

The 'Other White' Woman and the Anxiety at the Foreign: Studying Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*

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ABSTRACT

Nineteenth century English fiction displayed a unique tendency to project the foreigner with all the potential to commit crime. The woman foreigner seemed to be doubly potent in this regard. The paper intends to analyze the historical conditions that were responsible behind the evil and miscreant representation of the French governess, Hortense in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Her propensity to passionate rage and consequent crime is projected by the novelist as a trait typical to her race that makes her stand apart from the famed British sense of equilibrium. The othering of her would be established as distinct from colonial racism as Hortense is a fellow Caucasian to the native English. The genesis of this cross-channel othering would be searched in the structural Francophobia through literary and cultural evidences. The paper would further deal with the case of feminine agency and the issue of removal of the active woman and how the pretext of foreignness has to do with both.

Key Words: Foreignness, Anxiety, Other, Agency, Removal

1. INTRODUCTION

Foreignness and the English negotiation with the same in the nineteenth century have intrigued the practitioners of cultural studies for quite some time now. The ideologies and contexts of the imperial and colonial complexities have engaged the scholarships of the critics and theorists of the stature of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K Bhabha. On the other hand, the study of foreignness has also branched out into religious and racial dimension and has extended into the fields of Jewish studies, Semitic discourse and the likes. Both in the study of the colonial context and of the religious and racial foreignness, the alienation of the foreign from the essential English identity finds an overt emphasis in terms of skin, anatomy, accents, rituals and practices. The liminality of the foreignness, however, is not that steadfast. The English anxiety at foreignness soon spills over to fellow Caucasian white Christian neighbours. The same anxiety doubled up with the possibility of an incorporation of the foreign in the insular spaces that ranged from domesticity to national boundary. This often finds expression in the delineation of foreign women characters who pose the simultaneous threat of breaching into the English domestic space as a foreigner and offers the narrative the opportunity to project the threat of the foreignness in the convenient canvas of the female characters.

Victorian era saw the idea of a woman being categorized as fallen or pure, good or bad getting closely paralleled with the other forms of duality, namely familiar or foreign and by extension civilized or beastly (Davidoff 21). This polarity of thinking evidently gains currency in the depiction of the character of Hortense in *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens. The foreign woman is evidently outside the parameters of English respectability and hence is ceaselessly being judged for her lack of Englishness. She thus suitably represents 'the other' who threatens the accepted norms and values with her alleged evil and dangerous designs.

The Anxiety at the French

Such a depiction does not come as a surprise considering the Anglo-French hostilities since the Norman Conquest. The Hundred Years' War (1337-1453) was followed by a second major conflict when William III declared war on Louis XIV in 1689; both periods entrenching the anti-French sentiment in England. The Napoleonic War,

between 1792 and 1815 furthered the sentiment of hostility (Richardson 44). In fact, the multifaceted conflicts between the two nations during the period that ranges from the accession of William of Orange to the Napoleonic defeat were so convoluted that it is often called the Second Hundred Years War (Gibson 81).

On the trade and commerce front too, the rivalry grew bitter. The nineteenth century saw unprecedented circulation of capital across the globe that left many native English wary as they thought this would prove instrumental in eroding the national character of England as the mobility of capital would invariably bring with it the threat of the contamination of the foreign. Alexander Innes Shand in his 1876 essay 'Speculative Investment' holds the English fondness for foreign stocks responsible for the major financial crisis in 1866 and goes on to lament how the English now weigh respectability not on Englishness but on wealth accrued from the trade and commerce in lands as distant as St. Domingo. (Shand 301). Shand's choice of the Caribbean island nation for illustration is significant as it has been a French colony and the English weariness of capital contaminated with French connect thus becomes evident.

The rivalry however had distinct trade issues as well. The high duties and tariffs imposed by the French in 1659 were widely believed in England to be the primary reason of the decline of the latter's woolen industry (Duffy 32). The War of the Spanish Succession augmented the already simmering territorial and commercial friction. Finally, the active French assistance to the American War of Independence entrenched the anti-French sentiments in the British Isles.

This French-hatred of the British had spilled over in the realm of philosophy as well. The French revolution left the English forever panic stricken at the possibility of the radical realignment of the hierarchy. The French intellectuals thus were frequently lambasted in the nineteenth century England. Gerald Newman records how Voltaire and his ideas were charged as "chief of infidel philosophy" (Newman 392). Schilling in his *England and the Case against Voltaire* asserted that "Voltaireism ... lurked everywhere, secretly boring philosophical notion into the minds of the unwary" (Newman 390). The ecclesiastic sphere too was fraught with distrust towards the French. The English irreverence towards the Catholicism seamlessly couples with their skepticism towards the French in Richard Altick's *Studies in Scarlet*:

Between the French nation and the Roman church [...] there was not much to choose; the British nation as a whole was never more confident of its own righteousness, and consequently never more convinced of the malign cunning of Roman Catholics and the sheer immorality of Frenchmen. (Altick 179)

Interestingly, soon the distrust escalated into forming popular stereotypes of the French. The two of the same went on to become quite popular. Glenn Richardson records them with all their rawness. The first is that of "poor, starving, pathetic creatures"; while the second is that of the "over refined, effeminate fop...whose fashions betrayed intellectual and moral bankruptcy". During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the French were often portrayed as "skeletal imbeciles, at once grotesque, pathetic and malevolent" (Richardson 45). The Great Exhibition of the Crystal Palace, 1851 too captured this stereotype in the popular space. The souvenir handkerchief of the Exhibition made of cotton was entitled 'Wot is to Be' and was illustrated with four rows each containing figures that were journeying to the exhibition. Among them were, of course, the French delegation. The figure dressed as a French peasant was a thick bearded French 'Red Republican'. He was accompanied with an overtly refined dancing master and another figure who resembled a famous French chef of the time (Young 573). The figures were caricatures and the French being portrayed as either rabble rousers or effete fops did strike a popular cord.

With the progress of the nineteenth century the anti-French sentiment also advanced. The Britons now stared viewing the French as contrary to themselves in not only in philosophy but in moral values and codes as well. An article in the nineteenth century periodical, *The British Critic* observed that:

A woman who swerves from her sex's point of honour in England, is aware that she has committed an unpardonable offence [...] But it is very different in France. A female there experiences little, if any alteration, in consequence of the violation of her person [...] The French act from feeling, and the British from principle. (Newman 393)

Not surprisingly, the contemporary literature would also similar sentiments. Along with negative portrayals, the French characters faced numerous slurs. Mr. Poyser, for example in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* states, "Them French are wicked sort o' folks. (Eliot 522)" and Jane Eyre describes her French teacher as grotesque and harsh (Bronte 39). Rochester's houseguest, Blanche in *Jane Eyre*, recalled her French governess's "raging

passions”(Bronte 151). In *Bleak House*, Mr. Snagsby states that “I never had an idea of a foreign female, except as being formerly connected with a bunch of brooms [...], or at present time with a tambourine and ear-rings (*Bleak House* 663).” Beside successfully othering the foreign woman, this statement, by associating them with gypsies and witchcraft, invokes the notion of sorcery and mystical.

Hortense and the Embodiment of Francophobia

Hortense in Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* is a relatively minor character who plays a significant role. She is the French maid of lady Dedlock. She is removed from her position as the Lady’s maid for being, in the word of Tulkinghorn, “the most implacable and unmanageable of women (*Bleak House* 668).” Angry and desiring revenge for her dismissal, Hortense aligns herself with the lawyer Tulkinghorn who is single minded in uncovering Lady Dedlock’s illicit past. Hortense actively assists the lawyer to gather evidence of the identity of Lady Dedlock’s former lover and her illegitimate child, Esther Summerson.

It is through her intense hatred to Lady Dedlock that Hortense exhibits the much talked about French propensity to passion. She exclaims: “I hate my Lady, [with] all my heart [...] I detest her (*Bleak House* 666).” In fact, when Tulkinghorn treats Hortense with condescension, she turns even more furious: “Sir, you have not use me well [...] You have attrapped me – caught me—to give you information [sic] (*Bleak House* 665)” For this slight, Tulkinghorn pays with his life. Hortense revenges herself on Tulkinghorn by murdering him and on Lady Dedlock as she implicates her as the murderer.

Dickens drew considerably from the real-life incident of Maria Manning as he used her as his prototype for Hortense. Maria de Roux, of French origin, was a lady’s maid before her marriage to Frederick Manning. Charlotte Lindgren records how the trial captured sizable public attention with Maria often getting compared with Lady Macbeth and Jezebel, the foreign temptress. (Lindgren 7) The couple were both convicted for the murder of Maria’s lover, Patrick O’Connor, and sentenced to be hanged. The trial captured the fascination of the public. Where, as *The Times* reported, Maria “looked about her with a fearless and unembarrassed expression.” (Borowitz 207). However, after she was sentenced to death, she lost her composure and unleashed her verbal vitriol against the jury, her legal advisors, and quite expectedly, England. She showered damnation over them all repeatedly (Borowitz 207). The early biographer of Charles Dickens, Percy Fitzgerald, observed that Maria Manning’s fractured English, the restless demeanour, and her incessant verbal fury find a near exact parallel in the portrayal of Hortense (Borowitz 305).

The excited physical and verbal expressions of Hortense would be readily associated by the contemporary English with the French zealotry. In this regard, Hortense clearly embodies the notion of passion and danger associated with French ethnicity. The dominant trait of her character is a general quickness of speech and temper. Esther, being distinctly English, seems to be instinctively afraid of her when she meets her for the first time: The narrative records of her drawing back from Hortense being afraid of her excited exuberance. (*Bleak House* 368). Interesting to note here, Dickens makes Hortense herself attribute her own passion to her French birth: “I come from the south country, where we are quick, and where we like and dislike very strong. (*Bleak House* 368)”. With her strong emotions and volatile mood, Hortense stands in opposite axis to the English, who are believed to be characteristically reserved.

There seems to be no middle ground for Hortense. Her being dangerous lies in the fact that she is vastly unpredictable. In her exchange with Tulkinghorn, the narrator describes her as speaking with “energy...by clenching both her hands, and setting all her teeth”, and at the very next moment she is “ironically polite and tender.” (*Bleak House* 666). The pendulum swings back soon as we see her “suddenly dashed into the bitterest and the most defiant scorn, with her black eyes in one and the same moment very nearly shut, and staringly wide open (*Bleak House* 666).” Interestingly, she is described by the narrator as having a flair in English language as much as a native. However, the narrator, it seems, is eager to point out the difference between Hortense with mood and emotions characteristically French and a perfect English woman with poise and grace. Hortense with an explosive mood that can erupt without any provocation is decidedly alien to the balanced English psyche.

The language which seemed to the narrator English-like too suffers the violence of Hortense’s temper. Her Frenchness is characterized by her use of superlatives. She describes herself as “en-r-r-r-aged” and insists that she “det-est(s) [Lady Dedlock] (*Bleak House* 666).” The excessiveness of her emotion is complemented by her enraged actions as well. When Tulkinghorn attempts to rid himself of her by offering her money, Hortense refuses the same. She declares with scornful pride claiming that she is rich in hatred towards her lady and hence does not require any pay off. She rejects the money violently, “flinging [the coins] with such violence on the floor, that

they jerk up again into the light before they roll away into the corners, and slowly settle down there after spinning vehemently. (*Bleak House* 666)”

The engagement with the English language in the case of foreigners in general and the French in particular has found its scope in the works of other Victorian novelists as well. In William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, Becky Sharp is of French origin and would be employed by the aristocratic English households as a resident tutor of the refined French language. In addition, her suave English is also reckoned with as she climbs the ladder of social mobility. In fact, as a child, she was allowed food, lodging, some tuition, and a very small salary in return for speaking French with the younger girls in Miss Pinkerton’s academy. The first chapter in fact shows a fascinating linguistic antagonism of sorts. As Becky evidently wins a livelihood with her mastery over French, she tosses off of Johnson’s *Dictionary* in a gesture that reflects a pronounced disowning of the English language and the thereby the correspondent culture and society.

The similarity that marks Dickens’ Hortense and Thackeray’s Becky is the social strata that they respectively represent and negotiate with. Both are of French origin, belonging to the working class and negotiating with the upper rung of the society. During the years of the composition of both the works the threat of the Napoleonic invasion loomed large and the pall of threat of a possible French attack loomed large on the English psyche. The intrusion of the French language in the English social scape, illustrated both by Becky Sharp and Mademoiselle Hortense thus becomes an intriguing case in point in this context. This is almost a displacement of the battle of Waterloo onto language, and this illustrates the dialogic nature of discourse in both the novels. The works would unfold themselves as truly multi-voiced that represents, in M.M. Bakhtin’s terms, both the professed intent of the character who is doing all the talk and the intent of the author that refracts itself through that speech. To Bakhtin the prime cause of such multi-voicedness is rooted in the sociology of the speech itself. It is the heteroglossic society that surfaces itself in those speeches through individuated oppositions. (Bakhtin 324-326) Hortense and Becky thus emerge as the social counterpoint of Napoleon as far as their invasion is concerned, and what they primarily use as their weapon is the French language itself.

The Other White

The ‘refracted intention’ of the Thackeray, through Becky’s portrayal is perhaps to accept, albeit grudgingly, that in the post Napoleonic age, an Anglo-Saxon univocality is impossible and the carnivalization through the incursion of the foreign phrases as well as with individuals such as Becky, has to be accepted. While with Dickens in the case of Hortense, there seems still a resistance to accept the same and a desperate desire to enclose the French in the cocoon of othering and thereby ensuring the insularity of the English.

This othering of the French Hortense is executed by Dickens through different methodologies. With Hortense steadily getting represented as an agitated, violent and disturbing foreigner, Dickens emphasizes on her alienness with animal imageries. This seems to be the formulaic othering of the French woman by placing her in the lower rung of the bio-hierarchy. Hortense as the agitated, excited foreigner who is prompt to reaction makes the English around her appear saner and more human. When the narrative says that Hortense possesses a “feline mouth...she seems to go about like a very neat She-Wolf imperfectly tamed” (*Bleak House* 187), it seems Dickens is echoing Giorgio Agamben’s argument that holds humans would emphasize upon animal elements in themselves in order to expel the same so that the ‘pure’ human surfaces (Agamben 15-16). Only with *Bleak House*, this attempt was done on the animalesque Frenchwoman within the English social-scape to secure the native in their rational sobriety. To further distance her from the respectable English woman, feline imagery is constantly invoked. Hortense is “tigress-like...snap[ping] her teeth together, as if her mouth closed with a spring” (*Bleak House* 837) The passionate woman has got to be bestial. Her movements are wild as she is described in one place as throwing off her shoes and walking through the most wet stretch of grass. Even the groundskeeper describes her as “powerful, high and passionate.” (*Bleak House* 299).

The bestial representation of Hortense is an extension of the anxiety that the Caucasian foreigner engendered in the English. She is, unlike an Asian and an African, white and thereby accommodated in the high society with greater accessibility than the so-called racial inferiors. This accommodation, with the constant realization of the historical Anglo-French rivalry and the pall of a Napoleonic invasion, was fraught with the janus-faced desire to include and to expunge. The services of the likes of Hortense or Becky Sharp could not be denied in their social merit and simultaneously they could not be seamlessly assimilated in that society itself because of their foreignness in general and being French in particular. It is this anxiety at the intriguing location of the desire and

derision in the one body and the grudging acceptance of the same in the social space that finds its narrative expression in the animal imageries. The same finds an echo in Walter Benjamin who categorically states: “The horror that stirs deep in man is an obscure awareness that in him something lives so akin to the animal that it might be recognized (Fudge 6).” The bestial French is thus at once brought to the fold of the refined English society and its simultaneously scorned at. In that heady confluence whirls the xenophobic anxiety.

This simultaneous acceptance and rejection has far reaching implication in the novel. Because of her accommodation in the family space, she is privy to the dark secrets of Lady Dedlock’s past that makes her an immediate threat to the English aristocracy. She is especially threatening as she is constantly spying. She is depicted as having the capacity to see everything: She is even described to have the uncanny capacity of watching through the corner of her eyes without turning her head (*Bleak House* 187). She is thus an evident danger to the respectable society as she reinforces the threat of exposure presented by the sinister, foreign woman who sees into the dark recesses of the Victorian society, possessing secrets of sexual misconduct that respectable Victorians wished to deny. The narrator thus contrives the plot in such a way that makes Hortense an evil but ineffective one at the end. The murder of Tulkinghorn is actually a relief for Lady Dedlock as that eliminates an immediate threat for her. Further Dickens manipulates a significant reader-sympathy for the Lady as we are constantly made aware of the circumstantial compulsion that she had to undergo. When it is revealed that Hortense is the murderer, it comes as a relief in the narrative. By then, the narrator has ensured that we have much less sympathy for the passionate and erratic Frenchwoman.

This othering of the fellow-white European comes as a resistance to the hitherto accepted binaries of global relationships, namely Occidental/Oriental or White/Black and so on, The othering herein is more intimate as it exercises itself on the transgression of family, community and homeland boundaries. Further, as this fear of foreignness is less tangible than racism and more elusive than colonial othering, it circulates through several markers. Hence, French Hortense is disliked not merely because of her aggression and criminal intent, this foreign woman loses out on the sympathy of the target readership of the novel by the fact that she is lowborn. While the English middle class would find it difficult to receive a novel that projects an English Lady as a murderess, they would not be that hard on one that has an offender with an alien and low birth. Thackeray’s Becky Sharp too was of born low as her mother was a French dancing girl. The anxiety at the foreign thus resists any methodology of stable categorization and little hesitates to exploit every possible means to find expression.

The Structured Disempowerment of the Transgressor

Dickens further reinforces this tilted equation disfavours Hortense by making the reader not privy to her inner thought. As the reader cannot know her thoughts, they cannot relate to her inner struggles. It as if establishes that with so much passion and action, the Frenchwoman lacks the cerebral gifts of thinking and reflection. This is where the politics of representation vis-à-vis racial subalternity and xenophobic othering attains similitude. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ would famously note the inevitable submission of the subaltern voice to the micrological structures of ‘paternal proxies, agents of power’ (Spivak 74). Hence the racial subaltern would remain forever displaced in vocabulary and taxonomy. Interestingly, the silencing of the fellow Caucasian gets executed with far less subtlety. While Dickens only extends emotionally charged speeches to Hortense, Thackeray would keep long phrases and passages of French untranslated in *Vanity Fair*. The statement seems loud and clear: either the French foreigner is not attributed with cogitative reflection or that her thought and words remain alien to the native English.

The deliberate disempowerment of Hortense does not stop there. As the murder of Tulkinghorn takes place, it appears that Hortense acts almost as a substitute character that enacts Lady Dedlock’s desires. She as if emerges as the perfect other of Lady Dedlock herself: the dark, potentially violent nature that lurks beneath the surface of the otherwise ideal woman. The narrator reinforces this fact by stating that “...she (Lady Dedlock) has often, often, often, wished him dead” (*Bleak House* 854). The narrator craftily turns the table on Hortense here. With all her passion, aggression and proactivity, she thus becomes the passive ‘body’ that acts out the ‘will’ of the Lady Dedlock. Precisely herein the lack of access to the thoughts and reflections of Hortense, as designed by the narrator, becomes critically significant. As it is the case with the untranslated passages of *Vanity fair*, so with this narrative black out of sorts performed on Hortense, makes the novel, in the theoretical premise of Wulfgang Iser, more ‘readerly’. Iser was talking about *Vanity Fair* when he put forward the idea that the untranslated passages in the novel puts the onus on the readers to interpret (Iser 51). The same seems to be the case with Hortense as well. The unrevealed motivations of Hortense leave the readers to decide for herself the intent of the character.

Thus, as the English reader now interprets the motives of the French housemaid, it is the desire of the former that turns back on itself. The narrative thus engages with the foreigner to evidently negotiate with the intent of the native, leaving the foreigner with the taint of the crime committed and securing the native woman in the insulation of respectability.

No wonder, against the destructive, evil, feminine energy of Hortense, we have the subdued, contemplative Lady Dedlock. The Lady is almost always in the inert position, exhibiting the cold emotion demanded of the aristocratic woman. She is repeatedly represented gazing absently outside. Her movements are paralyzed. She is described in the novel to be mostly exhibiting a freezing mood. (*Bleak House* 22). This melancholia and the general lack of enthusiasm that Lady Dedlock is associated with in the novel might very well be, as argued by Elaine Showalter, her falling prey to the hypocrisy imposed by the society that condemns passion in the woman (Showalter 64). What is interesting is that, if we agree that the Lady is the 'will' behind the 'body' of Hortense, then we do have to accept that the same passion exists in Lady Dedlock, only suppressed from societal censure. Naturally when Lady Dedlock clothes herself in Hortense's dress, the moment gets poignantly symbolic as the Lady feels free now to be mobile and active in order to find her lover's final resting place. The English lady of the refined aristocracy thus as if invokes the French spirit to garb her as she moves to the nether regions of the society.

Conclusion: The Politics of Removal

The narrator however is not in any confusion about the removal of the alien transgressive woman. Her passionate outburst at the court room as if sticks the final label of guilt on her. When she first entered the room, she gently called inspector Bucket 'My angel'³⁷. After the inspector reveals her guilt, she quickly turns from sweet to savage and calls him, 'an unhappy idiot', a 'great pig', and 'a Devil'³⁸. This is quite in tune with Maria Manning's outrage and thereby reaffirming the fact that emotional outburst is criminal in the poised English society, as much for the crime as it is for the fact of passionate outrage itself.

Mannings' execution had an appalling effect on Dickens. He was aghast at the reaction of the crowd rather than the act of the execution itself. On November 13, 1849, Dickens sent a letter to *The Times* where he mentions his horror at the event that had proven to him "there was no more emotion, no more pity, no more thought that two immortal souls have gone to judgment" (*Times*, printed November 14, 1849). The public execution and the ghastliness of it is avoided in the novel as Hortense is quickly removed not only from the scene of guilt, but from the entire novel. Dickens summarily removes the contagion of the dangerous foreign woman: "It is impossible to describe how Mr. Bucket gets [Hortense] out, but he accomplishes the feat in a manner peculiar to himself; enfolding and pervading her like a cloud, and hovering away with her as if he were a homely Jupiter (*Bleak House* 837)". The desire of the narrator is to get rid of the anxiety that the foreign criminal woman exposes the English society to. The criminality, however, is not her singular identity. It is undeniable that she had been in the first place accommodated, albeit grudgingly, in the English society and the anxiety that her foreignness generated, rose out of this uncomfortable intimacy.

Sara Ahmed terms this 'the performativity of disgust' that operates in the 'contact zone' (Ahmed 87). In her *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed projects this intimacy of foreignness as the genesis of a movement of disgust which has its roots in the recognition of the intimate foreigner as the abject inter-corporeality. Ahmed invokes Julia Kristeva who in her *Power of Horror* would point out the most potent threat of the abject: its potency to threaten its fragile container, to disturb the container's guaranteed integrity of its "own clean self". (Ahmed 86) In search of the riddance from this, to Ahmed, the subject is left with the singular option of expelling the other. The contact zone of intimacy needs to be obliterated in order to reobtain for the subject the assurance that the element of disgust is no longer a threat and the subject's sanctity stands intact and unharmed (Ahmed 87). Quite formulaic in its manner, the narrative at the end, after all the silencing of her thoughts and making her a tool for the aristocratic desire, removes Hortense and hides her from the public gaze, thereby re-establishing the social order. This removal is more of an expunging, that not only removes the contaminated woman criminal, but settles the anxiety of losing the secured insularity arising out of the presence of the foreign 'other', though white and European,

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