri's desire for what the house sees as a racially impure relationship with the first-generation immigrant Ore is to expel Ore and silence Miri forever.

Much is experimental in *White for Witching*. The multiple viewpoints are particularly innovative. Ore, Eliot and the Dover House provide unreliable first person points of view, while a third party focalised point of view describes Miri's perspective. Unusually, the

prologue is scripted with three different characters (including the non-human Dover house):

ore:
Miranda Silver is in Dover....

eliot:
Miri is gone...

29 barton road:
Miranda is at home...

(p. 7-8)

This is more of a dramatic formalism than straight narration and has the immediate effect of both making Miranda and her disappearance the centre of the story but also suggests her fractured personality, e.g., she is named in three differing ways (formally as Miranda Silver by her friend, Ore; familiarly as Miri by her twin, Eliot; and as something between: Miranda, by the house). Another innovative effect is the ‘pivoting’ of narrative perspective mid-sentence. This has the effect of narrative intensification. In the following example, the narration is a third-party focalised on Miranda until ‘the mannequin’ when it becomes the first person point of view of the house - demonstrating the house’s control over the mannequin and raising the tension concerning the role the mannequin will play:

She could barely believe that such a simple-looking coat could take so much work...
It looked so fine on
the mannequin

proved very useful for me when Miranda, Luc and Eliot left for the airport. Especially as I did not have much time. I could not, for example, use the looking people. (p. 98)

The use of differing points of view and close and distant perspectives blur the reader’s perception of Miranda’s identity. Miri is never given her own first person narration – her speech is only recorded by others – in this sense, Miri’s internality is silenced, and her voice is only revealed to the reader via the authority of the other characters.

In *White is for Witching* Oyeyemi explores patriarchies that are not father based. Instead, matriarchy dominates as influence, control and uncanny haunting are passed down through

the female line. Furthermore, the gothic metaphor of male darkness is turned inside out as the novel uses the colour white to dominate other colours (e.g., the white cliffs of Dover, the pica chalk that Miranda eats, the whiteness of the poisonous apples overcoming their redness and the pale mannequin). Oyeyemi shows the reader a story in which three generations of female witches, acting through the Dover house, are terrifying matriarchs of the whiteness of colonial racial oppression. *White* truly is for *Witching* in this story.

In conclusion, Lahiri's work takes a modernistic approach but also uses realism as a narrative tool. Her writing is "associated with social conditions wherein a coherent perspective of the world is sought ... [resulting in] a questioning of conventional systems, finding 'fractures and fault lines'" (Gupta, 2016, p.11). The "new hybrid cultures that migration creates through interethnic marriage and the adaption of new forms of mixed identity" (Tickell, 2016, p. 195) are the locations of these fractures and faults.

On the other hand, Oyeyemi's work moves easily between the supernatural and the literary, rejecting conventional ideas of identity and cultural collisions by drawing on ideas from multiple genres. The power of white is used as a symbolic representation of racial purity, and the novel contests the place of oppression to maintain such imperial racial purity within modern society. The whiteness of both the political and the female body is rejected in the discourse, as the more Miranda tries to suppress the generations of white women that dwell within her, the sicker she becomes. Miranda's roots are in the 'poisoned soil' of her ancestry, and it is only by some future destruction of the Dover house and a migration away from her past that she could possibly, in life, escape.

Both Lahiri and Oyeyemi explore the struggle between individual identity and cultural oppression. Both show the effects of opposing the silence that enables such oppression. In doing so, both authors are performing the naming of modes of authority that hooks regarded

as critically important since: “rarely do we name it in everyday speech” (hooks, 2004, p. 25).

[3296 words]

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