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The Other Beyond the Wall: A Post-colonial Reading of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and HBO's *Game of Thrones*

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Abstract

In George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, although the "free folk" are split into hundreds of cultures, tribes, clans, villages and raiding parties, they are lumped together by the citizens of the Seven Kingdoms who refer to them as the "wildings". Separated from the rest of Westeros by the Wall guarded by the Night watch, the free folk are viewed as the Other, an entity as wild and as savage as monsters, giants, ghouls, stalking shadows, and the dead that walk. Drawing on various post-colonial theories, the paper traces the shifting identification of the Other and the attitude towards the free folk, addressing the construction of cultural identity, gender, ecology, and migration.

Introduction

George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-) is an epic fantasy series which (so far) spans five books, nearly six thousand pages, and an HBO series under the title *Game of Thrones* (USA, 2011-). Set in another world reminiscent of medieval Europe, most of the events take place in Westeros, the continent of the Seven Kingdoms and the society most similar to the feudal and medieval times of England and France, drawing inspiration from the savage political infighting of the Wars of the Roses. One throne unifies the land but the great houses fight over who will sit upon it. During the many-sided struggle for dominance, both politically and religiously, another force gathers behind the Wall to conquer the Seven Kingdoms. The third major storyline revolves around the ambitions of Daenerys Targaryen, an exiled princess, and her attempts to claim back the throne. In this multiperspective and multifocalised narrative, the decade-long summer is about to end, following the ominous words of House Stark: "Winter is coming".

In Martin's saga, the Wall looms large. It separates the Seven Kingdoms, or the settled south, from the uncivil North and the lands beyond—occupied by the wildings, the Giants, Children of the Forest, creatures like Direwolves (a hybrid between dogs and wolves), and a supernatural force referred to as "the Others", which only a few believe exists. "Beyond the Wall", on the other hand, is a generic term

employed by the people of the Seven Kingdoms to refer to the large area of Westeros that lies north of the Wall. Martin's Wall is very loosely based on Hadrian's Wall. Martin himself cited a visit to Hadrian's Wall:

We walked along the top of the wall just as the sun was going down. It was the fall. I stood there and looked out over the hills of Scotland and wondered what it would be like to be a Roman centurion [...] covered in furs and not knowing what would be coming out of the north at you. (qtd. in Harrop, 2014)

Unlike Hadrian's Wall, however, this Wall is made of ancient ice and is over 200 metres high, representing an unsurmountable obstacle for those who do not know or cannot access the passageways. Martin compares the two walls, saying,

Hadrian's Wall is impressive, but it's not really tall. A good ladder would be all you need to scramble right on over it. When you're doing fantasy, it has to be bigger than in real life. (qtd. in Harrop, 2014)

Martin's seven hundred feet-high Wall, therefore, becomes a monumental piece of imaginative landscaping where mortal engineering and magic interlace. When comparing the two walls, Harrop argues that the dedicated watchers on the Wall are not the Roman centurions initially envisaged by Martin, for based on their culture, weaponry, and fighting style, the Night's Watch are more akin to medieval knights, and "their name may have been inspired by the "night watch" which attempted (and often failed) to keep order along the unruly frontier between the independent kingdoms of Scotland and England during the sixteenth century".

Similar to Hadrian's Wall which is believed to have been built as a means of protection from invaders originating in territories not under the Roman Empire's reign, Martin's ice wall could be seen as a barrier against the wildlings, who do not recognize the Iron Throne. However, from the very beginning, in the Prologue of *A Game of Thrones* (1996), the reader is aware of another, very real danger in the lands north of the Wall where "Something's wrong". Thus, the Wall's purpose is to keep out bad things. Throughout the saga, the reader is presented with warnings of the imminent danger and the supernatural horrors emerging in the land beyond the Wall, for example: the ominous dead direwolf encountered in the early chapters whose species has not been sighted south of the Wall in two hundred years, and Osha (Natalia Tena), born of the Free Folk, who flees south. Yet the wildlings do not simply avoid the Wall and the South, for they familiarize themselves with the Wall, raiding it and carrying out bold assaults upon its integrity. Jon Snow (Kit Harington) is shocked to discover that wildling raiders could climb the ice-face itself and that "They have done this before, every man of them" (*A Storm of Swords*, "Jon"). For these climbers, raiding the cliff-face of the Wall has become a risky, familiar task. The reader slowly realizes that the Wall is neither "the end of the World" nor impenetrable, for its ice-stacks are riddled with potential routes and underground trails (one of those secret routes will be used by Bran Stark [Isaac Hempstead Wright] to head to the north).

The Construction and Transformation of Identities on the Wall

From the very beginning of Martin's saga, the reader is made aware of the Wall's identity as the outermost limit of civilization, tantalized by the question of "what lies beyond" (as early as when Jon Snow was still a recruit), and promised strange and dangerous adventures beyond it. The importance of the unknown is highlighted when Tyrion Lannister (Peter Dinklage) announces his desire to "stand on top of the Wall and piss off the edge of the world" (*A Game of Thrones*, "Tyrion"). Martin will confirm this description when Jon undergoes his initiation into the Night's Watch, traveling through the Wall through "a narrow tunnel cut through the ice" to emerge into the Haunted Forest, a journey that Jon describes as ridding "past the end of the world" (*A Game of Thrones*, "Jon").

If Westeros is vaguely medieval Europe, the world outside it becomes the Orient whose people are an image of the Other, something foreign, almost unnatural, and wholly unlike people in the West. According to Edward Said,

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident.' . . . Thus the relationship between Occident and Orient

is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony. (2003, 2-5)

Key to Said's theorization is the setting up of boundaries, demarcating "ours" from "theirs", calling the territory beyond these boundaries the "land of the barbarians". Such an arbitrary distinction does not depend on the so-called barbarians to acknowledge land distinction. In addition to territory, the distinction between "they" and "us" is highlighted by other factors, such as social, ethnic, and cultural. The sense of place, which reflects an understanding of belonging, forcefully produces a sense of self, an imperial identity. It is not required that the "others/barbarians" acknowledge such a distinction, for it is enough for "us/the occident" to set up those boundaries in our minds.

From the beginning of *Game of Thrones* TV series, it is clear that HBO wholeheartedly embraces the theme of orientalism. Nearly all major characters are undeniably white, and characters of colour have a peripheral presence. George R. R. Martin denied this on his blog:

I do know that David and Dan and HBO do favour having a racially and ethnically diverse cast on the series. It is true that we've lost several black characters who appear in the novels (Chataya and Alayaya, Jalabhar Xho, Strong Belwas), but to balance that, characters like Salladhor Saan and Xaro Xhoan Daxos, both white in the books, have been played by black actors. Missandei as well, though in the books the Naathi are golden-skinned, not white.

In addition, the Wildings in the North are stereotypical barbarians. For example, they wear crudely-cut pieces of fur (and apparently, nothing else). North of the Wall is nothing but an empty wasteland of ice and snow (though, surprisingly, the Wildings manage to have ample fuel for their fires amid this empty tundra). However, despite the orientalist depiction of them, the Wildings fare better than the Dothraki, who are treated the worst by the television series, disappearing entirely following the second season, replaced by the utterly anonymous Unsullied. To enforce their otherness and inferiority, the Free Folks are repeatedly described by the derogatory term "wildings" by those living south of the wall. Although the Free Folks are split into hundreds of cultures, clans, villages and raiding parties, with some reasonably cultured and others savage and hostile, inhabitants of the Seven Kingdoms only view them as lawless, primitive killers, rapists and thieves. Yet the former succeed to unite in an attempt to evade death by joining Mance Rayder's (Ciarán Hinds) army, a diverse force formed of nearly ninety different clans of wildings who speak seven different languages and have a long history of rivalry. On the other hand, the Free Folks themselves look down upon those who live south of the wall, calling them "kneelers" for being blind subjects to their lords and kings. Only when they face a common enemy will the inhabitants on both sides of the wall start shedding their differences and prejudices. However, while traveling with his wilding prisoner Ygritte (Rose Leslie), Jon, and consequently the reader, is reminded that the separation between the wildings (considered the Other at that moment) and the Night Watch (representatives of the Occident) is groundless, for both parties descend from the First Men. Moreover, according to Ygritte, her folk have been in those lands the whole time, way before the big Wall was erected and the land divided. The difference, therefore, becomes geographical and not racial.

In addition to the dichotomy between civilized/savage, a more subtle layer of othering could be found in the social exclusion of the members of the Night's Watch. Historically, Hadrian's Wall was not simply a ferocious, impenetrable line of armed defence, on the contrary, it was a provincial frontier that saw the development of hybrid identities among border communities. Similarly, the Wall in Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* becomes a site for personal and collective transformation. Many characters associated with the Wall are offered "crucial opportunities for character development and personal change" (Harrop, 2014). The Wall, therefore, creates a hybrid space, a culturally complex frontier zone where pre-existing identities adapt, re-negotiate and re-forge in an attempt to survive. Such a hybrid and transformative nature is foregrounded way before Jon reaches Castle Black for the first time. It is worth noticing that the position held by the Night's Watch has changed throughout the years; originally chosen to protect the lands in the south from the near-mythical creatures, the White Walkers, the Wall defenders have ended up sending out patrols into the wilderness to keep track of the wildings and prevent them from crossing south of the Wall. Thus, the Wall is transformed from a residence for honourable warriors into a dumping ground for exiled criminals. The Wall is described unappealingly by Tyrion who describes those who "take the black" as "Sullen peasants, debtors, poachers, rapers, thieves, and bastards like you all

wind up on the Wall” (*A Game of Thrones*, “Tyrion”). Lord Commander Mormont (James Cosmo) presents the Wall hybridity and recruiting practices in a more positive light, stressing its being a site for redemption:

“You came to us outlaws,” he began, “poachers, rapers, debtors, killers and thieves. You came to us children. You came to us alone, in chains, with neither friends nor honor. You came to us rich, and you came to us poor. Some of you bear the names of proud houses. Others have only bastards’ names, or no names at all. It makes no matter. All that is past now. On the Wall, we are all one house”. (*A Game of Thrones*, “Jon”)

Thus, the Wall at the northernmost edge of the Seven Kingdoms represents Man’s last chance to begin a new life where even promotion and advancement are available to bastards and those denied entrance in polite locales. To Jon, the Wall becomes his chance to stabilize his own uncertain identity.

Beyond the Wall, both the reader and Jon encounter characters who can successfully manipulate multiple identities, such as Tormund Giantsbane (Kristofer Hivju), a member in Mance Rayder’s armies, who possesses many names that act as markers of his feats and friendships; he is (among others): “Husband to Bears, the Mead-King of Ruddy Hall, Speaker to Gods, and Father to Hosts” (*A Storm of Swords*, “Jon”). Yet the clearest example of exploiting changeable identities is Mance Rayder. Once a black brother himself, he has reinvented himself as a supreme leader of the wildings’ forces, a King-beyond-the-Wall. Mance breaks his vows because he could not bear to part with the Scarlet silk used by a wildling woman to patch his black cloak. Such a poetic image highlights cultural hybridity and symbolizes Mance’s unprecedented achievement in uniting the various folk of the lands beyond the Wall. Thus, contrary to Jon’s initial hopes, the black cloak (symbolizing a stable and honourable identity) proves to be not enough to survive this harsh part of the world. One needs to be capable of negotiating flexibility between a range of titles, names, allegiances and relationships to manage surviving within the hybrid space of the borderlands.

In postcolonial discourse, the concept of identity is linked to one’s sense of place. According to Doreen Massey, when the bond between the traditional sense of place and one’s original roots is shattered, one is left utterly rootless; the result of such a case of rootlessness would be a sense of emotional emptiness (1994). In the case of Jon Snow, his sense of alienation and unbelongingness initially stems from his family and his social background (mainly being labelled a “bastard”, a son of Eddard Stark by a mother whose identity is a source of speculation). Thus, his childhood is characterized with detachment and emotional withdrawal.

Jon’s issues of cultural encounter and his struggle to accept his own experiences of the inhabitants of the lands beyond the Wall go back to Old Nan’s tales of “the savage folk who drank blood from human skulls” (*A Clash of Kings*, “Jon”). Jon slowly realizes that his earlier belief that “we’re here to fight wildings, not save them” (*A Clash of Kings*, “Jon”) is wrong, for the dangerous forces rising in the North are not carried out by the wilding populations who have lived alongside the Wall for generations. Following his election as Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, Jon negotiates and even brings former enemies through the Wall to share in its defense against foes long considered to be the stuff of nursery nightmares. Although his actions seem to run counter to his official role, they follow his new understanding of the spirit of his vows:

I am the sword in the darkness. I am the watcher on the walls. I am the fire that burns against the cold, the light that brings the dawn, the horn that wakes the sleepers, the shield that guards the realms of men. And for him a new refrain: *I am the guard who opened the gates.* (*A Dance with Dragons*, “Jon”)

The key phrase to Jon’s thinking becomes “The shield that guards the realms of men”; he elects not to discriminate between the various quarreling categories of men, recognizing the interdependence of the peoples inhabiting the borderlands. Although the recruited wildings to serve along the Wall join to evade fear, starvation and cold, and not to defend territorial boundaries or (despite the hopes of Stannis Baratheon) to bolster any claims to the Iron Throne, the symbolism of their mass migration is still significant. By resettling the wilding populations, the Wall becomes a site of cultural encounter and possible future integration, where former enemies (wildings) are offered relative security and comfort in exchange of their acceptance of an alien military and cultural authority (the South). The Wall, once

described as a barrier, an icy defensive fortification dominating the landscape in *A Game of Thrones*, becomes a symbol of multiplicity in *A Dance with Dragons* (2011). Thus, what was once an impenetrable military defense slowly becomes a site of personal discovery and cultural encounter. Ironically, such integration does not eliminate the theme of othering, for it only transfers this status from one group to another. With the unity between the Night's Watch and the Free Folk, a new common enemy takes over the role of the Other: the White Walkers. Paradoxically, the only group of creatures that is officially labeled the Other by Martin is the White Walkers; by describing them as "white" and with "blue" eyes (a physical description of the Occident), Martin negates the image of the coloured other. Moreover, so far in the published work, despite their vulnerability to "dragonsteel", the White Walkers are neither weak nor oppressed, on the contrary, they are the force that drive the original inhabitants of the North to forced migration.

The Othering of Gender

Although Martin incorporates several elements that have become de rigueur in fantasy novels, like swords with names, mythical beasts, and acres of naked flesh (the latter especially in the HBO series), *A Song of Ice and Fire* has its own version of realism, usually described by critics and reviewers as "gritty realism", a euphemism for realistic, dark, violent style of medievalism. He claims that this form of realism has been one of his major goals, for he

sort of had a problem with . . . [fantasy novels] were getting it all wrong. It was a sort of Disneyland Middle Ages, where they had castles and princesses and all that. The trappings of a class system, but they didn't seem to understand what a class system actually meant . . . the sensibilities were those of 20th century Americans. (Carroll, 2014, 248-49)

Martin, therefore, rejects the Disneyland version of the Middle Ages—which could be traced back to Victorian medievalism that tended to idealize the Middle Ages and use them to enforce cultural ideologies of the upper and middle class—and constructs his own version based on his own beliefs and desires. However, in his brutal construction of the Middle Ages, women's roles are usually defined by their being victims of confinement, violence, and rape. In *A Dance with Dragons*, Iron Emmet voices his concern to Jon regarding the safety of women in Hardin's Tower: "Men are men, vows are words, and words are wind. You should put guards around the women" ("Jon"). An example of one of the worst cases of dominating women is Caster who forcefully marries his own daughters, an act that is considered an abomination even by the other wildings whose faith (the Old Gods of the Forest) prohibits incest to prevent the begetting of weak children. Some women of the Free Folks, on the other hand, manage to escape this othering, for they are allowed to take up arms and ferociously fight alongside men, becoming known as "spearwives". Even their far-from-idealized courtship ritual—which is basically based on "stealing" or kidnapping a woman from her family—involves a show of the woman's independence in defending herself. Only a few female major characters succeed to rebel against this misogynistic structure of power in the series, such as, Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner), Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey), and Brienne of Tarth (Gwendoline Christie), and only one woman manages to visit the wall and keep her power intact: King Stanis' priestess Melisandre (Carice van Houten), an exotic, amoral woman who wears crimson, has her own agenda, and who instils fear in men and ultimately leads her king to be deserted by half of his army. Despite her power, Melisandre is given the opportunity to have her own chapter as a focalizer only once, a fact that strips her of much of her power in front of the reader.

Within the postcolonial structure of the Wall and the lands beyond, women become another cultural and ideological Other. According to Mohanty, women are usually characterized as a singular group based on their experience of shared oppression, hence, a sociological notion of a shared oppression that binds them. By mistaking women's homogeneity as a group for their being material subjects of their own history and an "already-constituted group", women end up being labeled powerless, exploited and sexually harassed (2003, 337-38). Moreover, by labeling women as "different", division becomes a tool of self-defense and conquest. Minh-ha explains this process of "separate development" as a "kind of perverted logic, they work toward your erasure while urging you to keep your way of life and ethnic values within the borders of your homelands . . . You may keep your traditional law and tribal customs among yourselves, as long as you and your kind are careful not to step beyond the assigned limits" (2003,

265).

Ecology

DeLoughrey describes place as having “infinite meanings and morphologies: it might be defined geographically, in terms of the expansion of empire; environmentally, in terms of wilderness or urban settings; genealogically, in linking communal ancestry to land; as well as phenomenologically, connecting body to place”. While postcolonial frameworks focus on displacement and the diaspora, ecocriticism focuses on “human continuity and the ethics of place and belonging” (2011, 4). As Spivak points out in her writings, the colonial project regularly legitimized itself by claiming that indigenous people should be considered animals that have not yet graduated into humanhood (1985). This logic has been thankfully challenged by postcolonial theory, not by celebrating Man but by thinking about human life and the complex relationship between Man and beast. Ecocriticism, on the other hand, focuses on nature where speaking animals and seasonal symbolism play a major part. While social ecology tends to value nature primarily in its human uses and grounds its analysis in domination, deep ecology values nature and the equal rights of other species (Heise, 2006, 507), independent of the utilitarian instrumental benefits or human use, disregarding the differences between races and cultures (Bookchin, 1987, 2).

From an ecofeminist point of view, the attempt to dominate both nature and women by men could be seen as the root cause of the crisis in the North. Moreover, according to Nerchant, The essentialist perception of women as closer to nature, as a result of their biological functions of reproduction, has historically been used in the service of domination to limit their social roles to childbearers, child rearers, caretakers, and housekeepers. (1994, 12)

A stark example could be seen in the plight of Craster’s (Robert Pugh) nineteen wives who are sexually exploited and forced to endure the murdering/sacrificing of their male children in an attempt to ensure his own survival. Although Gilly, one of his wives/daughters manages to escape with the help of Samwell Tarley, saving her newly born son (*A Storm of Swords*, 2000), she is ultimately forced to leave her son behind when sent South of the Wall (*A Feast for Crows*, 2005).

In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and on both sides of the Wall, most of the characters who dominate nature rely on uniting with nature and not just exploiting it. Such a unity between Man and nature is exemplified in Orell, one of the scouts of the free Folk who is a “warg”, a being capable of entering the mind of an animal, controlling its actions and seeing through its eyes. Moreover, the success of Jon’s little brother, Brandon Stark, to navigate the labyrinth underneath the Wall and go through the North side of it initiates his journey of self-discovery and his acceptance of the deep connection between him and nature, specifically the three-eyed crow and the sacred weirwood trees. In *A Clash of Kings*, Jon Snow discovers that whenever he opens his “third eye”, he becomes a “warg” like his brother Bran, a being capable of controlling his albino direwolf, Ghost, and of having prophetic dreams. Even the Night’s Watch are called “crows” which, in addition to being a reference to their black garments, could be a reference to an old relationship between them and nature.

Migration

Postcolonialism should be considered in the light of migration (whether forced or voluntary), a form of dislocation of the Other, usually as a result of major political upheavals and wars. After going through what Bhabha describes as “the Utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity” (2003), migrants cross borders to live tenuously in inhospitable circumstances, after which issues of class, subjugation and exploitation and cultural marginalization arise. The uncertainties, wariness and insecurities migrants suffer from are apparent when the Free Folk are allowed to pass through the Wall and settle in the Gift, an area of land south of the Wall under the protection of both the Night’s Watch and House Winterfell.

Three major features of migration are: hybridity, ambivalence and abandonment. Migrants recreate themselves through their encounters with cultural complexities and the discriminating experience of being a minority. Bhabha argues that the migrant individual’s hybridity is appreciated not by his

clinging to his pre-given ethnic morals and cultural traditions, but by “the power of tradition to be re-described through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are in the minority” (1994). Hybridity, moreover, entails “politicized and hierarchizing dualism, for instance between the rootless and the rooted, the migratory and the sedentary, stillness and movement, hybridity and purity, heteroglossia and monoglossia” (Moslund, 2010). A common feature in migration experiences is ambivalence, where migrants feel torn between the desire to retain cultural roots and being drawn to the acceptance of and integration to the new culture, an inner conflict that starts before leaving the homeland and lasts after entering the host society. By recounting the Free Folk’s diverse experiences of the flight from their homeland and the terror and humiliation they suffer from when seeking sanctuary, Martin provides the reader with their feelings of abandonment and dreams of return. Their migration, moreover, could be seen as a repetition in history though to a different direction. Thousands of years before the current events of the epic, the Children of the Forest were the original inhabitants of Westeros. After fighting a series of wars against the First Men (an earlier civilization of primitive warriors) and losing, they are forced to sign the Pact of the Isle of Faces, a treaty that banishes them to the Weirwoods forest, becoming the first forced migrants in this world.

Conclusion

A *Song of Ice and Fire* captures the imagination of its readers by showing the everlasting conflicts between self-sacrifice and self-interest, the human spirit and the human ego, and good and evil, and by Martin’s superb storytelling abilities, where each chapter ends with a cliff-hanger that contributes to further pressing questions about the fate of each of his hundreds of characters. Fans of the epic and its HBO adaptation disregard the controversial amount of rape and bloodshed as justifiable because of what they believe is a historically accurate portrayal of the Middle Ages. However, what Martin’s work really portrays is a colonized version of inequality, exploitation, and violence against marginalized groups, people of colour and women.

In the part of Martin’s world where there are thousands of acres of unexplored territory, the reader gets to witness the development of one of the major characters: Jon Snow. Like Jon and his maesters, we come to the conclusion that we “know nothing”. Is Jon on the wrong side of the Wall? And what is the right side of the Wall? Who are the “real” others? With time, Martin’s dramatic portrayal of the changing role of the Wall presents the reader with an ostensibly divisive monument that slowly becomes a site for coexistence and cooperation, which ultimately helps the reader to question the limits of his/her knowledge in regards to the lives of the different groups inhabiting that region.

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