THE UNIVERSITY OF THE BASQUE COUNTRY

FACULTY OF ARTS

ENGLISH AND GERMAN PHILOLOGY AND TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION DEPARTMENT

From "Belle Dame sans Merci" to "South Ldn Gyaldem": An Analysis of Beauty and Evil in Romantic and Contemporary Black British Poetry

PhD Thesis

ERIKA SANZ GÓMEZ

Thesis directors:

Dr. Martin Simonson and Dr. Raúl Montero Gilete

Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2023

Table of Contents

Specifications

Citation System

The system used to cite the references used throughout this thesis will be as advised by the 9th edition of the *Modern Language Association Handbook* (2021). However, some exceptions must be noted:

1. The space allowed between lines in the text is 1,5, instead of the double space proposed by MLA. This grants enough separation between lines to make for a comfortable reading experience.

Appendices

Due to the difficulty in finding the poems written by Black British authors that are considered in this thesis other than in the collections in which they were published, appendices have been added at the very end of the dissertation which provide the reader with complete versions of the poems. These appendices have been named using letters 'A' to 'G' and are listed in order of appearance.

Other Considerations

1. The term 'Black' appears throughout the text spelled with a capital B. The reason why this choice has been made is that when using this term the author is referring not to people whose skin is black, but to the groups and communities that are of Caribbean and African origin, mostly those who reside in the U.K., be they immigrants or people born and raised in this country. Discussions concerning the necessity and value of this decision abound and this specific decision does not wish to contribute to the creation of rigid rules.

Introduction

Poetry plays an invaluable role in the human experience, serving as both mirror and bridge - reflecting our innermost thoughts, emotions, and experiences, while simultaneously connecting us to others, across time, culture, and space. In the words of Audre Lorde "Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before" ("Poetry is not a Luxury" 9). Lorde further explains that part of the importance of poetry lies in its ability to move humans to action, after offering them a safe space where radical ideas can be contemplated and developed (9). Whether this understanding of poetry as something that is so central to our humanity comes from Lorde, writing in the 1980s U.S., or from Keats himself who rather simply stated that "'I find I cannot exist without Poetry" (*Selected Letters* 17), it seems quite clear that this form of art has a particularly deep connection to us.

However, over the years, poetry has either been kept in the circles of 'high' culture and, in more recent times, it has seen itself relegated to an unappreciated form of literature. Nowadays in the U.K., where this research focuses, poetry represents only a minority of the literary works that are published, promoted and enjoyed by the readers of the country. Those who seek to read poetry find themselves with a selection that is noticeably homogeneous, being populated mainly by poets who are white and, more often than not, men of the higher social classes, a sample that is far from the social reality and 'popular' poetic scene of the country. This dissertation sees poetry as something that belongs to all of us, because it speaks to us all in a deeper, more meaningful way.

As something that is such a key part of humanity, poetry should belong to all of us. However, nowadays the poetry scene is still mostly white and middle-class. For this reason, we need to tackle the issues of underrepresentation that are so obvious. When we think of Romantic poetry there is no doubt that the poetry written during this period is part of the well-established British literary canon. We understand Romantic poetry as somewhat of an essence of Britishness, something that has shaped our culture and the world we live in. Of course, there are differences in terms of how canonical some authors are and, we cannot deny that

some of them have been neglected and are not remembered all that much nowadays. The extent to which Romantic authors have become part of the canon depends on a variety of variables, among others their gender, social class and the quality of their work. However, it can be agreed that Romanticism as a movement is something that is, still nowadays, widely studied and appreciated and that some of the names associated with this movement are key figures in the history of British literature. In fact, it would seem that their influence is almost inescapable, as those who are not directly influenced by the Romantic tradition directly most certainly do still receive indirect influences (i.e. via the work of contemporaries who are influenced by the Romantics) (Montefiore 13). For this reason, we can claim that "the Romantic tradition —among others— is still an inevitable part of the intellectual context of poetry today; no one can write poems without engaging with the complex of themes, images, myths, stereotypes, reference-points and conventions which are roughly denominated by the word 'tradition'" (Montefiore 13). Of course, contemporary authors engage with this tradition in diverse ways, some may emulate and aim to continue it while others actively criticise it. However, as Jan Montefiore has argued, "to criticize tradition is not to be disconnected from it" (Montefiore 15). Therefore, we can claim that all of the poems that this dissertation analyses have been somewhat influenced by the Romantic tradition and this fact unquestionably places all the poems within one same tradition: that of British literature.

When it comes to Black British poetry, on the other hand, its position in that same tradition of British poetry and literature is a problematic one. As it has been mentioned above, is no doubt that nowadays poetry in general occupies a somewhat marginal position in the literary scene and this is certainly accentuated when we speak about Black authors. The poetry these authors write is far from easy to access: collections are difficult to find in bookshops and information about the work and its authors is scarce and remote. Similarly, poems by Black British authors are not part of the academic curriculum, except for one or two exceptions, and cultural institutions have not payed much attention to them. While it is true that between the 1990s and the 2000s the British Council made an effort to advocate for the literature written by all kinds of non-white British authors, the situation has changed in the last two decades and the attention these authors received from one of the main artistic organisations in the country has decreased significantly, showing their lack of interest in

cultural diversity (Ledent 241-242). Nowadays, as a consequence of the changes that have taken place in the publishing and media industries, "less seems to have taken place in terms of presenting Black British writing as part of the national narrative — as if promotional efforts in this direction were now felt to be no longer necessary" (Ledent 242). Ledent further explains that, although the reasons for this shift are not entirely clear, "a complacent view of British society as being now free from discrimination, and therefore not requiring any special intercessions for fairer arts representativeness" (242) is prevalent in the country. This view is dangerous as it spreads the narrative that it is only the quality of the work produced that dictates the success and respect an author receives, a considerable misrepresentation of the current poetry scene.

When it comes to Black women poets specifically, it is even more difficult to find them in mainstream spaces or conversations about literature. Often, women are placed in a separate category, one that would seem to be a subcategory of Black British poetry. These voices "seldom attract any serious critical or indeed scholarly attention. Nor do such writers have rooms in academic institutions. They exist, in my opinion healthily, outside the `posts' and have not as yet been labelled or categorized further than their ethnicity" (Nasta 72). This situation seems to mirror that of Romantic women poets perfectly: both groups exist in the margins of poetry and it appears that the only way of gaining recognition is by embodying the types of poet that are acceptable to the mainstream discourse, be it the poetess or the Black woman who writes about the struggle of belonging exclusively. This reality is not a new occurrence and it extends to other forms of art created by Black women too. As Olufemi explains, "art is threatening because when produced under the right conditions, it cannot be controlled. But gatekeepers and cultural institutions have written women, especially black women, outside of the history of artistic creation and freedom" (Olufemi 84). We are, indeed, still working to reverse this erasure of Black women from different artistic scenes and poetry is by no means an exception.

This poetry that finds itself in the margins of the margins, however, is as central to the British Literary tradition as Romantic poetry is thought to be and, as such, it shares many of the preoccupations of Romantic poetry. One of these themes is, of course, womanhood in its many forms. The representation of women is, undoubtedly, one of the most prevalent subject

matters in the history of Western art, whether we look at the Romantic period or at the poetry being produced in current times. Women have been portrayed in various different ways throughout history, but two main ideas seem to be predominant in the depictions of female characters: they fit into the categories of either angel or monster (Gilbert and Gubar 76), and, more often than not, they are described as extremely beautiful beings. During the Romantic period artists, poets in particular, produced a vast array of texts in which women are the main characters. This specific period is particularly interesting when it comes to the way in which poets wrote about women, since the new ideas brought about by thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) questioned the established system of belief that considered women to be inferior beings. Although extensive work dealing with the representation of women has been carried out within the work of the six male canonical Romantic poets (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Keats, Shelley and Lord Byron), numerous other poets, among which many are women, have not been considered to the same extent and remain, even nowadays, unknown to most of us. The fact that only the work of those six poets has been widely studied has resulted in a considerably narrow understanding of what Romantic literature actually is and, at the same time, it has led us to create a very restricted vision of Romanticism as an artistic movement, a vision that differs greatly from what this movement truly was. For this reason, the importance of looking outside the canon must be emphasised. The Romantic period was an epoch in which women were becoming increasingly involved in the literary world, both as writers and readers, and, despite them having been overlooked for the last 200 years, it is fundamental to acknowledge and value their work. This re-evaluation of the canon, should result in a wider and more diverse concept of Romanticism, one that reflects the artistic creation of that era more accurately. This new and broader concept of Romanticism, which should encompass female as well as male writers, is crucial in a society like our present-day one, where young people are progressively challenging and rethinking the established gender-related power dynamics. Hence, poems written by women need to be recovered and studied alongside the ones produced by male authors.

In more recent times, the seminal texts mentioned above and the ideas they explore, which remain undoubtedly relevant to our times, have been expanded upon and updated by more current feminist and cultural thinkers who are still working to unravel and re-think

preconceived ideas of womanhood and femininity. Having briefly touched upon the current climate when it comes to poetry written by Black British authors, it will come as no surprise that efforts to expand the canon are still crucial if it is to represent our society and the writing produced by it more accurately. The need and importance of a literary or poetic canon in itself could be questioned here but, since it continues to dictate so much of how we look at literature and a complete erasure seems unlikely for the time being, expanding it seems to be the logical first step. The British poetic scene cannot be understood adequately without allowing the voices of so-called ethnic minorities, disabled poets, working-class poets and poets of all gender identities to enter the canon, until every poet is afforded the same level of opportunity and respect.

Equally important in this respect is the fact that different readers at different moments in history read and understand texts in different ways and this can offer new perspectives for the way we approach those texts. Some of these perspectives might challenge the generally accepted interpretations we have of specific canonical texts while, at the same time, they can also broaden our overview of a specific literary movement and help us look at other texts that might have been neglected up until now. Since we, as members of the Western society and, more particularly as women in that particular society, are increasingly concerned with gender issues and how the system perpetuates female oppression it seems interesting to look both at the way in which women have been represented in literature throughout history and to rediscover women's voices, the voices of British women in this case. This rediscovery of women writers has the aim of proving that women have, in fact, been writing and that they have been consistently silenced. In so doing, it seeks to contribute to younger generations of women's process of realisation of the fact that there are figures they can identify with and that the masculine discourse is not the only one. This also applies to readers of colour across genres. While studying a selection of texts that are overwhelmingly white and finding literature by authors with whom they might share common origins or experiences can often be a laborious task, this dissertation engages with the current need to establish a literary canon that reflects the country we live in, with its diversity and particularities. True intersectionality is essential in order to understand the world and all its nuances.

Although ideally making the difference between men and women poets, Black and white poets, should be unnecessary, both our society and the one of the late eighteenth– and early nineteenth– centuries call for this distinction to be made. Since men and women, Black and white people take up different positions in these societies and, as a consequence, experience life in different ways, it is essential that we keep these differences in mind when approaching these poems. As Mary Eagleton claims, until men and women are equal the concepts of "men" and "women", and this latter one in particular, are key terms in projects such as the present one (344). This can also be said about Black poets, who navigate a particularly hostile terrain in the process of getting their work published in Britain. It is essential to work towards a representation that is fair and to give visibility to the work of these authors who are commonly disregarded. It is important, however, to stir clear from tokenism and box-ticking policies that rather than contributing to the diversification of the publishing and academic worlds that perpetuate racism. As Kenneth Parker explained it is "not simply a matter of ensuring that 'the black presence' [be] expressed in the classroom, but more fundamentally, [to ensure that the new curriculum might make] a contribution to the project of destroying racism in contemporary Britain" ("Sea Change" 27). As well as this, the limits of representation itself must be remembered as it "also has *political* disadvantages. Whether positively represented or not, the fact that a few individuals *can* represent a community reiterates the comparative weakness of that community" (Getachew 329). The emphasis must be placed not in overlooking difference, or pretending that it does not exist, but in understanding "the way it enables us to articulate how difference underscores our lives" (Olufemi 86).

Keeping these ideas in mind, throughout the analyses of the poems the focus will be specifically on the concepts of beauty and evil, and how the female characters are related to these notions. Several questions arise when approaching the texts from this perspective: Are the women in the poems portrayed as evil beings? Are they innately and inherently evil? How does beauty relate to evil in these texts? How do the poems written by men and those written by women differ? Is there any considerable difference that may be a consequence of the author's sex? What are those differences and what is the reason behind them? How does the portrayal of women in the Romantic period compare to that of the current times? What can we

learn about the evolution of beauty politics and standards when analysing these poems side by side?

Although considerable emphasis is placed on the concept of evil in the female characters of these poems, the dissertation does not intend to follow the trend that has recently developed in feminist literary criticism on British women writers, the ultimate goal of which seems to be to prove that women, all women in general, are not evil and are only capable of morally questionable actions in self-defence ("The Subject of Violence" 46-47). This approach is just as restrictive and essentialist as the one that aims at showing how evil the female sex is. Women, being complex human beings like any others, are just as capable of evil as they are of goodness and, as the dissertation will show, the difference between these two qualities is not always as clear-cut as it would appear at first sight. Further, it will explore the relationship between women, evil and race, as it is the case that Black people have been demonised throughout history. The analysis will unveil the specific ways in which the Black British authors considered tackle these ideas in their writing.

It is not without awareness of the writer's own position that this research has been carried out. As a white woman speaking about Black authors's writing, it is not the author's intention to appropriate voices or discourses that do not belong to her. However, there is a need to address and break the prejudices about reading, teaching and writing black literature. It is often thought that as white people it is not our place to concern ourselves with this writing, that it is not our place to speak about it and that the experiences and ideas these texts express are too far removed from our own. However, if this was the case white people would only study, read and teach literature by contemporary white authors, since everyone else is too different from us. As a matter of fact, we do not have more in common with Romantic poets than we do with black British poets just because the first group were white. What must be remembered when working on texts written by authors from cultures and backgrounds other than our own is to address these texts with respect, making a conscious effort to understand what they speak about without prejudice. Audre Lorde spoke about this matter wisely when she said the following: "I can't possibly teach Black women's writing -their experience is so different from mine. Yet how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and

Proust?" ("Transformation of Silence" 5) and it is with this idea in mind that the present paper has been written.

The paper will be divided into two main sections that sort of mirror each other in terms of structure: each of these sections will begin with an in-depth exploration of the contexts in which the texts were produced, as well as relevant observations about writing in each of these time periods and the role of poetry in said contexts. Following these, the reader will find, in each case, a section that provides the necessary theoretical framework to approach the poems in each case. Although different pieces of writing from different periods of time require different theoretical approaches, both theoretical frameworks depart from notions related to cultural and gender studies. Once the theoretical basis has been established, each section will move onto the analysis of the selected poems, each of which will be preceded by some brief aspects of the authors's lives which are relevant to the issue under study. To complete the dissertation the conclusions extracted from the research that has been carried out will be presented.

Objectives and justification of the corpus

In the first place, this dissertation seeks to explore the profound significance of poetry as a unique literary genre. As will be demonstrated, poetry serves as a transcendental conduit, resonating with the most profound aspects of human existence.

As well as this, this thesis aims to underscore the intrinsic quality and value of contemporary Black British poetry in and of itself. In so doing it endeavours to assert its critical role in redefining what we consider to be the contours of the British literary tradition creating, in so doing, a   better and more accurate understanding of the British literary tradition. The poems published in the last twenty years are a continuation of this tradition and they are in dialogue with the poems written and published in the 19th century. For this reason, both bodies of work need to be approached as   parts of the same thing and, further, contemporary Black British poetry, as some authors have said themselves, takes inspiration from Romantic poetry.

Moreover, it is the authors intention to prove that it is not only possible but also vital to create of body of academic work that considers Black British poetry with the same level of intellectual rigour as it does other works of literature. As a result, it will be shown that a comparative analysis that places Romantic poetry and contemporary Black British poetry side by side is is not only feasible, but also illuminating and it offers fresh perspectives.

Finally, this dissertation intends to analyse and observe the evolution in the portrayal of women between the Romantic period and the contemporary times. Specifically, the focus will be placed on notions of beauty and evil and attention will be payed to the ways in which these interact.

It is, thus, the aim of this paper to analyse the portrayal of women in a variety of poems belonging to the two distinct 'movements': Romanticism and Contemporary Black British poetry. To represent the Romantic era, the poems selected for analysis include S.T. Coleridge's "Christabel" (composed in two parts in 1797 and 1800), Anne Bannerman's "The Dark Ladie" (1800), John Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (1819), and Letitia Elizabeth Landon's "A Legend of Tintagel Castle" (1833). On the other hand, the corpus of Contemporary Black British poems will be constituted as follows: "U.F.O. Woman (Pronounced OOFOE)" by Patience Agbabi and published in the year 2000; the sequence of poems known as "medusa" by Dorothea Smartt, published in 2001; "The Contract. Femme Fatale. (The Second Nun's Tale)" also by Patience Agbabi and published in 2014; "The Warner" by Omikemi Natacha Bryan, published in published in 2017; "A recipe for retaliation" by Vanessa Kisuule, published in 2017; "Mum's Snake" by Rachel Long, published in 2020; and "Ode to South Ldn Gyaldem" by Caleb Femi, published in 2020.

The selection of poems to be analysed, both for Romantic and contemporary Black British poetry has been carried out with the intention of keeping the samples as varied as possible, in order to come up with a compilation that represents the times of writing as accurately as possible. In the case of the Romantic poems, two of the ones under consideration, those by Coleridge and Keats, are considered to be classic texts, undoubtedly understood to be key works of the British canon. Regarding the poems by Keats and Coleridge, extensive research has been done on them, but the opinions of the experts seem divided when it comes to their possible interpretations, and the different ways of

understanding the female characters often contradict each other. The other two poems, written by Bannerman and Landon, have received scarce critical or academic attention and remain greatly unknown even today, which means they are far from being considered part of the canon. The case of Landon requires further clarification: Although scholars consistently situate the end of the Romantic period in the year 1830 and, therefore, Landon's poem would not strictly belong within this movement, she has been described by Stephenson as "one of the most relentlessly Romantic of all the poets writing during the early nineteenth-century" (*The Woman behind L.E.L.* 1). This, together with the fact that she was one of the most popular writers of the early nineteenth century, a position that was rare for a woman writer to hold, accounts for the inclusion of her poem in the dissertation and its comparison to those of the other authors.In analysing said poems it is the author's intention to contribute to the process of re-evaluation of these works, which seems essential because Landon and Bannerman are still known exclusively within the field of research of Romantic literature and, even within this particular area, the attention they have received is insufficient.

When it comes to contemporary Black British poetry, matters become even more complex. As the chapters dealing with Black British writing and poetry below will show, poetry does not receive much attention in the current literary scene, a reality that is exacerbated when it is the work of Black authors and poets that is considered. Of all the poets analysed in this section of the thesis, only those by Dorothea Smartt can be said to be somewhat close to being considered canonical. It is true that Caleb Femi's work has enjoyed him relative success and a remarkable position in the current climate: at the time of writing, his second poetry collection has just been announced and will certainly be marketed heavily. These are, therefore, lesser-known poets, placed in the margins of the British literary canon and tradition. Their work has been selected due to their exploration of themes that align with those of the Romantic poets listed above, which has resulted in an overwhelming majority of women poets as opposed to a more balanced selection. The reason why this is the case is a simple one: many Black poets writing in Britain, of any gender, find themselves in need of conforming to the type of poetry that is associated with their race, a poetry that deals with more overtly political themes. The authors studied here are, in fact, greatly engaged with the social and political issues of the U.K., but they also show interests that go beyond the preconceived ideas of what Black British poetry is. The work selected for this section has

been produced between the years 2000 and 2020, a time period that is short enough to allow for these poems to be grouped together but large enough to allow for changes in social and political attitudes.

Chapter 1: The Romantic Period

1.1 Romanticism: Some Specifications

Romanticism in England has generally been located between the years 1780 and 1830 ("The Romantic Reader" 99). This term is used to refer to the literary and philosophical movement that developed during those years (Kitson 39), as well as to the ideas that prevail in the texts produced in this period (Perry 3). These ideas are often understood as reactions to those of the previous period, the Enlightenment, and, to a certain extent, it would appear that the ideas of the Romantics did, in fact, oppose many of the beliefs of the preceding movement: while during the Enlightenment reason, order, objectivity, limitation and society were valued, the Romantics emphasised the importance of emotion, rebellion, aspiration, and the individual (Kitson 39). Nevertheless, the opposition between the ideas of the two periods was not complete: as recent research on this field has shown the Romantics did not completely reject the ideas of the Enlightenment. Instead they were building upon what they had received from the Enlightenment at the same time as they reacted to it (Kitson 39).

The idea of Romanticism we have constructed over the years, however, is one based on the work of the six male poets that constitute the canon of this period, namely William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron (*Romanticism and Gender* 1). The work of these men is usually divided into two generations, the first three constituting the first one and the latter three belonging to the second one. These men did, as a matter of fact, share similar thoughts and ideas that can be observed in their work, many of them being deeply influenced by the French Revolution, the historical event that most notably marked the experiences of these poets (Duff 25), and so did the Napoleonic Wars. Although during these conflicts the opinions of the British had been divided, the end of the War in 1815 was supposed to secure peace in Europe (Shaw 54). In addition, as a result of the War, England had had the opportunity to expand overseas, and had now acquired seventeen new colonies, which granted the British their position as the most powerful nation in the world (Shaw 54). This resulted in a new "sense of nationhood" (Shaw 60) that can most certainly be appreciated in the works of the Romantics.

Similarly, one of the most influential publications of the time was Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she pleaded for the recognition of the rational capacities of women, who had been treated as purely sensual creatures and relegated to an inferior position until this moment (Wolfson 418). This text is usually thought of as the first proto-feminist text in English literature (Wolfson 418) and it is a clear example of how the predominant ideas about gender politics were being revised and questioned. The abovementioned canonical poets valued human feelings and sensitivity over reason and the analytical qualities that had historically been associated to men, that is, they valued qualities that had been traditionally thought of as female. In so doing, they "effectively stole from women their primary cultural authority as experts in delicate, tender feelings, and, by extension, moral purity and goodness" (*Romanticism and Gender* 23). Although this certainly placed women in a more ambiguous and complex position than before, it also contributed to the process of destabilising the gender politics of the time, even if it meant that men were now able to "claim to speak with ultimate moral as well as intellectual authority" (24).

In addition to these ideas, the "questions about the nature of poetry, the poet and the faculty of Imagination" ("England and Germany" 535) were central to the work of these poets. These authors constantly questioned themselves about "the origin of the poetic activity" ("England and Germany" 535), and about how the poet, that is the subject, was related to the perceived object and the relation this had with "imaginative creation" (535). The Romantics insisted in the concept of the poet as a prophet (Wedd 74), the poet as someone who has a "sacred and fearful vision" (74), which, by extension, means that they placed a great value on the experience of each individual and their subjectivity: the genius of the poet was central to the poetic creation ("England and Germany" 535-536).

Another concept that became significantly relevant during the Romantic period was the aesthetic of the Gothic, a concept which, in this particular period, is also applied to poetry (Fäcks 1). The Romantics opposed the concept of Newtonian Science as they considered that it removed the divine from nature and "emptied the world of its mystery" (Kitson 45), resulting in a demystification of nature they were unwilling to accept. Gothic carries with itself a desire for transgression, a yearning to go beyond limits (Miall 374; Fäcks 3) and it

therefore allows for some of the mystery that had been dismissed as a consequence of the scientific approaches of the Enlightenment to be restored. In fact, the years comprised in the Romantic period witnessed a growth in popularity of the Gothic ballads (Fäcks 1). One of the main issues this kind of literature is concerned with is that of otherness, and, more specifically, gender-related otherness. Despite "Otherness" being a relative term, depending on who is the "One", that is, who is the subject of the discourse, the Gothic "Other" "is broadly consistent with some of the most ancient categories of otherness in Western culture" (Williams 18). The female, is, unquestionably, one of the most recurrent others of Western culture (19) and, for this reason, Gothic literature is greatly concerned with the representation of women. This specific kind of literature thus, provides its writer with the possibility of transgressing the sexual and political systems dominating society (Verdonock 39), a transgression that is quite often carried out by the female characters themselves, since their portrayal is marked by their otherness, and, thus, the position in which they are placed allows them to go beyond the limits. Nevertheless, when a female character transgresses these limits in canonical Romantic poetry she is usually labelled as evil (*Romanticism and Gender* 28). These evil characters, in addition, are very commonly represented as supernatural beings or having some kind of supernatural powers (Verdonock 13).

All of these ideas can be found, to a greater or lesser extent, in the works of the six poets that we take to be the sole representatives of the Romantic period. We, therefore, have inherited a notion of Romanticism as a homogeneous phenomenon, based primarily on the poetry written by those six male canonical poets in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries. By understanding Romanticism in this restricted way we have managed to erase the voices of numerous authors, such as women and Scottish writers, from the history of literature. Nevertheless, both women writers and Scotland played a key role in the evolution of British Romanticism. In fact, Edinburgh was one of the most relevant cultural centres of the United Kingdom at this time. Three main issues need to be considered when analysing the role of Scotland in shaping what we know as Romanticism: the ballad revival that took place during the early nineteenth century that "helped shape canonical Romanticism's developing theories of genius, primitivism, and authenticity" ("Romantic spinsrelsy" 204); the importance of the Gothic; and the role of women writers, since both Gothic and the ballad are considered "culturally feminized forms" (205). If we start to consider issues such as these

ones, our concept of Romanticism will inevitably be altered, and this will probably result in a wider and deeper understanding of the literature of the period.

1.2 Women Poets

Parallel to the evolution of the canon encompassing the six male authors discussed in the previous section was the production of literary works by a great number of women writers. Most of these women and their works are "relatively or entirely unknown to current scholarship" (*Romanticism and Gender* 2), because, as the Romantic canon was constructed around the figures of those male poets, anything that did not fit within that concept of Romanticism created based on their works was simply excluded from history, which meant that these women writers were effectively silenced (Kramer and Behrendt 4). Nevertheless, the last few years have witnessed a growing interest in the recovery of writings by women of this period, an interest that originated from the spreading of feminist thought (Amstrong 16) and that has called into question the concept of Romanticism that was universally established and accepted before (Kramer and Behrendt 2).

During the Romantic period, women showed an increasing interest in being part of the public discourse of the time. They progressively started claiming their right to voice their opinions when it came to matters such as abolition, education, and women's rights (*Romantic Writing Community* 40). Writing was one of the most effective ways in which women could express their ideas and, as a consequence of the advancement of the new ideas of women, the cultural establishment, dominated by men, reacted so as to prevent women's ideas from spreading (40). While women authors were struggling to convince the world that they, too, were capable of thinking, therefore, society was reacting against the women who dared to think, and, in turn, sensibility was being praised (Curran 195).

In addition, women writers were usually confined to writing novels, which, at the time, was a disrespected genre (Verdonock v). If women dared to write any poetry at all, they were expected to stick to the "lyric and the sentimental modes" (*Romantic Writing Community* 18). But not only were women writers supposed to write this particular kind of poetry, their qualification was also key for them to be granted any recognition since "the

critics were always more comfortable if they could at least demonstrate that what a woman wrote was inherently different from what a man wrote, that the very process of poetic production was different, and that even in the matter of writing [...] women somehow retained their associations with nature and relied on their sensibilities" (Letitia Landon and the Victorian Improvisatrice 3). That is, women were thought to put little conscious effort into their literary creations, and, thus, "they were often seen to exemplify a debased Romanticism —Wordsworth's 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', which, rather than being recollect in tranquility, are immediately spewed out upon the page" (4).

The men in control of the literary world were, consequently, able to dictate what women should compose and how they should compile it. But not only were they defining the space allotted to women writers in this area: they managed to grant themselves the "power to define woman herself" ("Letitia Landon and the Victorian Improvisatrice" 1). And, thus, the poetess was born, a distinct type of women poet who wrote according to the predominant ideology of her time (2). Writing according to specific conventions, the poetess wrote about love and domestic affections being the way to women's happiness, repudiated any potential fame arising from her writing, and aimed at her writing to be representative of Burke's concept of the "beautiful" ("The Female Poet and the Poetess" 82), which will be discussed later on. Nevertheless, despite the apparent agreement of women to conform to this stereotype of the poetess, many of their texts are charged with messages that subvert and resist the ideology that had forced them into this specific construction of the female poet (82). As a matter of fact, these women were completely aware of the way in which the publishing world worked and so it makes sense that, in order to continue to be able to publish, they would, in some cases at least, conceal their messages by means of the aesthetic that was imposed on them (*Romantic Writing Community* 3).

Despite the limitations forced upon them, women wrote extensively during this period and, as they became more and more involved in the literary world of their time, so did they participate "in the *same* same discursive public sphere and in the *same* formation of public opinion as did their male peers" (qtd. in *Romantic Writing Community* 9). Their sex was, certainly, limiting, but, nevertheless, women participated in the literary production of their time. The rapid growth of the publishing industry brought about an expansion of literacy

during this period and so women, in the same way as men did, needed not only to be good writers, but also to write according to what the public wanted to read, especially if they meant to support themselves and their families by means of this activity (*Romantic Writing Community* 27). As has already been mentioned, however, in spite of the significant development of women's position in the literary world, their literary production was limited to a certain kind of publications, two of the most important ones being periodicals and magazines, and the annuals. Both Bannerman and Landon, the two female poets this paper will focus on, had some of their poetry published in magazines and, Landon was, in addition a fresquent contributor to several annuals, which, despite being ultimately controlled by men provided women with a space in which they had considerable power (*The Woman behind L.E.L.* 3). Through this kind of publications, which were addressed primarily to women, female authors could create a sense of community combining women writers and readers and, in this way, "effect significant social change" ("The Romantic Reader" 102).

One of the main topics women dealt with in this period was the revision, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the definitions of women they had inherited from the literature written by men (Gilbert and Gubar 76). Especially interesting in this respect were "the paradigmic polarities of angel and monster" (76), as will be evidenced by the analysis of the texts this dissertation will examine. Women were clearly interested in their own otherness and, therefore, often portrayed their "increasing emotional and psychological displacement, the sense not only of exclusion but of a fundamental *inability to belong*" ("The Gap that is Not a Gap" 41). Consequently, a great part of the literary production by women of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries "contributed to a discussion of female rational abilities, emphasized the need for education of women, shared a desire to contribute to society, and featured a communion with nature rather than a need to conquer it" (Lindsey 12).

Hand in hand with this challenging and deconstructing of the received notions of womanhood is the aesthetic of the Gothic. This aesthetic provided women writers with a world that was, in many cases, analogous to their society, where the institutions of patriarchy often threatened "civilisation" (The Gap that is Not a Gap" 29).

The ideas discussed until now apply to British women poets in general, but certain specific issues must be taken into account when considering the work of Scottish female authors, such as Anne Bannerman. If women were defined by their otherness in general, this otherness is further accentuated in the case of Scottish women since, as Behrendt as noted "when it comes to poetry by Scottish women, two varieties of actual or virtual subaltern statues are involved: one is grounded in national cultural identity, the other in gender" (*Romantic Writing Community* 203). This means that Scottish women were members of a minority not just because of their gender, but also because of the fact that their culture was considered secondary in relation to the English one (201). Scottish literature of this period, therefore, shows a great will of endurance, it rejects complete assimilation into the "United" Kingdom, which would imply the deletion of Scotland and the Scottish identity, and so, it makes a conscious effort to keep the independent Scotland alive. Women's situation is fairly similar to that of the Scots: dealing with the pressure coming from the dominant hegemonic discourse to submit and adjust to an establishment that demanded that they give up their voices while trying to fight back and oppose these demands (213). This accounts for the subversive content that characterises literature written by women in general, and that of Scottish women writers in particular.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Gender Studies

Before fully getting into the theoretical concepts this section will deal with, it is important to note that, since the main object of analysis in this paper is the representation of women, the concepts that will be applied to the texts are also primarily concerned with the position of women in this specific society. This does not mean that patriarchy and its institutions have no negative effects on men, but this paper will not be looking into that.

Gender Studies did not become an established discipline for research until the 1970s, but both gender, that is, the "socially constructed characteristics of women and men" ("gender" par. 1), and biological sex have defined who human beings are, how they should behave, and how they relate to each other and the world since the beginning of times. Patriarchal societies, such as the ones in Western culture, reproduce "the socioeconomic and male-dominant structures of that particular social order" (qtd. in De Lauretis 8) and, in order to do so, they employ a sex-gender system. What De Lauretis refers to when she talks about a sex-gender system is a "sociocultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation which assigns meaning [...] to individuals within the society" (5). Thus, this system assigns different meanings to being male and to being female. In addition, our compulsion as human beings to divide the world into binary oppositions, or "foundational restrictions (qtd. in Eagleton 342), further contributes to the process of providing the terms male and female with specific meanings. These oppositions take many different forms besides male/female, such as: "I/self-Other; sex-gender; agency-construction; heterosexual-homosexual" (Eagleton 342). The first term of the opposition is generally regarded as the foundational, natural, and real one, while the second one is just thought to be the opposite (342). Nevertheless, the artificiality of the very opposition itself must be emphasised: this binary division is created by the hegemonic discourse that dominates our culture (Hurley 8).

The fact that women (females) are placed in the second half of this opposition means that there are some qualities they are assumed to lack. In fact, this division defines what a woman is in opposition to the concept of man, and, thus, "within this phallocentric writing, the female exists only as the absent or silenced other" ("On Romanticism and Feminism" 6).

This is a clear example of "how deeply embedded in the Western culture are the mechanisms that silence women, that refuse to take them seriously, and that sever them [...] from the centres of power. [...] When it comes to silencing women, Western culture has had thousands of years of practice" (Beard xiii).

Cultural discourses, such as the ones operating in our society, "make available positions for subjects to take up" (Hollway 233), positions which are defined in relation to other people. The available positions resemble those of sentences: the subjects and objects of the discourse are established in relation to each other "through the meanings which a particular subject makes available" (233). Similarly, subject and object positions within a discourse also function in the same way as the ones of sentences: the subject does, the object has something done to it. As the traditional discourses are gender differentiated, the positions of subject created by these discourses are not equally available to men and women (233). Since within this kind of system women almost invariably take the position of objects, they tend to be "shaped and determined by being viewed" (Crisafulli 38), they are "objects of perception" (38). This applies to Western societies in general, but it is particularly interesting when applied to Romantic poetry, which is self-reflexive. Thus, if women are to be part of the Romantic universe they must become observers, rather than being the objects that are observed by others; that is, women need to find a way to negotiate their positions within the discourse and become subjects (39).

Nevertheless, renegotiating these positions can be problematic because the whole system, the entire structure underlying Western societies is coded as male, and, hence, women becoming subjects would necessarily imply a change in the structure itself: only by changing the very basis of the system can women get to be as powerful as men are (Beard 86). As the analyses of the poems that will be carried out in this dissertation demonstrate, this change is a complex and slow one and our present society is the best piece of evidence of how we still have not been able to make it: still nowadays "we have no template for what a powerful woman looks like, except that she looks rather like a man" (Beard 54).

Our inability, as a society, to make such a change has resulted in the creation of concepts such as the "abject". As Kristeva defines it, the abject is that which is "radically excluded" (Kristeva 2) and "lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the

latter's rules of the game" (2). This abject can, of course, never be the "I" (1), the only position that is available to it is the object one. However, from that marginal position as an object, the abject keeps challenging its master (2). As patriarchy situates women in that particular position, in the margins of its symbolic order, and they can, therefore, be considered abjects, women "come to represent the necessary frontier between man and chaos, but because of their very marginality they will also always seem to recede into and merge with the chaos of the outside" (Moi 127). Hence, placing women in this position has enabled patriarchy to treat women as representatives of chaos, the chaos that lies outside the frontiers of its system and threatens to destroy it. As Baker affirms, the process of abjection plays a key role in the construction of the subject, which in the case of patriarchy is an exclusively masculine one, and that what is excluded from the subject position, the female, helps define the boundaries of this subject (167). Consequently, this definition creates taboos in order to defend its unitary subjectivity from a potentially subversive plurality (Baker 167), that is, it creates a single and homogeneous definition of what a man, and, therefore, a subject, is, and, then, it marginalises whatever is different.

The patriarchal system, however, marginalises not only women but anything that is associated to them. This means that femininity, defined as absence and non-being like the subject, is strongly rejected by the system (Moi 126). Since femininity is not a quality that can be found in women exclusively, because men can also embody something that is radically different from the prototype of subject, men can potentially be excluded from the system (126). This illustrates how "femininity and masculinity cannot be taken as fixed features located exclusively in women and men" (Hollway 224), instead, they are defined in relation to the position a subject takes within a specific discourse. According to Moi, "patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women, in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for "femininity" are natural" (123). If these standards are natural, any woman who does not conform to them is considered unfeminine and unnatural (Moi 123), and will consequently be cast as an abject. This ties to the concept of performativity defined by Butler as "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (qtd. in Gal 162-163) and a great part of performing what a woman is, is their asexuality (Hollway 228). Since the system does not allow any space for female

sexuality, woman is seen as "the object that precipitates men's natural sexual urges" (229) and, in addition, it attaches some kind of power to being attractive to men: "women are often seen as 'trapping" men by their powers of sexual attraction (230). The definition of women as fundamentally asexual leads us to interpret any woman who exhibits any kind of sexual desire as a negative version of this "natural" woman and, thus, "the split between wife and mistress, virgin and whore, Mary and Eve is created" (228) and women's sexuality comes to be interpreted as something dangerous, something which needs to be controlled (228). It is in this way that society, through cultural representations such as the ones we encounter in literature, has produced the angel-monster dichotomy also known as the virgin-whore split (Anderson 6), in which the figure of the virgin/angel is associated with the asexual woman who conforms to the rules dictated by society and the whore/monster is, by opposition, the sexual woman who will not satisfy the ideal society has created (Gilbert and Gubar 17). When it comes to what a nineteenth-century woman should be, the ideal defined her "in terms of delicacy and dreaminess, sexual passivity, and charmingly liable and capricious emotionally" (Bordo 94).

Cixous notes the power that women's writing might have in upsetting discourse: "it is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence" (881). It is for this reason that the present dissertation focuses on how women were represented both by male and female authors and the differences that can be found in these representations.

2.2 *Femme Fatale*

The *femme fatale* is the embodiment of the woman that refuses to be what society defines as the ideal woman and is, thus, very closely related to the previously mentioned idea of the monster woman or whore. The term *femme fatale* was not coined until the twentieth century but representations of women that correspond with it had been present in different cultural expressions long before that (Anderson 1). In fact, "the *femme fatale* is frequently depicted in Gothic ballads from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century" (Fäcks 11). The function of the *femme fatale* is, usually, to act as the opposite of the passive Gothic heroine

(11), each of whom represents one of the images of female sexuality that predominated at the time: frigidity in the case of the heroine and hypersexuality in the case of the *femme fatale* (Hobson 10). Ultimately, the *femme fatale* embodies culture's anxieties about female sexuality, "especially that it is unquenchable and uncontained by male dominated institutions such as the Church, the family, and even the government" (12).

Most frequently, "Romantic *femmes fatales* are commonly thought to originate in and appeal to solely the male imagination" ("The Subject of Violence" 64). But men have not been the only ones to portray this kind of women; in fact, during the Romantic period, *femmes fatales* were very common in the works by women, which shows the crucial role this particular image of women had in the evolution of women's poetic identities (*Fatal Women of Romanticism* 1). Throughout this period both men and women created numerous fatal women, charged "with a range of contemporary political, sexual, and poetic significations" (16).

The figure of the *femme fatale* has been recurrent throughout history, appearing at moments in which social change was thought to be threatening the established "patriarchal infrastructure" (Anderson ii). This means that whenever women's economic, social and political situation improves substantially, stress points are created in the continuum of history, indicating that the boundaries and roles that were clearly delimited before might be undergoing some kind of change. As a consequence of this potential threat, the hegemonic discourse responds both through its institutions and by means of its cultural productions, and, thus, the *femme fatale* emerges (ii). She can, therefore, be understood as a "symptom and symbol of male fears of female equality" (iii) and her main function is to counteract the aspirations for equality that resurface at these particular moments in time.

The image of the *femme fatale* materialises everything that "is wrong" with the women that attempt to go against the establishment, and, during the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth centuries, they were "more erotic and more evil than in earlier art" (qtd. in Perrojo 102). In the figure of the fatal woman we find the epitomisation of "danger, death, eros, beauty, demonism -and *intent* to destroy as well as being a central figure in imagery or plot" (qtd. in Perrojo 102). An image of evil women as drastic as this one was, to a great extent, a backlash produced by the already mentioned writings and ideas of women such as Mary

Wollstonecraft or those of Mary Hays, which prompted a reaction on the part of the establishment, a reaction that became manifest in a revival of the more traditional, strict, and restrictive ideas concerning gender roles (Stuart).

These *femmes fatales* are defined in opposition to the "angel" or "virgin" women, that is, in contrast with the model of womanhood that patriarchy considers acceptable and beneficial. The kind of woman that is appropriate and valuable is very often one that is associated with motherhood, implying that this kind of womanhood is, in fact, productive both for men and for the system that favours them. After all, the system needs children to continue existing (Anderson 24). The *femme fatale*, on the other hand, is more independent and she is "concerned only and for herself, is destructive and abhorrent" (24) and, very commonly, these characters have an advantage that conveniently helps them achieve their goals in a more effective way: "they look very often and/or behave often like "normal" women" (Lindsey 7). Therefore, while the good, angelic, and maternal woman is something that patriarchy needs and will try to preserve, fatal women must be either confined to a space in which their existence does not threaten the established social order or, more effectively, destroyed (Anderson 25).

Two prototypes of fatal women predominate in Western culture: a "vampire-like woman" (qtd. in Gal 161) and the "exotic or ethereal fairy creature" (161). Although the two are not completely identical, there are some features they share: they are "hypersexual, un-maternal [...] [and they have] a monstrous appetite for destruction" (161). In the particular case of Gothic literature produced in Britain during the 19th century, they evidently break with the established idea "of what a female body and feminine behavior should be according to the nineteenth-century mainstream British culture" (Lindsey 1). Since in addition to breaking the rules, *femmes fatales* of this period usually possess supernatural attributes, they make the rest of the characters feel fear and uneasiness (1). Their occasionally violent and explicitly sexual actions, or the way other characters perceive these actions, undermine the system they inhabit (1). In fact, these women are very rarely given a voice. In most cases, the reader only gets to know about them and their action through what other characters say, and, therefore, what the reader receives, is a biased idea of them (15).

Subversive as these female figures are, it must be remembered that they are, ultimately, a creation of patriarchy and that, in most cases, they are used to provide an example of what women must not be. Consequently, *femmes fatales* not only subvert the social order established by patriarchy, they also submit to it (Stuart 6).

2.2.1 Monstrosity and Evil

In the previous section we have already mentioned that transgressiveness, which is perceived as a threat to the established order and therefore considered evil, is a quality that constitutes the basis of the definition of the *femme fatale*. For this reason, the present section will discuss some ideas related to evil more in depth.

The notion of evil is commonly related to the "other", and therefore, it is culture-specific, since each culture has its own others. Any social structure usually defines as evil everything and anything that is different from itself or which embodies a threat to the established social order (Jackson 30). Evil is, therefore, an element that can be found in all societies, and it has the power to unsettle our received ideas about the society we inhabit (Tekinay 188).

In literature, evil is very often represented through a monster. The monsters a society creates are as time-and-place-specific as the very concept of evil is, since they embody what causes a particular culture to feel fear and anxiety at a very specific moment (Cohen 4).

The monster resides on the borders of culture, not belonging within it but not quite being completely excluded from it either. This is why it is "dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (6). Due to the in- betweenness position that it is allotted to it the monster tends to emerge at moments of crisis, when the clear-cut division between the centre and the borders, the One and the Other, is blurred. In this kind of situation, the monster's function is usually to act as "that which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis" (qtd. in Cohen 6).

It has already been mentioned that women are a consistent other in Western societies and, therefore, they are very often represented as monsters. More precisely, female monsters surface because the gender roles constructed by society are difficult to maintain and, as a

consequence of the artificiality of these roles, attempts at challenging them and transgressing the border between them are frequent. For this reason, culture tends to represent as monstrous the woman who "oversteps the boundaries of her gender role" (Cohen 9).

As the previous lines suggest, one of the monster's main roles is to allude to the limits of a culture, the limits that must not be crossed by the ones that want to keep being part of society (13). In the particular case of the borders that are related to gender, it must be noted that these borders, and the need to stay within them, are part of the mechanism to keep men at the centre of patriarchal societies (13).

Exactly like the *femme fatale*, who is ultimately a kind of monster, the general monster is "transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker" (16) and so what it embodies must be controlled, driven away, or destroyed (16).

2.2.2 Beauty

If evil, or apparent evil, recurrently defines the female characters of the Romantic period, so does beauty further complicate this definition. As the poems under consideration evidence, women are, in most cases, equally defined by both of these qualities.

According to Wolf, "beauty is a currency system [...] that keeps male dominance intact" (5). This implies that, since we culturally impose certain physical standards on women, women must, in turn, use their beauty like currency to compete with each other, gain the attention of men, and finally get the resources that men have allotted for themselves (Ryan 26). Nevertheless, beauty is not just about physical appearance, it is strictly related to the behaviour a certain period in history deems appropriate for women, it is a symbol "of the female behavior that that period considers desirable" ("The Female Poet and the Poetess" 81-82), and, thus "the beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance" (Wolf 7). Following this idea, Wolf claims that beauty is in fact "about men's institutions and institutional power" (7).

Beauty, just as *femmes fatales* in literature, becomes particularly important in the moments in history in which women have made social progress. In reaction to this progress,

the images of female beauty that are imposed upon women become especially strict and a greater importance is given to them (1-2). Apparent as this is in our current society, this phenomenon is by no means new. In fact, "since the fourteenth century, male culture has silenced women by taking them beautifully apart" (31).

When it comes to the Romantic period, Burke played a key role in the development of the aesthetics of the beautiful. Burke's concept of the beautiful is defined in opposition to the sublime. Thus, while the sublime is characterized by qualities that cause admiration such as "fortitude, justice and wisdom" (*Romanticism and Gender* 108), and it is considered "an experience of masculine empowerment" (85), the beautiful is defined by its "easiness of temper, compassion, kindness and liberality" (108) and it is related to the feminine. In addition, the beautiful "embodies and produces 'affection and tenderness'" (108). In associating the beautiful with these qualities, Burke also associated it with both

> the nurturing mother but also with the erotic love-object, the sensuous and possessible beloved. Identifying beauty with the small, the diminutive, pointing out that "it is usual to add the endearing name of little to everything we love", Burke revealingly commented that "we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us". The ideal woman, then, is one who engages in a practice of what today we would call female masochism, willingly obeying the dictates of her sublime master. (108)

These ideas, developed mainly by Burke but consistently represented in the literature of the period by many others, "participated in, and helped to support, a powerful hegemonic sexual politics" (*Romanticism and Gender* 108). The identification of the female with the beautiful and the beautiful with those things that are small, delicate, and possessible contributed to the creation of an ideal of womanhood characterised by the same qualities: a woman "who can conceptualize her own existence only as the object and creator of love" (109). As a consequence, the roles this society made available for women were just those of daughters, lovers, wives and mothers, valued only in relation to their "submissiveness, tenderness and affection" (109). As Wolf notes, this particular notion of beauty and the excessive importance given to it is ultimately a strategy to ensure "that culture can be kept male" (Wolf 31).

Chapter 3: Romantic Authors and Poems

3.1 "Christabel"

3.1.1 Coleridge: Life and Work

Samuel Taylor Coleridge is, undoubtedly, one of the representative figures of English Romanticism and, therefore, his work has been widely read, analysed and discussed over two centuries. This has resulted in an extremely large amount of critical work concerning both his life and his literary and philosophical work. However, since this dissertation will only consider one of his poems, "Christabel", the present section will deal exclusively with the parts of his life that offer interesting information related to this specific poem.

Coleridge was born on the 21st of October of 1772 (*The Life of STC* 13). During his first years, the cold and distant personality of his mother had a great impact on his own personality (14): he would often feel lonely and often turned to his brothers to find the affection he did not receive from her (23). From a very early age he would also seek to create relationships with other women who would let him into their lives. These women would usually have no "male protector" (26) and, thus, his interactions with these women placed him in a position that was quite ambiguous: he wanted to protect them as much as he wanted to find a mother figure that would act as a substitute for his own. The need for a mother or a female friend seems to have continuously mixed with his desire for sexual intercourse with women (26). All through his life, Coleridge was aware of the fact that his feelings towards women were not very wholesome, to an extent where he even confessed being scared of having sex with his wife (27). When it comes to Coleridge's wife, Sara Fricker, it seems quite clear that when they got married he did not actually want to marry her (74), and besides the resentment he felt towards her for the rest of his life, he proved to be quite an exasperating husband who spent as much time as he possibly could away from his family. For Coleridge, marriage meant "learning to live with a real woman" (75), something which differed enormously from the unattainable and pure images of ideal women he had constructed as a result of being in love with other women (75). This idealisation of women made him "incapable of allowing any place for female sexuality" (Fulford 68), and resulted, according to Fulford, in his repeated representation of sexual women as evil (68).

If the relationships he had with women shaped his life, so did his relationship with William Wordsworth. Their first meeting in 1979 has often been considered to mark the beginning of English Romanticism (*The Life of STC* 46) and definitely had an irreversible impact in Coleridge's life. Wordsworth and Coleridge were very close friends for a great part of their lives, but the relationship they had was, for the most part, clearly unbalanced. Wordsworth was decidedly the most confident of the two, and this meant that Coleridge felt not as good a poet when he compared himself to his friend (101). A few years after this first meeting, they worked together in the project of *Lyrical Ballads*. Coleridge wanted to include "Christabel" in the volume but Wordsworth determined not to include it and, although the reasons for the exclusion of the poem are not completely clear, the truth is that Coleridge was unable to finish it and that it did not really fit in with the project they had designed in the first place (181). Wordsworth's decision made Coleridge feel more insecure than ever: for him Wordsworth's writing represented an ideal of masculinity he could not grasp and from this moment on his uneasiness over his masculinity increased (Fulford 22). Yet "Christabel" was to bring him many more worries and concerns, the poem kept haunting him for the rest of his life. Although the first and second parts of the poem were written in 1797 and 1800 respectively, the text was not published until 1816 and, when it finally saw the light, it was "universally ridiculed" (*The Life of STC* 112), which came as no surprise to its author (112). During the rest of his life he made numerous attempts at finishing the poem, but he never managed to do so, he "just could not find, or create, the conditions under which he could finish 'Christabel'" (182), and so, the poem remains unfinished nowadays. Gillman[1] wrote about the planned ending of the poem as, supposedly, Coleridge had told him about it but, since such ending does not actually exist, the discussion of the poem I will carry out will focus exclusively on the parts of it that were written, and the potential planned ending will not be considered in relation to the global meaning of the poem.

3.1.2 "Christabel": Poem Analysis

Coleridge's "Christabel" is probably one of the most controversial poems in British Romanticism. Scholars have been trying to grasp the meaning of the poem for a long time and this has given rise to countless interpretations of it, which very often are strikingly different

from each other. Consequently, this dissertation does not attempt to provide a definite interpretation of this poem, but, instead, it aims at contributing to the ongoing debate concerning its possible meanings. In addition, the clear difference in the space dedicated to this poem and to each of the others the dissertation analyses must be noted: since "Christabel" is considerably longer than any of the other poems under consideration, and the present section deals with both of the female characters in the poem, as opposed to the single female character that is analysed in the case of the other texts, more space has been required for this particular analysis.

Despite of the different interpretations of the poem that have, so far, been proposed, the majority of them seem to agree on the fact that the characters of Christabel and Geraldine represent the opposition between the angel and the monster woman. Most readings of the poem interpret Christabel as the innocent, dutiful daughter who embodies "moral innocence" (Ulmer 378). Geraldine, on the other hand, has commonly been interpreted as the incarnation of evil, and has been assumed to be the reason why Christabel falls from innocence, as she is "the character *in* the poem who excites desire and disgust, and introduces discord into apparently harmonious circles" ("Literary Gentlemen and Lovely Ladies" 40). Nevertheless, the division between good and evil in this poem might not be as clear-cut as it has regularly been assumed to be.

The poem starts by introducing the reader to the location in which the events will take place: "'Tis the middle of the night by the castle clock" (Coleridge line 1). This castle belongs to "Sir Leoline, the Baron rich" (Coleridge line 6). The fact that we are told about Sir Leoline before we get to know the actual protagonist of the poem, who is his daughter, suggests that being the daughter of this man is a relevant point in the identity of Christabel.

Christabel, the Baron's daughter, the main character of the poem, and the one who gives it its title, thus, is not introduced until line 23: "The lovely lady Christabel,/ Whom her father loves so well" (Coleridge lines 23-24). The name of this character, which is composed by the names of two archetypal victims, Christ and Abel (Ulmer 389), prepossesses the reader to interpret her as a victim. In addition, as we see in these lines Christabel is defined both by her loveliness and, again, in relation to her father. Nevertheless, as much as her father loves her, she "is left alone to do as she wishes; no one notices her absence or cares for her" (Taylor

712) and so, she leaves her father's castle at midnight to go and pray in the forest. In leaving her father's home, she is also leaving the "safe" patriarchal space represented by it and, thus, she crosses the borders and enters the potentially threatening and dangerous space that is the forest. In fact, both the time and place in which the first part of the poem is set, midnight in the forest, are the place and time in which "innocence is traditionally put to the test" ("Wandering Mother" 539). Nevertheless, midnight is also "the hour which symbolizes a new beginning" (Kapetanović 63) and, therefore, we can understand the setting of the poem as a premonition of what is about to happen to Christabel: her innocence will be tested and, as a result, she will enter a new phase in her life.

When the narrators of the poem comment on the reasons why Christabel has left the castle at such an hour they mention that "She had dreams all yesternight/ Of her own betrothèd knight" (Coleridge lines 28-29) and, for that reason, she has decided to go into the forest and pray "For the weal of her lover that's far away" (Coleridge lines 29-30). While she is praying quietly by an oak tree, Christabel suddenly hears moans; "But what it is she cannot tell. —/ On the other side it seems to be" (Coleridge line 40). She goes around the tree and she finds "a damsel bright" (Coleridge line 58):

> Drest in a silken robe of white,
> That shadowy in the moonlight shone:
> The neck that made that white robe wan,
> Her stately neck, and arms were bare;
> Her blue-veined feet unsandl'd were,
> And wildly glittered here and there
> The gems entangled in her hair
> I guess, 'twas frightful there to see
> A lady so richly clad as she—
> Beautiful exceedingly!   (Coleridge lines 59-68)

As can be observed in these lines, the woman she encounters, looks as lovely, beautiful and innocent as Christabel herself does. She is wearing white, representing her purity, and her skin is even lighter than the white of her dress; so much so, that her veins can be clearly seen through her skin. In addition, she is dressed richly and she even has gems decorating her hair.

When Christabel asks this woman who she is, she answers in a voice that is "faint and sweet" (line 72) that "My sire is of a noble line" (line 79), thereby introducing herself, as the narrator had already introduced Christabel, by saying who her father is ("Wandering Mother" 534). Immediately after that she proceeds to narrate how she was kidnapped by "five warriors" (Coleridge line 81) who "tied me on a palfrey white" (line 84) and, after riding for a while, one of them, "the tallest of the five" (line 93), took her from the horse, when she was "A weary woman, scarcely alive" (line 95), and left her by the oak. Geraldine ends her report of the events by asking Christabel to "Stretch forth thy hand [...]/ and help a wretched maid to flee" (lines 102-103). Geraldine is, therefore, first introduced to the reader as an exceptionally beautiful victim, a damsel in distress who has been abused by five men and who needs help.

Christabel, then, comforts Geraldine by telling her that she may "command/ The service of Sir Leoline" (line 107), who will "guide and guard you safe and free/ Home to your noble father's hall" (lines 110-111). The fact that the person rescuing Geraldine is Christabel rather than a knight represents a clear subversion of the traditional gender roles, since it is a delicate and gentle lady and not a strong and heroic man that rescues the damsel in distress ("Cultivating Medievalism" 43). Christabel continues:

> All our household are at rest,
> The hall as silent as the cell;
> Sir Leoline is weak in health,
> And may not well awakened be,
> But we will move as if in stealth,
> And I beseech your courtesy,
> This night, to share your couch with me.   (Coleridge lines 116-122)

As we see in these lines, Christabel is the one that suggests that they share the bed. The suggestion might be an innocent one, although the truth is that, at this point in the poem Christabel is the most active of the two women and she is the one that takes a subject position. Thus, both of them head to Sir Leoline's castle and as they are about to cross the door:

> The lady sank, belike through pain,
> And Christabel with might and main

> Lifted her up, a weary weight,
>
> Over the threshold of the gate:
>
> Then the lady rose again,
>
> And moved, as she were not in pain. (lines 129-134)

This passage "has usually been interpreted as the devil requiring the support of a living person to enter the abode where it plans to launch its nefarious schemes" (Ganguly 4). However, it might be more accurate to interpret these lines as Geraldine, and the transgressions she embodies, which, as will be shown subsequently, are potentially threatening for patriarchy, and she requires Christabel's consent to enter her father's household. In addition, the subversion of traditional gender roles in carrying Geraldine must be noted: Christabel carries Geraldine as a husband would carry his wife after getting married, and, just as she did when she rescued her from the forest, she takes the position that the male character rescuing the damsel in distress would conventionally hold.

Once they have crossed the threshold, they move "So free from danger, free from fear" (Coleridge line 135), an idea which is emphasised a few lines later: "So free from danger, free from fear" (line 143). Sir Leoline's castle, therefore, is meant to be a safe space where Christabel, and her guest, Geraldine, find protection. We cannot forget, however, that, safe as this place is meant to be, it is, above all, Sir Leoline's home, a place in which his patriarchal rules operate and, by extension, a masculine space. As they enter the 'safe' castle, there are little hints that signal that something bad might happen: the dog which "Never till now she uttered yell" (line 150), "an angry moan did make" (line 148) and from the almost extinguished fire "when the lady passed, there came/ A tongue of light, a fit of flame" (lines 158-159). Nevertheless, as the poem progresses, "these signs of male, heterosexual authority slowly evaporate" (Elfenbein 190).

Christabel's room seems to be a space that is completely different from the rest of the castle; in fact, it seems to be a 'feminine space': "Carved with figures strange and sweet,/ All made out of the carver's brain,/ For a lady's chamber meet" (Coleridge lines 179-181). The fact that this space is designed to be a feminine space, despite it being inside Sir Leoline's castle and, thus, to a certain extent, within his patriarchal domain, means that the rules of his system do not operate in this space, that is why so many transgressions are possible in it. It is

with their entering the room, and not the castle, that they have finally completed the journey from the potential danger of the forest to a space that is actually safe (Grajko 6). Once they are both in the room, Christabel offers Geraldine some wine:

> O weary lady, Geraldine,
> I pray you, drink this cordial wine!
> It is a wine of virtuous powers;
> My mother made it of wild flowers. (Coleridge lines 190-193)

Drinking the wine has a great effect on Geraldine and several changes can be noticed in her. Firstly, Geraldine seems to be able to see Christabel's mother's ghost, and, not only can she see it, she can also make it disappear, she is more powerful than the ghost: "Off wandering mother! Peak and pine!/ I have power to bid thee flee" (lines 205-206); "Off , woman, off! This hour is mine—/ Though thou her guardian spirit be,/ Off, woman, off! 'tis given to me" (lines 211-213).

These lines suggest that Geraldine has left Christabel unprotected because she has made her mother's spirit, which was her protector, leave the room. Nevertheless, Geraldine seems to be able to see the ghost only after drinking the wine, the same wine Christabel has urged her to drink, which, therefore, leads us to think that it might be the case that this is what Christabel actually intended: to get rid of her mother's spirit so that she can actually start a new chapter in her life, to allow Geraldine and herself to act freely knowing there is no presence watching over them.

The second change that the wine seems to bring about in Geraldine is that she takes over the control of the situation. Up until the moment in which Geraldine drinks the wine, Christabel has been leading the interaction between them but there is a shift in the power as soon as she drinks the wine: from that moment on she is the one who takes the leading role. Prior to the moment in which Geraldine is given the wine, Christabel is clearly having her own adventure, without any constrains and doing whatever she wants to do. In this section, however, power is transferred from Christabel to Geraldine (Taylor 712-713). Some authors have understood this shift in power as an instance in which "one young woman absorbs another, eradicates her will and her speech, deprives her of the imaginary protective spirit of her mother and the fragile loyalty of her father, and fills her with the underside of her own

vicious features" (Taylor 718). Nevertheless, it must be remembered that Christabel gave Geraldine the wine and urged her to drink it and that she was completely aware of the fact that the wine had "powers". In fact, the wine is made of "wild flowers" (Coleridge line 193), "underlining the wild act that they were going to engage in" (Grajko 4).

Upon drinking wine for the second time, the power that it gives to Geraldine is made manifest in her body:

> Again the wild-flower wine she drank:
> Her fair large eyes 'gan glitter bright,
> And from the floor whereon she sank,
> The lofty lady stood upright:
> She was most beautiful to see,
> Like a lady of a far countrèe.   (Coleridge lines 220-225)

Her eyes now glitter, and she stands up straight in what seems to be in a very proud posture. Then, claiming that she will try to compensate Christabel properly, "Even I in my degree will try,/ Fair maiden, to requite you well" (lines 231-232), she asks Christabel to undress: "But now unrobe yourself" (line 233). Christabel obeys the order without questioning it or considering any alternative:

> Quoth Christabel, So let it be!
> And as the lady bade, did she.
> Her gentle limbs did she undress,
> And lay down in her loveliness. (lines 235-238)

Although she has many things on her mind ("So many thoughts moved to and fro" (line 240)), Christabel reclines herself "To look at the lady Geraldine" (line 244), just to witness her undressing:

> Like one that shuddered, she unbound
>   The cincture from beneath her breast:
>   Her silken robe, and inner vest,
>   Dropt to her feet, and full in view,
>   Behold! her bosom and half her side—
>   A sight to dream of, not to tell!
>   O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!   (Coleridge lines 248-254)

The fact that Geraldine's bosom is "A sight to dream of, not to tell!" has often been interpreted as it being a "sight so shocking that its horror demands silence" (Elfenbein 185). However, there is nothing in the text that serves as actual evidence of it being horrible and, judging from the intercourse that follows Geraldine's undressing, we can claim that the sight is, in fact, a beautiful one. The narrator of the poem, however, understands this vision as a threat to Christabel and, demands that she is protected "O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!" (Coleridge 254). The words of the narrator clearly suggest that Geraldine is a threat Christabel must be protected from, but, as we have seen, it is actually Christabel that gives Geraldine the wine that prompts the change in her attitude and, in addition, she joins in the interaction without second thoughts. Therefore, even if Geraldine has been taken to be a temptress and a demonic force, it is not clear who the seductress is (Grajko 6).

To further complicate the matter, when she turns back to look at Christabel, Geraldine's attitude seems to be undecided: "eyes the maid and seeks delay" (Coleridge line 259). But, once more, her disposition changes suddenly and she lays down with Christabel, taking her in her arms: "And lay down by the Maiden's side!—/ And in her arms the maid she took" (lines 262-263). What follows this action is, without doubt, one of the most enigmatic parts of the poem —Geraldine puts a spell on Christabel:

> 'In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell,
> Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!
> Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know to-morrow,
> This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow;
> But vainly thou warrest,
> For this is alone in
> Thy power to declare,
> That in the dim forest
> Thou heard'st a low moaning,
> And found'st a bright lady, surpassingly fair;
> And didst bring her home with thee in love and in charity,
> To shield her and shelter her from the damp air.'   (lines 267-278)

What is important to note about the spell is that it makes Christabel unable to talk about what is about to happen, but it does not force her to do anything. In taking away her ability to speak Geraldine does leave Christabel powerless, but Geraldine is very open about the spell, she gives Christabel a full explanation about it and she seems to hide nothing. The dubious attitude of Geraldine before actually laying down with Christabel, together with the fact that she prevents her from telling about what is clearly a lesbian sexual intercourse open the possibility to interpret the spell as a means of protecting her. Since the patriarchal society his father represents would never tolerate Christabel's having sex with Geraldine, preventing her father and the rest of the court from knowing what has happened also means that it is impossible for their actions to have consequences. In addition, Ulmer has noted that the spell "is not supernatural but merely a lie or threat which Christabel embraces in order to keep believing in her own infallibility... Christabel is free to stand or fall" (379). Whether the spell actually exists or it is just something Geraldine tells her to make sure she will not tell what has happened, it still takes Christabel's power to decide whether she wants to speak or not away from her.

Concerning the representation of lesbianism that Coleridge makes in the poem it is important to mention, as Elfenbein has noted, that the traditionally heterosexual context in which lesbianism had been portrayed until this moment is removed (189). The encounter between the two women has no further purpose than the encounter itself, it does not work as a tool to "create male erotic pleasure" (Elfenbein 189), at least as long as we do not take the male reader into account.

After the spell is put on Christabel, the text actually creates an empty space, that is, it does not explicitly tell about the sexual intercourse between the two women but, as several scholars have already noted, the silences actually "serve to echo the unspeakable nature of homosexuality in early 19th century Britain" (Grajko 3). Therefore, instead of describing what happens in Christabel's bedroom, the narrator recalls an image of when Christabel was praying in the forest. This narrator describes Christabel and her actions as "gentle" (Coleridge line 285), with "slender palms" (line 286), "fair" (line 289) face and "both blue eyes more bright than clear" (line 290): an ideal representation of the pure and good "angel woman". This image of Christabel, however, contrasts with the one of her "dreaming fearfully" (line

293). In fact, the two images are so different that the narrator even questions the fact that this woman he is seeing now is the same that was praying by the oak tree: "Can this be she,/ The lady, who knelt at the old oak tree?" (lines 296-297). It is clear, thus, that a change has taken place in Christabel as a consequence of her encounter with Geraldine. Since we assume they have had sex, this change is probably Christabel's sexual awakening, meaning that the purity that defined her before is now gone. Despite the fact that Christabel has clearly undergone some kind of change as a consequence of this interaction, "it is unclear whether Christabel will suffer or benefit from knowing Geraldine" ("Cultivating Medievalism" 45).

If Christabel's present image contrasts with what she was before, so does it contrast with that of Geraldine, "the worker of these harms" (Coleridge lines 298), who holds Christabel "As a mother with her child" (line 301). The fact that Geraldine holds Christabel as if she were her mother after having sex is disturbing to say the least but, at the same time, it implies that there is something maternal about it, which is, therefore, associated to her being loving and caring, since these are the defining features of mothers (*Romanticism and Gender* 108). In these lines we see that the narrator of the poem deliberately blames Geraldine for the events of the previous night, although, as we have already seen, the boundaries between seducer and seduced were blurred in Geraldine and Christabel's encounter. As a consequence, "lesbianism remains unassimilable to conventional patterns because Coleridge does not allow Geraldine to be seen as simply a masculinized aggressor" (Elfenbein 193).

The following morning, when Christabel wakes up, the reader finds her in quite an awkward state: she sheds "Large tears that leave the lashes bright!/ And oft the while she seems to smile/ As infants at a sudden light!" (lines 316-318).Christabel is both crying and smiling like a child and we can infer that this state is a consequence of her encounter with Geraldine. What we can conclude based on her tears and smiles is that although she is not completely at peace with what she has done, she does not reject it either and, on that note, part one of the poem concludes.

The second part of the poem takes us out of Christabel's room and back into the Baron's castle. The first thing we learn about life in the castle is that Sir Leoline has made it a point to remind everyone about the death of his wife every single morning: "Each matin bell, the Baron saith,/ Knells us back to a world of death" (lines 232-233), something he began to

do "When he rose and found his lady dead" (line 353). These bells are associated with "prayer, order, patriarchy, custom, and law" (Ulmer 383). Furthermore, since Sir Leoline's wife, and Christabel's mother, died during childbirth ("She died the hour that I was born" (Coleridge line 197)), this ritual also reveals things about Christabel's position within his father's household. In fact, Christabel is "responsible" for her mother's death and, the fact that Sir Leoline will force her to think about that every day makes us question the level of acceptance with which she is treated in her house.

When Geraldine wakes up the next morning she looks even more beautiful than she did the day before: "Nay, fairer yet! and yet more fair!/ For she belike hath drunken deep/ Of all the blessedness of sleep!" (lines 374-376).

In addition, Geraldine is grateful for Christabel's help but, Christabel, unlike Geraldine, wakes up feeling that she has sinned: "'Sure I have sinn'd' said Christabel," (line 381). Once she realises what has happened, she hurries to take Geraldine to meet her father and it is in this moment that the real change in Geraldine's attitude takes place. Geraldine goes mute. In fact the voices we hear during the second part of the poem are almost exclusively those of the male characters, Sir Leoline, the Bard Bracy, and the narrator. What Geraldine does for most of this section of the poem is to look like "bright a damse1" (line 402) and, gratefully bend at the Baron's feet: "The lady fell, and clasped his knees,/ Her face upraised, her eyes o'erflowing" (lines 518-519). As we see, therefore, Geraldine's behaviour has become much more passive, she definitely performs the role of the damsel in distress that is designated to her in a patriarchal society. Her performance is so exceptional that the Baron "Had deemed her sure a thing divine" (line 476).

Her attitude contrasts with Sir Leoline's. He acts as a protector, making it his mission to ensure Geraldine's safety, even pointing at violence in order for the young woman not to be bothered by the snake Barcy had seen in his dream: "'Sweet maid, Lord Roland's beauteous dove, With arms more strong than harp or song, Thy sire and I will crush the snake!'" (lines 569-571). This dream is actually a warning about the threat that Geraldine, who Barcy was embodied in a snake, represents for Christabel, who appears in the dream as a dove. Geraldine's representation as a snake symbolises "the deceit of Satan and Eve, which enabled them to seduce more ingenuous beings" (Spatz 113) and, consequently, alludes to the

encounter that took place between the two women on the previous night, that in which Christabel was supposedly tempted into sin by Geraldine. When Barcy tries to explain the implications of the dream, however, Sir Leoline fails to identify her daughter as the actual potential victim of Geraldine and he turns his back on her.

As these lines evidence, Sir Leoline is the strong and authoritative man that represents patriarchy. Since he has taken up the active subject position in his household, he has relegated Christabel to the position of object. Christabel is the way she is because it is her role to be like that in a patriarchal society. She behaves, most of the time, according to the behaviour patterns the system has taught her to reproduce. Her father has idealised and infantilised Christabel and pays no attention to what she says, even when she is trying to warn him of the possible harm Geraldine might cause (Ulmer 389). Instead of acknowledging that what Christabel is saying could possibly be true, he dismisses her, feels "Dishonoured thus in his old age;/ Dishonoured by his only child" (Coleridge lines 642-643), and he sends the Bard to Geraldine's father castle without realising that the snake is within his home. His failure to interpret the dream correctly is representative of the way in which the men in Christabel's surroundings treat her: they "are constantly assessing her emotions while exerting social pressure to conform. At no point are Christabel's concerns or desires described by the men in her life" (Grajko 19).

The contrast between the environment in which these events take place and the attitudes Christabel and Geraldine take in each of them clearly shows that the female characters change their attitude in a situation that is overtly and explicitly patriarchal ("Wandering Mother" 547). This change realises itself in the form of repression and the return of women to the position of objects of the discourse. While both Christabel and Geraldine were completely free to speak during the previous night, with their entrance in what we could think of as a space that is absolutely dominated by Sir Leoline, their words vanish. Thus, in this masculine space dominated by Sir Leoline's laws, women become unable to speak for themselves because "the Law legislates against every voice but its own" ("Wandering Mother" 549). This difference between the two spaces is further reinforced by the fact that the Baron is unable to grasp the meaning of the dream the Bard had, and, as a consequence, does not understand what Geraldine actually is.

Christabel, on the other hand, starts to see Geraldine's serpent form as soon as the dream is told and, after begging her father to send Geraldine back to her castle and being disregarded by her father, she eventually sees him "turning away from his own sweet maid,/ The aged knight, Sir Leoline,/ Led forth the lady Geraldine!" (Coleridge lines 653-655). These lines demonstrate how patriarchy, represented by Sir Leoline in this case, ignores the women who try to speak up and prefer the ones that confine themselves to the traditional definition of woman. Since this is what Geraldine has done from the very moment she entered Sir Leoline's space, she is the one who is "rewarded" in the end, whereas Christabel, who has tried to speak up and contradict her father's will is just rejected. It is also worth mentioning that, although by this point in the poem Geraldine seems to position herself with Christabel's father, to replicate his authority and to even make him turn his back on his beloved child, the power that seems to be apparent here is only illusory. Geraldine's power comes ultimately from her ability to make men like her and, in the end, she succumbs to patriarchal rules. The rivalry that is created between them for Christabel's father's attention is a way to ensure that they won't threaten the established order but continue instead trying to rid the other one of power. Her "strength is illusory because it is fashioned within the context of male modes of power" ("Uses of the Erotic 22"). This specific section shows the inutility of women trying to replicate the positions of power that men hold in society as they will not lead them to liberation. The power that Geraldine seems to have gained by the end of the poem grants simply a slightly improved position within the same structures and the same patriarchal system. However, " we cannot fight old power in old power terms only. The only way we can do it is by creating another whole structure that touches every aspect of our existence, at the same time as we are resisting" ("A Conversation between" 80). In imitating Christabel's father's power, therefore, Geraldine becomes a perpetrator of the same patriarchal system that was responsible for her oppression.

As we have seen throughout the poem, most of the time Geraldine looks as lovely, beautiful, innocent and pure as Christabel does. Nevertheless she is presented as an outsider, she does not belong within Sir Leoline's patriarchal system and, therefore, she does not act according to the rules established by this system. Her otherness makes her indeterminate, she is a liminal being who does not completely belong within Sir Leoline's system and who has the power to unsettle its way of functioning, and that is why she is regarded as a threat and a

danger for Christabel: getting to know her might lead her to become as transgressive and subversive as she is. However, it must be noted that neither Christabel nor her father reject her otherness. "Geraldine, as an indeterminate being, an outsider welcomed into the enclosed and patriarchal family, suggests that such roles are unstable social constructs, for she herself seems to stand beyond them in a way that Christabel and Leoline cannot" (Fulford 104).

The poem leads its readers to the conclusion that there is no clear division between good and evil, in the same way that there is no human being, no woman in this case, who is entirely good or entirely evil, for even a lovely and dutiful daughter like Christabel will, occasionally, break the rules. Christabel's leaving her father's castle in the middle of the night can, thus be interpreted as a "defiance of her father as well as the social gender norms" (Kapetanović 63). In the same way, no evil woman is unable to conceal her nature and act as if she were a dutiful woman. In fact, the way in which both women are described does not differ that much, both seem to be lovely and gentle ladies but, still, there are instances in which "their actions are often courageous and transgressive, even manipulative of their gender-roles" (Kundu). Although the narrators of the poem often imply that Christabel needs to be protected from Geraldine ("O shield her! Shield sweet Christabel" (Coleridge line 254); "Jesu, Maria, shield her well!" (line 582)), the truth is that the two characters are actually quite similar to each other during the first part of the poem. The beginning of a new day in the second part, on the other hand, seems to have reminded Christabel of the importance of the rules of her father's system, and the actual presence of men in this part accentuates Christabel's will to submit to what her father would consider acceptable. It is only in the presence of men that Christabel suddenly remembers Geraldine's bosom as "that bosom old" (line 457), "that bosom cold" (line 458). That is, as her awareness of the growing evil in Geraldine her image "her sight from that beautiful woman into a hideous hag" (Tekinay 189). Similarly, Geraldine also undergoes a transformation in the presence of men and she even seems to flirt with Sir Leoline to guarantee that he will favour her: "Fair Geraldine, who met the embrace,/ Prolonging it with joyous look" (Coleridge line 449-450). She uses these qualities to negotiate the resources she can obtain. That is, she uses her appearance and her innocent behaviour to gain Sir Leoline's favour.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the fact that the two parts of the poem were written three years apart from each other creates a rupture in the narrative that affects the way in which the main characters, Geraldine especially, are represented. Her portrayal in the first part of the poem is not consistent with the serpentine nature she demonstrates in the second one. During the three years that passed between the composition of the first and second part of the poem, an important event took place in Coleridge's life: he met Sara Hutchinson and he fell deeply in love with her. By this time, however, Coleridge was married and so meeting with Sara could only contribute to his feelings about women growing even more complicated. Therefore, a simple continuation to the poem, one that might have followed from the first part, was probably considered too simple by Coleridge, "given the tangled nature of his own feelings" (*The Life of STC* 185).

3.2 "The Dark Ladie"

3.2.1 Bannerman: Life and Work

Information concerning Anne Bannerman's life is scarce and much of what is known has been learnt through the correspondence of people who knew her while she lived, in particular through his friend Robert Anderson's letters ("Romantic spinrelsy 208). Anne Bannerman was born around 1780, although the exact date of her birth remains unknown and she spent most of her life in Edinburgh (Heilman iv). She was self- educated, she had taught herself Italian and French and she was exceptionally well read (xxxvii).

During the time when Bannerman lived, Edinburgh was a notable place for literary production, and movements such as the ballad revival, the Gothic, and Romanticism coexisted in the city (A. Miller). Bannerman's three volumes of poetry are influenced by these three traditions and, in addition, she was influenced by the works of female thinkers such as Wollstonecraft and Hays, which means that, in the same way as they did, she witnessed and was fully aware of "the narrowing of female gender roles and the gradual backlash against feminist advocacy" (Stuart 12). As can be observed in her poetry, these ideas strongly influenced her work: from her first volume of poetry *Poems* (1800) it can be noted that she deals with themes that are closely related to women's role and place in society. Similarly, her

second volume *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry,* published anonymously two years after the first one and containing "The Dark Ladie", builds up on these concerns and, despite most of the poems being set in the Medieval past, they address issues that were relevant for Bannerman's contemporaries and still continue to be discussed (Heilman xcix).

Bannerman owes the little recognition she has had to this second volume of poetry, *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* (1802), although it was also this volume that triggered the decline and end of her poetic career and forced her to eventually abandon her artistic pursuits in favour of a more profitable lifestyle (xcix). In fact, neither critical nor the general public regarded the volume positively despite the larger body of potential readers granted by the fact that the book was published in London rather than Edinburgh (Verdonock 10). One of the main reasons why this book did not succeed was the "depiction of vengeful women regularly getting the upper hand on men throughout Tales would certainly be perceived as a challenge to 'social order'" (Heilman ciii). Several of the ballads question the efficacy and relevance of respected institutions, particularly the Catholic Church" (ciii). The volume contains ten ballads, one of them being "The Dark Ladie", which is the only one that is somewhat recognised nowadays. This poem was first published in the *Edinburgh Magazine*, a magazine for which she was an occasional contributor, in 1800 (c). The poem was a response to a poem by Coleridge that was published in the same magazine just one month before Bannerman's (cxiv). Nevertheless, her poem did not manage to procure her any kind of recognition.

When her mother died in 1804, Bannerman lost her source of income and found herself homeless. Although she tried her best to support herself by means of her writing and her close friends did what they could to help her in this endeavour, the lack of success of her literary work forced her to give up writing and become a governess in 1807 (Stuart 12). She died in 1829 (Heilman iv) without the opportunity to see her work succeed, and, in fact, her work remains broadly unacknowledged. As Craciun notes, her social class (her father was a street ballad singer) played a significant role in the lack of recognition of her work but, it was her gender that ultimately made of her literary career an impossible one ("Romantic spinsrelsy" 220).

A marginal subject, both because of her position as a woman and due to her Scottish nationality, Bannerman firmly criticised the patriarchal society that relegates women to the

role of objects. In so doing, she puts into question and challenges the ideology that imprisons women and forces them to fit in the restrictive concept of women that had been created by society. Therefore, we can claim that her "ballads introduce a new perspective into the traditional construction of the female representation in the ballad genre" (Hoeveler 97). In addition, "In publishing her ballads in her own volumes, Anne Bannerman challenged the prevailing sexual politics of the Scottish ballad revival, in which women were expected to provide the popular, oral sources for male scholars' published volumes" ("Romantic Spinsrelsy" 221).

3.2.2 "The Dark Ladie": Poem Analysis

"The Dark Ladie" indubitably succeeds in frightening its readers as much as it leaves them feeling that there is very little they have understood about its main character's history. At the beginning of the poem, the reader encounters Sir Guyon and his knights, who have just "return'd from Holy Land" (Bannerman line 1) and are feasting to celebrate. Even though they are celebrating, Sir Guyon, the central male figure of the poem, looks obviously uncomfortable: "But none, on Guyon's clouded face,/ Had ever seen a smile" (Bannerman lines 7-8). As they are all in the castle and the evening draws near, Sir Guyon, looks progressively anxious:

> And, as the hour of eve drew on,
> That clouded face more dark became,
> No burst of mirth could overpow'r
> The shiverings of his frame;   (Bannerman lines 9-16)

The source of his anxiety is clearly related to the door, and therefore, to the possibility of someone coming in through it. This, together with the fact that every time he hears a noise he "pale as death, bent his ear" (line 18) makes the reader think that he is expecting someone to actually come in and, as his extreme uneasiness suggests, he is utterly perturbed by the thought of this visit.

Once the feast is ready and the knights start to eat, the lady makes her appearance:

> And when the feast was spread, and all

> The guests, assembled, were at meat,
> There pass'd them by, with measur'd step,
> And took the upper seat,
> A Ladie, clad in ghastly white,
> And veiled to the feet: (lines 21-26)

As it can be appreciated in her description, one of the defining features of this woman are the veils that cover her: she is "veiled to the feet" (line 26) and this, together with the fact that the knights have just returned from the Holy Land (lines 1-2), and that "Sir Guyon came and brought with him/ The Ladie in the veil" (lines 111-112) from this particular place, hints at her origin and lets the reader think that she is probably a muslim. In this light, the title of the poem can be interpreted as referring to the ladie's skin colour (Heilman cxxiv) and, furthermore, it doubles the lady's otherness: she is an other because she is a woman and she is also an other because she represents another culture. The lady's body, however, is covered by two veils, a white one "clad in ghastly white" (Bannerman line 25) and a black one "Her long black veil that swept the ground" (line 32). The veil, as Gilbert and Gubar state, "separates two spheres" (469) and, as will be evidenced by the poem, in the particular case of "The Dark Ladie" the veils mark the division between the male and female spaces. According to them, the veil has different meanings for female and male writers: while for men it is a marker of otherness (471) and it "reflects male dread of women" (472), for women writers it represents the confinement of women in its different forms (468). So as to the colour of the veils Craciun has interpreted the white one as "a symbol for her destroyed marriage" (*Fatal Women of Romanticism* 169) and the black one "denotes death as a signifier for the Ladie's return as an avenging revenant" (169). The implications of this interpretation, however, are more profound than that: the two veils also stand for the angel-monster dichotomy. The white one is, thus, the one that represents the dutiful and loving wife, whereas the black one symbolises the transgressive female who crosses boundaries and is, therefore, seen as monstrous. That is, the lady embodies the two most common representations of women in literature and this is "literalized in her veils of pure light and pure darkness" ("Romantic spinsrelsy" 211). Along these lines, we can claim that Bannerman's lady is a woman who is confined to live behind the veils because as she does not belong in the masculine space that she has just entered, her face and body must be covered to materialise the fact that she is an outsider.

Covered by these veils, then, the lady enters the room and places herself above all the knights, in the "upper seat". The position of the lady is further relevant if we consider the space in which she takes it: she is in a room full on knights, full of representatives of the chivalric institution, and, therefore, in an altogether masculine space ("Romantic spinsrelsy" 210). But the lady does not utter a single word, she remains quiet and has managed to gain all the knights's attention, every single one of them is now looking at her in awe: "And every knight in chill amaze,/ Survey'd her one by one" (Bannerman lines 29-30). This "emphasizes the power of her gaze and the impotence of her male audience" (Romantic spinrelsy 210). Furthermore, at this point we get to know about another one of the defining features of the lady: her eyes. Although the veil covers her face completely, her eyes create a light that can be seen through the fabric that covers her, a light "That mortal never own'd" (Bannerman line 34). Presenting this woman as someone who is, or at least seems, supernatural provides Bannerman with a perfect excuse to justify her behaviour. Bannerman's depiction of the lady places her quite far from what a woman of the nineteenth-century was meant to be, and this enables her to make her character subversive and transgressive (Verdonock 60-61).

Once he sees the lady, Sir Guyon's anxiety turns into fury (Bannerman line 37). This evolution in his feelings, and the anger he feels, might be due to the fact that, after all, he was hoping not to have to deal with the lady. Although the knights can identify Sir Guyon's feelings, there is nothing they can do to help him because they are sort of hypnotised by the lady:

> But, from the Ladie in the veil,
> Their eyes they could not long withdraw,
> And when they tried to speak, that glare
> Still kept them mute with awe!   (lines 39-42)

Both Sir Guyon's anxiety and the muteness she causes in the knights evidence how extremely powerful this lady is. But the lady goes one step further and dares play with the situation. Similar to the effect of her potential arrival before, her patient waiting, while she forces everyone to look at her, helps build up the tension caused by her presence and makes the knights increasingly uncomfortable: "Each wish'd to rouse his failing heart,/ Yet look'd and trembled all, the while" (lines 43-44).

After the clock strikes midnight, the lady finally stands up and, holding a shell full of wine, as if offering a toast:

> [...] to the alarmed guests she turn'd,
> No breath was heard, no voice, no sound,
> And in a tone, so deadly deep,
> She pleg'd them all around,
> That in their hearts, and thro' their limbs,
> No pulses could be found.   (lines 51-56)

This stanza gives rise to two important issues. The first one is that the power of the lady is unusually overt and explicit. Not only does she have the ability to maintain the attention of the knights and to torture them willingly making them feel distress, she can also control the very organs that keep the knights alive: she can make their hearts stop. This kind of power and energy are definitely unusual in a female character and, as Heilman notes, she represents power that cannot be restrained and which "signifies a reversal of traditional male/female power dynamics" (cxxiii). The second thing the stanza draws our attention to is the third, and final, defining feature of the lady: the sounds she makes. These sounds are as supernatural as the light her eyes shed and, they are so inhuman that the narrator of the poem does not even refer to them as a voice.

When, after this event, the knights regain their consciousness, they find that the lady has disappeared: "They gaz'd... but she was gone!" (Bannerman line 60) and the knights try to go to sleep. However, they soon realise that their sleep is disturbed by the lady:

> For, often as they turn'd to rest,
> And sleep prest down each heavy eye,
> Before them, in black veil wrapt,
> They saw the Dark Ladie. (lines 65-68)

Together with the vision of the lady comes her deeply disturbing voice, a voice that "stopt/ Thro' all their limbs, the rushing blood" (lines 69-70) and that is evidently inhuman: "no human voice/ Could ever reach that echo, deep;" (lines 73-74). The emphasis on the woman not being human is quite telling since it implies that Bannerman's character is as powerful as she is precisely because she is not human, she is not an actual woman and that is, at least

partly, the source of her power and the reason why she manages to affect the knights so profoundly. In addition, the deepness of her voice is worth mentioning. Because of this deepness, the lady's voice is associated with the male realm and, in the same way as her explicit and immeasurable power does, it contributes to the destabilisation of the traditional gender roles because qualities that are usually considered male are now found in a female character.

The next morning the knights are reunited and they comment on Sir Guyon's strange attitude while they were at the Holy Land. While he demonstrated exceptional bravery when they killed people ("The infidels we slew" (Bannerman line 84)) and fought in the war ("This same Guyon, erst so brave,/ In fight, who ever led the van" (lines 85-86)), he grew extremely weak and anxious when seeing a tomb. The way Sir Guyon's reaction to the tomb is described ("Grew pale and trembled then" (line 88); "I've seen the big drops burst/ For hours upon his face!" (lines 91-92)), as well as his reaction to hearing "the blessed name" (line 93), upon which "His face became as livid clay,/ And, on his foamy lips, the sounds,/ Uttere'd, died away!" (lines 94-96), very much resembles his state as he was expecting the lady to walk into the room at the beginning of the poem, when "No burst of mirth could overpow'r/ The shiverings of his frame; (lines 11-12). These similar reactions suggest that the tomb that made Sir Guyon feel such a great uneasiness is, in fact, that of the lady, which, therefore, implies that what the knights saw at the feast was the lady's ghost, who had returned from death with a still mysterious aim.

The same knight who mentions this event continues to tell the rest of the knights that he spoke to an older man, "hoary-headed" (line 101), who told him about the lady. This old man had lived in Sir Guyon's castle for a long time in the past but he had never lived there "Since he saw the Dark Ladie!" (line 108). While he lived there, he had witnessed how "Sir Guyon came and brought with him/ The ladie in the veil" (lines 111-112). The way in which Sir Guyon is said to have brought the lady with him "he brought her in that frightful veil/ That ever hides her face" (lines 115-116) suggests that the lady was taken from her land without her consent and, furthermore, gives "the impression that Guyon cherished her as a war-prize rather than as a lover" (Ruppert 788).

During the time the lady spent at the castle, Sir Guyon often "tried/ That ne'er-uncover'd face to see" (Bannerman lines 117-118) but he never managed to do so until, one day, he caught a glance of "that glaring eye" (line 121) and immediately after that the lady disappeared. The lady was kept in a "curtain'd tower" (line 125), which reinforces the idea that Sir Guyon took her as some kind of war bounty. Even after her disappearance, the tower she inhabited was still surrounded by supernatural and disturbing elements:

> "But, sometimes, thro' her curtain'd tower,
> A strange uncolour'd light was seen,
> And something, of unearthly hue,
> Still passed on between.   (lines 125-128)

In addition to these visions, "sounds came forth, dull, deep, and wild,/ And O! how deadly slow!" (lines 131-132). These sounds could be interpreted as the lady's laments, the direct consequence of her imprisonment in the tower.

After describing these events, the man the knight was talking to recounts a story he had heard about the lady's origin:

> Some story, how this poor Ladie
> Had left, alas! her husband's home
> With this dread knight to flee:
>
> "And how her sinking heart recoil'd,
> And how her throbbing bosom beat,
> And how sensation almost left
> Her cold convulsed feet:
>
> "And how she clasp'd her little son,
> Before she tore herself away;
> And how she turn'd again to bless
> The cradle where he lay.   (lines 142-152)

These three stanzas evidence the fact that the lady did not voluntarily leave her home, but she was rather taken from her husband and her little son against her will. Here we see her sweet and gentle attitude towards her child, which contrasts greatly with the previous image we had

51

of her (Fäcks 23). Sir Guyon seems to be responsible for the lady's abduction ("But Sir Guyon took her then" (Bannerman line 153)) and, thus, she has come to punish him for what he did to her. The words vengeance or haunting seem inappropriate to describe the lady's actions, since, making him pay for the pain he willingly caused her is closer to a sentence than it is to revenge: what Bannerman is portraying is "an incident in which a 'man's perfidious cruelty' towards a woman is actually punished rather than simply recounted to evoke pathos or pity" (Heilman cxv). The ladie's intention seems to be to make sure they will all remember her and what Sir Guyon has done, and in order to do so she forces them to repeat her story over and over again, haunting them forever (*Fatal Women of Romanticism* 165). Bannerman's choice of Sir Guyon to embody this kind of behaviour is significant for two main reasons. First of all, he holds a notably high position within the army: he is the one who "In fight, ever led the van" (Bannerman line 86) and the one who "led the armed train" (line 2). This means that he stands as a representative for the institution of chivalry and the values it holds. Bannerman's portrayal of this character, however, leads the reader to think that "men like Sir Guyon exploited their power and hid behind the formality of decency yet committed atrocities that ran the gamut of rape, pillaging, and murder" (Heilman cxxiii). She, thus, makes us think about the power dynamics that several systems, chivalry among others, have perpetuated over time and the positions in which the discourses kept alive by these institutions situate powerful men and not-so-powerful women (cxiii). Secondly, Sir Guyon is a character who appeared originally in "Book II of Edmund Spenser's epic poem The Faerie Queene (1590)" (cxxii), where he represents virtue, a quality he is far from having in "The Dark Ladie".

Thus, although at the beginning of the poem the lady might be identified as a *femme fatale*, a dehumanised being who has made it her task to destroy the knights, the stanzas that explain her origin and the reason behind her being in the castle serve to humanise her and prove that there is a reason why this lady is "evil", she "is not a *femme fatale* per se since she does not deploy violence that causes the knights' deaths" (Fäcks 23). The lady, then, goes from seeming evil to be a clear victim of Sir Guyon's actions, although the story Bannerman provides is not just "another tale of women's victimization" (*Fatal Women of Romanticism* 165). The transformation of a good woman into a monster, however, is a recurrent theme in Gothic literature and it is usually prompted "by a male counterpart" (Stuart 3). In fact, what Bannerman is doing in the poem is highlighting the role that men play in creating women

monsters. All the voices in the poem, that of the narrator, the knight, and even the old man's define the lady in a negative way, and, since the story is made available to the reader through them, the image of the lady we construct is definitely affected by the male narratives.

As the analysis of the text has shown, the lady is not just a powerless and silenced victim. She refuses to accept that position. She is a fully active being who has a goal that she will definitely manage to achieve. As Craciun has stated, "instead of providing yet another tale of women's victimization, Bannerman focuses on the Ladie's terrifying revenge on the Christian crusaders who took her from the Holy Land" ("Romantic spinsrelsy" 209-210). Nevertheless, it must be noted that, powerful as the lady might be, she is still perceived as a monster rather than a powerful woman: her "power to haunt the Dark Ladie's oppressors comes at the price of her humanity" (Stuart 20), that is, she is an abject who will never belong within the cultural system of the poem. The lady succeeds in making the knights remember, but she has still not been fully acknowledged as a human being in the knight's world, the veil still marks the separation between both worlds and keeps the lady isolated (Sulaiman 140). In fact, the lady has had to reject her humanity and become a ghost in order to ensure that the knights will not forget what they did. As we can tell from the end of the poem, which raises questions but provides no answers, the sexual politics "of feminine idealization and demonization prevalent in supernatural ballads" ("Romantic spinsrelsy" 211-212) lead us nowhere, as once the poem has finished the reader arrives at no clear conclusions. As a consequence, Stuart's statement that "Bannerman's poems function as a critique of the male gaze and the unrealistic expectations it set for women in the nineteenth century" (21) can only be agreed with.

Although the poem does not provide definite answers, it does manage to force its readers to reflect on the position of women in society, are women still to be prizes for men to take and eventually destroy? (Hoeveler 98) This questioning of the roles and positions available to women in society is also extrapolated to the position of women in the literary world. "The Dark Ladie" was written at a time when women were increasingly visible in the literary world, both as readers and writers (*Romanticism and Gender* 8). Men undeniably regarded this situation with great uneasiness because it meant that the central position they had been granted in the literary world might be put into question. Throughout her life

Bannerman tried to find a place for herself in this predominantly masculine world and we can extrapolate this to the ladie in the poem. The Dark Ladie enters an evidently masculine space, a room in which knights are celebrating, and she takes the "upper seat" (Bannerman line 24), therefore forcing everyone to look at her. There is, however, an obstacle that makes it impossible for her to fully blend with the men in the room: the veil. Here the veil may be read as a border, a line that separates the public and the private (qtd. in Sulaiman 129) and which therefore marks a difference between the ladie and the men. She is ultimately an outsider, an Other, who has to forcefully act upon men for them to regard her. The fact that she manages to keep the knights talking about her, however, could be linked to the stance taken by women writers to be considered fully capable members of the literary world. The ladie's aim is to destroy the knights ("Romantic Spinsrelsy" 211) who perpetuate patriarchy and, by extension, men who want to prevent women writers from coming into the literary sphere.

3.3 "La Belle Dame sans Merci"

3.3.1 Keats: Life ad Work

Although, as in the case of Coleridge, there is abundant and very detailed information concerning the life of John Keats, the present section will focus purely on the details that are relevant for the subsequent analysis of his poem.

Keats was born on the 31st of October of 1795. His childhood experience was marked by his relationship with his mother, with whom he was extremely close (Motion 21). As scholars have observed on several occasions, this relationship shaped the rest of relationships he would have with women throughout his life, especially the one he had with Fanny Brawne, and it definitely affected his representation of women in poetry (21). Keats's relationship with his mother was significantly affected both by her abandonment of the family and her death when Keats was still quite young. The fact that Frances Keats abandoned her family on two occasions meant that she went from representing Keats's most idealized figure to someone who was judged and marginalised by society (33). Keats nursed his mother throughout the illness that would eventually kill her, and her loss was an event that had a great repercussion

in his personality for the rest of his life (40). This turbulent relationship with his mother has often been said to be possible to trace in poems such as "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (42).

Throughout his life, Keats produced a significant amount of poems, some of which were published in his own volumes of poetry (147) and others which were published in journals such as the *Examiner*, although for the most part his work went unnoticed (Motion 153). "La Belle Dame sans Merci", in particular, was written in April 1819 (372) and it lets its readers catch a glimpse of Keats's thoughts and ideas about women. Throughout his life, and particularly from the moment in which he fell in love with Fanny Brawne, his attitude towards women and his opinion about them was marked by a sense of distrust, and he felt that he needed to protect himself from them (198). He was aware of the fact that he had issues with women and that he did not have "a right feeling" (qtd. in Motion 284) towards them. Women made him extremely anxious and triggered in him a great feeling of unrest: "When I am among Women I have evil thoughts, malice spleen —I cannot speak or be silent— I am full of Suspicions and therefore listen to no thing" (qtd. in Motion 284), and he even went as far as to say that women seemed to him "children to whom I would rather give a Sugar Plum than my time" (qtd. in Motion 316). These feelings were further complicated by his relationship with Fanny Brawne, with whom he was nearly obsessed. He felt that he could not exist without her (Motion 470), but at the same time he was convinced that a relationship with her would have disastrous effects on his work (326).

In addition to his views on women, his ideas about poetic creation and the position in which he found himself in life, often acting as a nurse to his mother, brother, and to his patients while he studied, meant that he often found himself in a position that was traditionally associated to women (*Romanticism and Gender* 171). In addition, as a consequence of his social class, Keats received no education concerning the classical tradition which, according to Williams, "placed him in the 'female' position" (20). Nevertheless, this did not prevent him developing his own ideas about the poetic creation and, when it comes to this subject, Keats associates the poetical character with something that has no defined self but is, instead, compared to a chameleon (*Selected Letters* 195). In making this association Keats is defining the poet's self in a traditionally feminine way, since while men and the masculine are identified with that which has clearly established limits ("Complexities of

Gender" 214-215), women and the feminine tend to be associated with just the opposite: women in general, and pregnant ones in particular, are often seen as "a self that erases difference between one and two" (*Romanticism and Gender* 175).

Finding himself in positions associated to women, however, was not something Keats could easily come to terms with, and, in fact, it proved to be a considerable source of anxiety for him ("Complexities of Gender" 219). Even more so because many of his poems were sonnets and odes, forms of poetry which were discredited by male poets and considered not to be important (*Romanticism and Gender* 179). Nevertheless, these anxieties and his "ambivalent attitude toward gender infiltrates his poetry" (181), and, as the subsequent analysis evidences, "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is an excellent example of it. Although two different versions of this poem exist, the first one written in 1819, and the revised version from 1820, this analysis will focus only on the first one, since it is this version that is generally preferred by scholars (Motion 516).

3.3.2 "La Belle Dame sans Merci": Poem Analysis

Most readings of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" agree to describe the female character in the poem as a *femme fatale* and consistently blame her for the deplorable state of the knight. In fact, the very title of the poem qualifies the lady before the poem has even started. According to the words in the title, there are two relevant things the reader must know about the lady before learning about her story: she is beautiful and she is merciless. Nevertheless, when one sets out to read the poem he encounters a decaying knight.

The first stanza of the poem introduces us to one of the main speakers of the poem: the unknown person who encounters the knight wandering around somewhere. This voice immediately begins to question the knight about his state and about what is causing it: "O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms?" (Keats line 1); "O what can ail thee knight-at-arms," (Keats line 5). The questions of the speaker, therefore, introduce the knight to the readers of the poem. The fact that the character that is placed in the position of the decaying character is a knight is telling because he is, clearly, a representative of chivalry, and that means that a set

of "masculine values" such as strength, power and dominance are assigned to him. Yet, the knight we encounter has nothing to do with what one would expect a knight to be. Keats's knight is "palely loitering" (Keats line 2), "haggard" (Keats line 6) and "woe-begone" (Keats line 6). All of these terms hint both at the terrible state the knight's body is in and also to his emotional state, which leads us to conclude that the thing that is bothering him affects his mental state as much as it affects his body. The idea of decay conveyed by the descriptions of the knight's body is further reinforced by the references to nature that are made in these first two stanzas: "The sedge was withered from the lake, /And no birds sing" (lines 3-4); "The squirrel's granary is full,/ And the harvest's done" (lines 7-8). These four lines clearly set the events the poem narrates in autumn, a season in which plants and several animals die. Not only does the setting of the poem in this particular season create an atmosphere of melancholy and decline, but it also works as an anticipation of the knight's fate: he is dying, just like nature.

Stanza three emphasises the idea of life abandoning the knight's body: his forehead is "With anguish moist and fever-dew" (line 10), and his cheeks are growing more and more pale; on them "a fading rose/ Fast withered too" (lines 11-12). The first three stanzas, therefore, serve the purpose of letting the reader know how badly damaged the knight is. This representation of the knight breaks with the conventional portrayal of men of his position; instead of being brave and robust —that is, instead of being traditionally masculine— the knight is described by means of images of flowers, which are conventionally feminine.

After the knight's state has been reported he starts to speak. The knight is the main speaker of the poem and it is through his words that we learn about what happened to him and the events that led him to be in the terrible state he is in. This means that from this moment on we get to know his side of the story. He starts his account of what happened by mentioning how he encountered a lady in the meadow:

> I met a lady in the meads,
> Full beautiful—a faery's child,
>
> Her hair was long, her foot was light,
> And her eyes were wild.   (lines 13-16)

This lady is a "faery's child" (line 14) which hints at her young age, but also at the fact that she is a supernatural being. Fairies are a kind of supernatural beings who were often said to steal people from our world (Monaghan 167). Although they were considered immoral because they did things such as stealing married people, both men and women, from their partners, they were also said to have their own moral and codes of behaviour (167). When stealing people from our world, fairies had preferences: young, good- looking people were often favoured, and, hence, more likely to be stolen by fairies (173). A remarkable figure in this respect is that of the fairy lover, a creature, almost unfailingly a woman, who, aided by her exceptional beauty, willingly managed to captivate the best-looking men and make them her lovers. Once men had succumbed to the fairies's charms they would very rarely attempt to leave them, since they were incredibly beautiful and lustful. Fairies, on the other hand, did not enjoy commitment as much and, sometimes, they would just send their human lovers back to their world, in which case, men were likely to be unable to return to their normal lives and they would frequently just die, longing for the fairy and her world (174-175). The generally agreed- upon idea of what a fairy is, therefore, corresponds to the above-mentioned "exotic or ethereal fairy creature" (qtd. in Gal 161) that embodies one of the prototypes of *femme fatale* of the 19th century.

The physical appearance of the lady the knight encounters also resembles this description of mythological fairies. She is "full beautiful" (Keats line 14), with long hair (Keats 15) that hints at her sensuality and "her foot was light" (line 15), that is, she moves delicately and gracefully. As we see, therefore, "she displays the fragility of vulnerability that the knight assess as refined or socially proper" (Gal 164). Her eyes, however, are "wild" (line 16) and so, they somewhat contrast with the rest of her gentle and nimble appearance. The way in which he describes her, in addition, seems rather reductive, he focuses on her being a "child" (line 14) and on the features of her appearance that suggest delicacy and fragility (Allen 1131). However, although he describes her in a descending motion, from her hair to her feet, he ends up going back to her wild eyes.

The wildness insinuated by her eyes seems to have caused in the knight an urge tame her, a wish to control her unrestrained nature by giving her "presents", which are, actually, more similar to chains than to actual presents. The things the knight gives the lady are "a

garland for her head" (Keats line 17), "bracelets" (line 18), and "fragrant zone" (line 18), that is, a belt (Allen 1131). The subtlety of these actions must be noted since, it is only when carefully looking at the items that are given to the woman that one realises about their implications: the knight aims at "domestication" ("Harassing the Muse" 88) and the chains will help him restrict the fairy's actions. Worth mentioning in this respect is the fact that, unlike the previously mentioned mythological fairies, this one seems not to make any conscious efforts to enchant the knight, it is him that sees her and starts the interaction. The fairy's reaction to this is the following "She looked at me as she did love,/ And made sweet moan" (Keats lines 19-20). Her actions are as subtle as the intention of the knight, in fact, it can be said that she barely reacts to the presents she has received. In addition, line nineteen suggests that she looks at the knight as if she loved him, that is, the knight interprets the fairy's look as one of love, but it seems to be just an illusion. As Allen states, "the artificiality of the lady's affection is apparent when she does not look at him with love, but with a likeness to it" (1132).

Immediately after this, the knight refers that "I set her on my pacing steed" (Keats line 21). As we see in this line the lady does not get herself on the horse, but rather, the knight is the one that does it for her. This part of the interplay is key because it clearly shows the knight in a subject position acting on the fairy. The image of the knight we see through the lines that describe the time he spent with the fairy, as can be observed in this particular instance, is entirely different from the one we encounter at the beginning of the poem. As a matter of fact, the knight actually behaves in the way we would expect a knight to behave: he is an active being and, for the most part, he is the one in control of the situation.

After this, the lady engages in a performance of the traditional female gender roles: she feeds the knight: "She found me roots of relish sweet,/ And honey wild, and manna-dew" (lines 25-26), she takes him home: "She took me to her Elfin Grot" (line 29), and she even helps the knight go to sleep by singing to him: "And there she lulled me asleep" (line 33). What is more, "she seems to love it" ("Harassing the Muse" 88). The behaviour of the lady during these lines seems to correspond completely with the one that is conventionally regarded as maternal (Williams 129). However, if we look at what happens in between these

three episodes, we can sense that the fairy is not as happy as we would think if we trusted the knight's interpretation of the events.

According to what the knight tells the readers of the poem, there is no direct speech between him and the fairy. There is one single instance in which the fairy utters actual words and, although, as we will see later on, the poem does, in fact, silence her, at this particular point the lack of speech tells us more about the knight than it does about the fairy. The only thing the fairy says is "'I love thee true'" (Keats line 28). This utterance is produced in a "language strange" (line 27), meaning that this is a language the knight is unable to understand. "The impenetrability of the woman's 'truth,' expressed here through a language that the knight may not recognize as his own, projects his failure to ascertain the lady's agency, perhaps because his male 'translators' can understand only conventional or *less* strange versions of feminine expression" (Gal 165). Thus, the knight "appropriate[s] her speech with his own words" (qtd. in Wootton 112), which puts into question "his own credibility" (Wootton 113). The alliteration of the "s" sound in the line that introduces the lady's actual utterance, "And sure in language strange she said" (Keats line 27) hint at the hissing sound made by snakes, which definitely aims at making the reader realise that the lady is evil.

In addition, once they get to the cave, the lady bursts into tears: "And there she wept and sighed full sore" (line 30). In view of this, then, we could claim that, perhaps, both the previous moans and the present crying "indicate resistance more than love" ("Harassing the Muse" 89). As Swann argues, "romance blinds most readers to the woman's point of view —a point of view from which the exchange between lady and knight looks less like a domestic idyll or a fatal encounter and more like a scene of harassment" (89). The knight fails to provide an explanation concerning the crying of the lady because he refuses to make an effort to actually understand her. Instead, his response to her crying is to "shut her wild wild eyes/ With kisses four" (Keats lines 31-32). This could possibly be interpreted as an attempt of the knight to comfort the fairy but, as Williams has observed, "since eyes and seeing so often are a metaphor for selfhood or subjectivity" (220), the knight's gesture could also be interpreted as an effort to dissolve her subjectivity, her own sense of selfhood and, thus, the shutting of her eyes could be read as "an impulse simply to shut her out (or up)" (220).

The narration of the encounter between the knight and the fairy finishes just as she puts him to sleep. The knight, then, moves on to tell his interlocutor about the dream he had while he slept. In the dream, the knight sees "pale kings and princes too,/ Pale warriors, death-pale were they all" (Keats lines 38-39), that is, he sees a group of men in a state that highly resembles his own at the beginning of the poem. It is these men that actually label the fairy as "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (lines 39) and warn the sleeping knight of the fact that she "Thee hath in thrall!" (lines 49). Stanzas number ten and eleven, therefore, are the ones in which we get a judgement about the lady. According to these men, the knight's case is not an isolated one: this woman has had other victims previously. However, this judgement is " ill-supported by anything other than masculine pronouncement" ("Gender and Imagination" 126). As a consequence, the woman we see throughout the poem "remains at odds with the verbal construct generated by the story disseminated between the men" (126). The lady is, therefore, portrayed as a dangerous creature, she is not human, she "falls outside common experience and is therefore not to be trusted. She transcends the known" (Swanepoel 93), that is, the lady is an abject and, therefore, she has the chance to refuse to act according to the rules established by the princes and the kings. This dangerous nature, however, is conveniently concealed by her outstanding beauty, which, in this poem, seems to function as a trap that the lady employs to place men in a position in which she can use them, just as the prototypical *femme fatale*. Thus, the fairy would seem to voluntarily take up the object position that would allow her to enthrall the knight and grant her the power, since "commonly accepted practices of femininity take it for granted that there is status and power attached to being attractive to men" (Hollway 229).

After analysing the poem, it can be claimed that both the structure of the poem and the order in which the events are recounted play an essential role in the interpretation of the poem. The first thing the reader learns is that the knight is in a terrible condition and that life seems to be fading from his body. It is only after the reader has learnt about this and empathised with the knight that s/he is told about the supposed cause of this state. The reader thus, gets into the poem expecting to find the source of the knight's ailment. And, apparently, this expectation is fulfilled. Upon paying closer attention to the narrative, however, one realises that the poem is structured in a way that, willing or unwillingly, manipulates the reader so that they place themselves in favour of the knight and against the lady. The way the

poem is written does, in fact, make the reader think that this woman is evil and that her aim is just to seduce the knight and abandon him when she gets bored of him. The final stanza, which closes the cycle by going back to the beginning of the story, ensures that the reader will remember the knight's condition, and, in so doing, will further blame the woman.

> And this is why I sojourn here,
> Alone and palely loitering,
> Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
> And no birds sing.   (Keats lines 45-48)

However, this is a male narrative, which would no doubt blame the woman, especially a woman who seems to have the power to unsettle patriarchy by refusing to accept the rules established by it.

Similarly, the verbs that describe the actions that each of the characters perform are extremely telling. While the interaction between the characters seems to be balanced at first sight because the subjects of the sentences referring to them constantly alternate between the "I" that refers to the knight and the "she" that refers to the fairy, the actions of each of the characters does reveals that this is not actually the case. The actions the knight performs are described by means of sentences such as "I made a garland for her head" (line 17), "I set her on my pacing steed" (line 21), "I shut her wild wild eyes" (line 31). All of these actions are targeted at the lady and have a direct impact on her: she is "decorated", but in actual fact restricted, she is carried, and she is made to close her eyes. In addition, these actions seem to require a higher level of activity and a stronger will than those of the lady, whose actions have a smaller impact on the knight and require less activity. The actions performed by the lady are the following: "look" (line 19), "moan" (line 20), "bend" (line 23), "sing" (line 23), feed the knight "She found me roots of relish sweet,/ And hone wild, and mana-dew" (lines 25-26), "said" (line 27), "took [the knight] to her Elfin grot" (line 29), "wept and sighed" (line 30), and "lulled" (line 33) the knight asleep. Although there are significantly more verbs referring to the fairy's actions, the kind of activities they refer to is completely different. Most of the fairy's actions have no impact whatsoever on the knight, she looks, she cries, and she sings, but none of these actions does actually affect the knight or his will. The three actions the lady

performs and which do, in fact, have some kind of impact on the knight are feeding him, leading him to her cave and making him fall asleep. These are also the three actions that show the fairy as a more active being. Nevertheless, the knight, who speaks in the poem and therefore has the chance of commenting on these actions, seems to agree with what the lady does to him.

The analysis has also hinted at the evident silencing of the female in this poem. The narrative of the poem is completely masculine, since male voices and their male story appropriate and silence the female ("Gender Complexities" 223); thus, the lady "becomes available to the reader only through the double displacement created by the act of naming her in a foreign language by the Kings and Princes" ("Gender and Imagination" 126). This means that the only point of view that is available to the reader is that of the knight and the other "victims" of the fairy. These men are unable to distinguish between seduction and cruelty, and, as a consequence, they construct their own idea of what the lady is, based on the way in which they, clumsily, interpret the events (126) but which is far from an accurate reflection of the woman's behaviour.

Overall, the poem makes a conscious effort to make the reader believe that the lady is evil: she is heartless and cold, she is completely responsible for the state the knight is in, as well as for that of the princes' and knights'. In addition, her beauty conceals her intentions, making her look sweet and innocent, just so that she can trick the knight into loving her. But on reading the poem more closely, these attempts at making the reader believe that the lady is evil when the truth is that the knight does not care about actually understanding the lady seem a little bit unnatural. The fact that he sees her as an evil being comes from his inability to treat her as a human being rather than as an object. Keats seems to be warning men against women with this poem. The conclusion one gets is that women are magical creatures who will seduce men by means of their looks and will later put a spell on them just to finally abandon them, leaving them terribly affected and ill-looking. However, upon reading the poem carefully we can tell that the truth is that the knight seems to be forcing the lady to be a certain way. He is trying to control her, to tame her, and that is probably why she abandons him. These women, according to the poem, are a threat to a man's masculinity, as evidenced by the knight's initial

state. In fact, when the lady leaves she acts according to her own will, and that is precisely why the kings and princes consider her a threat: she refuses to submit.

The image of this fairy has, in addition, often been read as a metaphor of the women writers of the 19th century intruding into the "masculine" literary world (Allen 1128). As we have already mentioned, Keats's self-doubt as well as the constant negative criticism he received as a poet made it extremely difficult for him to live off what he wrote. Women writers, "blue-stockings" in particular, were something he had a very strong opinion about: he firmly disapproved of them because he felt threatened by them. Swann notes how, in losing the fairy, the knight has actually gained "accession to an all-male community. Could this community, and not the ideal or even the fatal woman, be the true object of his quest?" ("Harassing the Muse" 90). As Mellor has stated, Keats "repeatedly assigns to the feminine gender the possession of beauty, power and knowledge, everything that the male poet yearns to possess" (*Romanticism and Gender* 181). In the case of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" these qualities are present in the fairy and thus, the knight aims precisely at that, at possessing her because she has qualities he desires. At the same time as he does this, however, Keats tries to establish a space between the male poet and the female object of desire, a space where the poet can preserve a recognizable masculinity" (*Romanticism and Gender* 181), and this is precisely what the community of victims of the fairy provides the knight with.

3.4 "A Legend of Tintagel Castle"

3.4.1 Landon: Life and Work

Letitia Elizabeth Landon was born on the 14th of August, 1802, in Chelsea, London. At this time Chelsea was a neighbourhood designed to accommodate the members of the upper middle class (*The Woman behind L.E.L.* 22), which means that she was born into a quite well-off family. The comfortable social position of the family is further evidenced by the fact that her parents made sure that their daughter received a proper education, which shows not only that the Landons were in a position to provide Letitia with a good education, they also thought it important for her to receive it (23-24). However, their comfortable life was to be disturbed

by financial problems a few years after Letitia was born. During this difficult period, and being aware of their daughter's exceptional literary abilities, the Landons managed to make one of their neighbours, William Jerdan, who was also the editor of the *Literary Gazette*, read some of Letitia's poems. Jerdan liked Landon's work, and one of her poems was published in the *Literary Gazette* in 1820 (24). Landon became one of the chief contributors in several magazines and annuals of her time and, after her father's death, she managed to support both herself and her mother, who lived in a different house, and she even made it possible for her brother to go to Oxford (33). Slowly, she became the "'poetess' par excellence" (L. Miller 5). As well as benefiting from Jerdan's favour, Landon embarked in an affair that would last for the majority of her life with this man who was married and about twenty years older than the young poetess and fathered the three children she had (L. Miller 32).

Signing her works as L.E.L., she succeeded in creating an air of mystery around her persona, a constructed literary self that did not really correspond with the person she was in real life. The annuals and magazines in which she had most of her works published were some "of the few publications in which women were allowed to publish (and even edit) without the social stigma of having intruded into a masculine realm" (Riess 820). In fact, this kind of publications were, in most occasions, designed for and targeted at women predominantly, and they worked as "ideological propaganda" (*Romanticism and Gender* 112): both the texts and the illustrations that accompanied them "promoted an image of the ideal woman as specular, as the object rather than the owner of the gaze" (112). Landon, as will be evidenced by the analysis of the poem below, succeeded in subverting this propaganda of the "ideal" woman by pretending to submit to it. Her real life persona, however, was far removed from the womanhood she wrote about in her poems: "as L.E.L. she would transform herself into a scandalous 'public acter' herself. Part rebel tomboy, part feminine people-pleaser, Letitia was conflicted in her gender identification" (L. Miller 50).

As her career as a writer evolved and she became a public figure, rumours about her life began to appear, most of them concerning the supposed affairs she was constantly accused of having with the men surrounding her (*The Woman behind L.E.L.* 35). Harmful as these rumours were for Landon, she managed to keep things going. Some of these rumours, however, such as her affair with Jerdan are not only true but also prove instrumental to

understand Landon's life and poetic work (L. Miller 33). From early on in the process Letitia was encouraged to flirt with Jerdan as this would contribute to his publishing her poems in the *Gazette*. Her mother was one to reinforce this idea until Letitia became pregnant with her first child (76-77). As Letitia and Jerdan continued to work side by side at the *Gazette* and their affair continued, rumours about their relationship became widely-spread (103). These rumours were far from being false but both Landon and Jerdan did as much as they could to reject them and continued to claim that their relationship was purely professional. By 1829 Jerdan was losing interest in Letitia, as it turned out, he preferred girls who were much younger and for this reason, he not only payed less attention to her in a personal level, but he also stopped praising her work so highly in the *Gazette* (141). Letitia was forced to compete for Jerdan's attention personally but, more importantly, she could not afford to lose his patronage for her work as her life depended on the money she made from it. Over the years, financial struggle and emotional neglect from Jerdan, whose interest lay increasingly in other places, turned her even more towards the exploration of "the misery of erotic abandonment" (188).

It is also worth mentioning that the fact that she turned to writing novels instead of poetry around the year 1831 shows that she was completely aware of the risky development her reputation was undergoing. At the same time, however, this change suggests that she understood the way in which the literary market was changing and she had noticed the growing interest in novels (39). The year after her novel *Romance and Reality* (1831) was published, she became a monthly contributor in the *New Monthly Magazine* and she also became the editor of *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrapbook*, for which she wrote "A Legend of Tintagel Castle" (*Avalon Recovered* 242). Alongside these jobs, she continued to write numerous poems for other annuals, since she was one of the time's favourite poets (*The Woman behind L.E.L.* 40). The understanding Landon had of the literary world and market is truly remarkable and the above mentioned ability to adapt her work to what would be most economically beneficial for her shows the workings of her mind to be much more complex than are often thought to be. Lucasta Miller expands on this and she explains that

> No writer was in fact more consciously alert than Letitia to the idea that poets were no Shelleyan nightingales singing alone in the forest, but constructions dependent on a nexus of economic interrelations. Authorial identity was a function not of the author alone, but of publishers, critics, typesetters,

booksellers, and especially of the readers whose consumer choices could determine whether a writer's voice lived or died. It is perhaps no accident that L.E.L.'s work features so many dead poets: in her awareness of the impact of commercial mass culture on literate, she anticipated the postmodern notion of 'the death of the author'. Privately, Letitia was under increasing pressure, with her brand value in decline and her sexual hold over Jerdan decreasing. (160)

However, her ability to read the market and satisfy the demand of the time, sadly, did not mean that she was financially stable or comfortable. Jerdan, it appears, took advantage of Landon's success and have exploited her financially, often not paying her for her work or keeping portions of the earnings her books generated (L. Miller 149). The power dynamic at play during the entirety of their relationship saw Letitia unable to detach herself from Jerdan (152).

Although Landon was by now a central figure in London's literary society, the effect that the rumours concerning her personal life were having on her career and reputation eventually forced her to get married. In June 1838 she married a man called Maclean, who had a governor's post in Cape Coast (Morrison 246). The reason why Letitia chose to marry this man at this specific time is quite evident: desperation. At this time, she was "truly a woman on the edge: harassed by debt, her star status in decline, her social position in free fall, her allies melting away" (L. Miller 224). After the marriage she was taken there with him although he was already involved with a local woman, a practice that was quite common at this time (244). Only eleven months after arriving in Cape Coast she was found dead (*The Woman behind L.E.L.* 50-51). The circumstances of her death remain, uncertain even today. It is impossible to tell if she killed herself, she was murdered by her husband, or, although it seems very unlikely, she died naturally (Morrison 246). The biography written by Lucasta Miller in 2019 points at suicide though an overdose of prussic acid, which was at the time used to calm and sedate anxious people (269-271). What is more, Letitia was an addict to this substance, a fact that was well-known among those who frequented her company in London (L. Miller 271). On the night before she died, Letitia sent two Letters to London which were, in fact, "formal suicide notes" (276).

At the time of her death Landon was only 36 but she left behind a remarkable body of work which consists of

> six stand-alone poetry collections, three novels and a book of short stories, plus at least ten further poetry collections in the then fashionable format of the 'annual'. That, however, made up only a portion of an output that also included reams of occasional verses, prose fictions and critical writings, plus an unknown number of unsigned reviews. A tragedy and a further novel were published posthumously. (L. Miller 6)

With her death, the mystery surrounding the famous letters, L.E.L. grew faster than ever. Her death marked the moment in which the identification between this poetical self and the real person, Letitia Elizabeth Landon, became merged into one and the image of her as the "romantic and melancholy poetess" (*The Woman behind L.E.L.* 33) became fixed:

> The spirit of Miss Landon's writings is essentially feminine in all that blends tenderness, delicacy and devotedness of feeling. We have previously considered the frequent introduction of love, and therefore need only further observe, that it is a love which only a woman could depict in its truthfulness, self-denial and disinterestedness. If in any instance it is wrought up to a higher intensity of feeling, of feeling leading to crime, then, too, does womanly propriety, combined with a delicate and correct judgement, manifest all rightful indignation against evil.(Sheppard 66)

This rigid idea of Landon's persona still prevails. She has consistently been associated with the poetess tradition, that is, the type of female poet that "accepted and reflected in her work the dominant views concerning how, what and why a woman wrote" (*The Woman behind L.E.L.* 3). This specific type of female poet was principally defined and controlled by the male critics who held the power over the literary world of the time. If a woman wanted to be successful in writing she, of course, needed an audience, and the only way for her to secure one was to gain the critics' approval of her work. In order to do so, women needed to write submitting to what these men thought proper of women. Landon, however, managed to mislead the critics and convince both them and her audience that she was writing following

this specific ideology even when she was not (5-6). Landon's identification with this model of poet accounts, to a great extent, for her exclusion from literary history: the same establishment that encouraged women to write according to these rules was the one that progressively "minimized and next excluded" (*Romantic Writing Community* 14-15) the works of the poetesses and contributed to the "new exclusionist, masculinist marketplace of the capitalist nineteenth century, taking away that voice when it could no longer either suppress or misrepresent it" (15).

This construction of Landon as a poetess who submitted to the dominant ideology of her time without questioning it, however, is superficial and extremely restrictive. If we read her work without the preconceived idea that she was just writing 'what a woman should write', her poems reveal a strong critique of the society and institutions that place women in such positions. As several scholars have noted, most of Landon's poems tell the same story: that in which a woman who loves a man is abandoned by him and dies ("Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon" 225). In fact, as Germaine Greer states " no female poet become L.E.L. had ever written of women's passion as she did. It was not like the love plaints of men, but the fierce, important, inward-turning tumult of a woman's heart, the agony of a creature unable to speak or act, forced to wreak her vengeance on herself" (qtd. in L. Mellor 5). Her poems in particular speak of the vanity of romance, of worlds that lack strong values and they are full of hints and subtle references to her real preoccupations, which were often related to sex and suicide (L. Miller 15-16). Despite the thematic similarities one can find across Landon's poems, and even if scholars such as Mellor have argued that she was "supporting an essentialist definition of the woman as the one who loves" (*Romanticism and Gender* 114), these remarks show a very trivial reading of her work, which fails to notice what lies behind the formulaic writing of the author. Landon uses this essentialist portrayal of woman, which completely corresponds with the definition of woman provided by the early nineteenth-century critics, to criticise both that idea of what a woman was thought to be and the concept of romantic love. In fact, as Stephenson notes "love is not only the centre of Landon's convention-bound poetic universe, it is also the centre of her attempt to undermine that universe" (*The Woman behind L.E.L* 13). Lucasta Miller further explains that Landon "used poetic ambivalence, and the overt topic of romantic love, to register covert political resistance" (24). A very common strategy that women writers from this period used in order to

include subversive messages in their writing was to use medieval settings. By displacing their stories they could comment on issues of their contemporary society while maintaining their career and not risking their reputation ("Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism" 1).

In addition, her knowledge about the literary world must be noted. Above all, Landon was an "astute business woman" (*The Woman behind L.E.L* 3) who willingly constructed a persona that would enable her to make a living. The very position that she took within the literary world, therefore, subverted the system: instead of being reduced to the passive poetess who lived her lived her life according to the rules established by society, the success granted by the specific kind of texts she wrote enabled her to be a fully independent woman who openly disregarded society's opinions about women.

It is only within the last couple of decades that the work and life of Letitia Elizabeth Landon has begun to gather some interest. At the time of writing this dissertation, she has been included in some anthologies of poetry from the 19th century and she is mentioned in university English literature degrees. As the interest in her work increases, so does the curiosity about her life which has attracted a number of scholars wanting to write a more truthful account of her life (L. Miller xi). These anthologies will shed some light on her career and contribute to reclaim the status as a 'legendary figure' that she enjoyed during her lifetime (4).

3.4.2 "A Legend of Tintagel Castle": Poem Analysis

Although Landon considered the poems she wrote for the annuals some of her best (*Quest for Knowledge* 231), "A Legend of Tintagel Castle" is one of her lesser known poems. It was written in the summer of 1832 in order "to illustrate Thomas Allom's painting of 'Tintagel Castle, Cornwall' (228). Tintagel Castle was known to the readers of the nineteenth century as the birthplace of King Arthur but, instead of his story, the poem tells the us about the maid of Asolat (228). As the subsequent analysis will show, the story the poem tells is quite similar to the one in "La Belle Dame sans Merci", although the messages Keats and Landon convey are

completely different. Before actually starting with the poem it is worth to note that not many critical sources about this poem are available and, therefore, the statements made throughout the poem will be supported primarily by more general information about Landon's poetry.

The poem opens with an image of Sir Lancelot riding on his horse through the forest. Sir Lancelot is described in very traditionally masculine terms: he rides "alone in the forest" (Landon line 1), with his bare head meeting "the soft breeze that was fanning him now" (Landon line 4). He looks almost idyllic as he makes his way through the forest and he seems to have the power to waken nature, usually associated with women, and to make its different elements react to his presence: the flowers "gave forth all their fragrance" (Landon line 7) even as he is crashing and destroying them; "The wind stirred its branches, as if its low suit/ Were urged, like a lover who wakens the lute" (lines 9-10). Because of the conventional association of nature with women and, by extension, of the flowers in nature with women, the first two stanzas in the poem could be read as both a description of Sir Lancelot's relationship with women and an anticipation of the events the reader will find in the poem. On the one hand, the flowers react positively to his presence, and they pleasingly offer him their fragrance. On the other hand, Sir Lancelot and riding on his horse with "proud courser's feet" (line 6) crushes the flowers with manifest indifference. These first lines seem to anticipate the fate of the female character, who, as we will see, is someone who has very strong connections with nature.

The female character, who in this case is a nymph, appears for the first time in the fifth stanza. In ancient Greek and Roman mythology, nymphs were goddesses or spirits of nature who took the shape of young women and lived in trees, forests, or waters ("nymph"). In addition, nymphs were known because Greek men tended to fall in love with them due to their unusual beauty and their charm, which was different from the qualities associated with the human women from their cities, that is, they were not defined by their chastity and modesty (Jones par. 2). When nymphs were in their natural habitat, they were thought to have the ability to "drive mortals insane" (par. 2). It is also known that the Greeks would worship these deities because they were associated with fertility (par. 4). Regardless of her not being a human being, therefore, the nymph is associated with a very specific type of womanhood, and one that is defined both by her remarkable beauty and sexual activeness, providing her with

71

the ability to drive men crazy, and her fertility, one of the most valued qualities in women throughout history.

The nymph in the poem is defined in contrast to Sir Lancelot. As opposed to his image of power and strength and masculinity we have the nymph's loveliness: she looks pure and delicate, just as one of the flowers Sir Lancelot destroyed as he was riding on his horse.

> Lo, bright as a vision, and fair as a dream,
> The face of a maiden is seen in the stream;
> With her hair like a mantle of gold to her knee,
> Stands a lady as lovely as lady can be.   (Landon lines 17-20)

The first thing that must be noted concerning the nymph is that while we know Sir Lancelot's name from the very first line of the poem, the nymph has no name. This absence of name suggests that she has no defined personality, she has no concrete identity. The reason why the author names the male character and refuses to provide the nymph with a name might be that Lancelot's name is actually relevant to the narrative, because in reading it the reader immediately associates this character with the institution of chivalry he clearly represents, whereas the nymph, who could be any nymph, could also be any mortal woman, and any woman's fate could be that of the nymph's. When it comes to the physical description of the lady, we can immediately perceive that she looks more as a daydream than as someone who is actually in the same place as Lancelot. The main attributes defining the lady are light "bright", beauty "fair", her beautiful long blond hair "like a mantle of gold to her knee" definitely hinting at her sensuality and, finally, her extreme loveliness "Stands a lady as lovely as lady can be". As it has already been mentioned, the association of women with delicacy (Bordo 94) and with the ability to be the objects of love, that is, to be possessed (*Romanticism and Gender* 109) was very common and it was strictly related to the behaviour an ideal woman should have in the nineteenth century (109). The first image of the lady the reader gets, therefore, is one that would really fit into this category of ideal woman of the time in which the poem was produced.

These two characters, the masculine knight and the delicate and feminine nymph, immediately get involved with each other in a "romantic" way. The poem provides no explicit description of the actual intercourse between them, although the narrator refers to it as a "love-tale" (Landon line 21). Nevertheless, this same narrator is also quick to mention that, even if the relationship between them seems to be one of love, it is in fact "Such as love may have murmured —ah, long, long ago" (line 24). This line hints at two relevant issues. On the one hand, love is just an illusion and, as much as what goes on between Sir Lancelot and the nymph might resemble love, it is just a fantasy, it is not real love. On the other hand, the fact that the narrator mentions that the real love the interaction simulates is something that might have happened in the far past implies that it is something which could not really exist at the time when the action is taking place. If the first stanzas already anticipated the unhappy outcome of this encounter, these lines confirm the tragic end of the affair.

After making these comments, the narrator moves on to provide a very general account of the interaction between the characters. At the beginning of this relationship the nymph takes an active role: she takes Sir Lancelot to her cave "She led him away to an odorous cave" (line 25). As soon as they arrive the richly and beautifully adorned cave, the narrator interrupts the narration of the event to further comment on the relationship and describe how it reached its end:

> They might have been happy, if love could but learn
> A lesson from some flowers, and like their leaves turn
> Round their own inward world, their own lone fragrant nest,
> Content with its sweetness, content with its rest.   (lines 29-32)

What the narrator seems to mean in these lines is that the relationship between these two characters could only have been possible if they had kept it private. Privacy, in this case, seems to be quite tightly related to isolation, since the narrator tells us that they should have just kept the relationship in "their own inward world" (line 31). The implication here is that it is society that destroys relationships and, by extension, as the poem will prove, it is society that destroys women as well. In addition, the narrator's comment points at the fact that in order for the relationship to work they should have been satisfied with what this isolated world offers them: "Content with its sweetness, content with its rest" (line 32). Nevertheless,

Sir Lancelot does not want, or maybe cannot, stay in that kind of secluded relationship and, as soon as he hears the sound of the trumpets he "rode forth again to the war" (line 34). Male characters who leave women behind in order to go to war are recurrent in Landon's poetry and their presence enables her to criticise "the gender expectations war makes more obvious" (Broome Saunders 46). As these lines evidence, war relegates women to a position of "mourners, locked in the passivity of melancholia" (qtd. in Broome Saunders 48), a position in which nineteenth- century women often found themselves (Broome Saunders 48). The fact that the abandonment of women, and in this case of the nymph, is preceded by an actual acknowledgement of the feelings of love between the characters is key because it allows the female character to vocalise their desire. Conventionally in nineteenth-century England "a woman should not speak of her love before the man declares his. Consequently, a woman whose love is unrequited or unknown cannot vocalise" (*The Woman behind L.E.L* 95) and, therefore, it is essential that Lancelot shows his feelings in order for Landon to be able to explore the nymph's.

Up until this point of the poem the narrative of the events and the comments the author makes about them are intertwined. As we have seen, there are several elements in the poem that allude to the negative conclusion of the story. The foreshadowing of the tragic ending that the readers encounter from the very beginning of the poem gives an insight into what Landon was actually interested in: the terrible consequences that romantic love had for women in a society such as the one of the nineteenth century. Thus, her male lover's function is just to make the woman experiment those consequences, allowing the readers to understand the female experience ("Letitia Landon and the Victorian Improvisatrice" 13). Therefore, Sir Lancelot must disappear, and so he does: "But the sound of the trumpet was heard from afar,/ And Sir Lancelot rode forth again to the war" (Landon lines 33-34).

After Lancelot's departure the nymph is left completely desolated: "And the wood-nymph was left as aye woman will be,/ Who trusts her whole being, oh, false love, to thee" (lines 35-36). Furthermore, she spends months waiting for Lancelot to come back and hoping that he will, in fact, do so:

> For months, every sunbeam that brightened the gloom,
> She deemed was the waving of Lancelot's plume;

She knew not of the proud and the beautiful queen,
Whose image was treasured as hers once had been.   (lines 37-40)

The nymph's attitude clearly changes in the moment Sir Lancelot leaves her and she goes from being an active subject who can lead a man to her cave, to a passive and weak woman who is unable to do anything in order to change her situation. In addition, she is unaware of reality and she keeps building hopes that Lancelot will come even if he has now replaced her with Queen Genevra: "She knew not of the proud and beautiful queen,/ Whose image was treasured as hers once had been" (lines 39-49). This not knowing about the queen means that she could probably have waited forever, since she seems to know nothing about the reality of the knight's life. The description of the queen is particularly significant because one of the words used to describe her is "proud" (lines 39), which is a word that has previously been used to refer to Lancelot's horse as he rode across the forest. In using the same word to describe Lancelot's courser, and by extension Lancelot himself, and Genevra Landon is not only highlighting the similarities between them and, by extension accentuating the differences between Genevra and the nymph, but she is also attributing a traditionally masculine quality to a woman.

The emphasis on the difference between the two women alludes to issues that are far more meaningful than what they might seem at first glance. The image of the nymph corresponds to Burke's concept of the beautiful and, by extension, with the idea of womanhood he had helped to construct with the definition of this term: an idea of womanhood determined by smallness, easiness of temper, compassion (*Romanticism and Gender* 108). These qualities can easily be identified as those of the kind of women society expected real women to be in early nineteenth century England. English women of this period were "encouraged to be 'delicate' and refined [...] forced to be flirts and sexual teases, they were encouraged to arouse male sexual desire by allowing their suitors to take "innocent freedoms" or "liberties" with their person" (36). That is, women were expected to be little passive objects that men could enjoy. And so is the nymph in the poem, but as the poem shows, this artificially constructed model of womanhood is ultimately utterly damaging for women.

When, after those months the nymph spends waiting for him, Lancelot fails to come back to her, the narrative of the poem slightly changes its focus and, leaving the nymph and her feelings aside for a little bit, describes an extremely pleasant scene at Genevra's court, a place that reminds the narrator of a "fairy-land bright" (Landon line 42). Nevertheless, this perfectly peaceful and calm environment is soon disturbed by the appearance of the nymph's corpse on a boat:

> And there lay a lady, the fairest of all.
>
> But pale as a statue, like sunshine on snow,
> The bright hair seemed mocking the cold face below:
> Sweet truants, the blush and smile both are fled.   (lines 52-55)

Even in death, the nymph still preserves the beauty that defined her, so much so that it seems that nature is deriding her. Lancelot's reaction to this vision is to immediately weep and kneel by the corpse. In spite of his lack of interest in the lady after abandoning her, when he finally sees her again he is devastated by her loss. The fact that the nymph's corpse is compared with a statue shows that the nymph has gone from behaving like an object to actually being one. If while she was alive she was an object Sir Lancelot used and abandoned whenever he thought it convenient, now that she is dead she is a real object ("Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon" 232); she is a statue and this is a position that cannot be altered. Then, once again, the narrator of the poem intervenes to comment on the facts:

> And these are love's records; a vow and a dream,
> And the sweet shadow passes away from life's stream:
> Too late we awake to regret—but what tears
> Can bring back the waste to our hearts and our years? (Landon lines 57-60)

In these final lines we can observe a key change in the narrative: the narrator changes from describing the events in the third person singular to the first person plural. The pronoun that is now used is "we", including not only the narrator's own self, but also the characters of the poem and its readers. Landon, through her narrator, uses these final lines to acknowledge the fact that the attitude of Lancelot is a very common one among human beings: we find it difficult to value the things that we have when we actually have them. Love, therefore,

becomes transitory and, the kind of heterosexual romance she portrays, in particular, has deadly consequences for women (*Fatal Women of Romanticism* 197).

Since what interests Landon are the effects that heterosexual romantic love have on women when it is framed by a patriarchal context, the narrative of this poem is not as masculine as the ones we encounter in the rest of the poems. As we have seen, Landon associated her literary production with Burke's concept of the "beautiful" which was, at the same time, related to the female (*Romanticism and Gender* 110). In fact, Sir Lancelot, just as Landon's other male lovers "is excluded and made almost irrelevant, he becomes no more than a prop for Landon's exploration of female eroticism" ("Letitia Landon and the Victorian Improvisatrice" 3). As a consequence, the narrative is not as male centered as in some of the poems discussed above. Although the poem is short and so the details it offers are limited, we do get an insight into the nymph's feelings and we can even understand why she stays behind instead of trying to find Lancelot herself: she is a woman and, thus, she must be passive (Broome Saunders 6).

The nymph is, without a doubt, significantly more passive than any of the female characters in the other poems. Yet, it can be argued that she is performing the role conventionally assigned to women in romantic heterosexual relationships at the same time as she embodies the ideal woman of nineteenth-century England: she is the object the subject, in this case Lancelot, acts upon (*Romanticism and Gender* 109). Landon is, hence, claiming that "that a woman is forced to assume the mask that distorts and eventually destroys the self" (*The Woman behind L.E.L* 17), she must perform the role that society has assigned to her and resign to the consequences this might have (qtd. in Gal 162-163). Furthermore, the evident outcome of the relationship evidences how unattainable real, requited and happy love was thought to be by women such as Landon, who repeatedly portrayed women being abandoned by men ("The Ideal of History" 21). Nevertheless, the lack of judgement on the character's actions provided by the poem must be noted. The narration of the events is quite objective and, although the consequences of the actions described are clear, none of the characters is portrayed as evil. The nymph is female and, therefore, she is an Other, but since she is an other that succumbs to the social restrictions imposed upon her, she therefore, represents no threat to the established order.

In this poem Landon is, therefore, strongly criticising the social institutions (i.e. patriarchy and chivalry) that lead women to act this way. As Mellor has noted, in this period "women were encouraged to be fundamentally hypocritical and insincere" (*Romanticism and Gender* 36), and prevented from acting according to their own feelings and their own will. The poem clearly draws the readers's attention to the double standards society has for men and women (*The Woman behind L.E.L* 83): whereas women must reject their feelings in order to accommodate men's idea of what a woman is and satisfy men's demands and desires rather than their own, men are free to act according to what they want and decide what their priorities are. It is clear that the nymph is a somewhat weak and passive character, completely controlled by an unrealistic idea of womanhood, but the reason for it is that she is a victim of expectations she cannot fulfill. In portraying the nymph in this way, which greatly corresponds with the concept of the Beautiful, as defined by Burke, Landon was warning her readers, who were predominantly women, of the consequences that giving up one's voice, one's will, and even one's own life in order to pursue a romantic relationship with a man might have: they might be destroyed just as the nymph was, because if they play by the rules, their fate will be that of the nymph. Hence "rather than supporting images of female devotion, Landon is criticizing both them, and the society that holds them up as virtues" (Broome Saunders 49). Even though the poem was published in an annual which "played a central role in the construction and consolidation of the female domestic ideal" (*The Woman behind L.E.L* 139) Landon used her constructed persona that appeared to conform to that ideal of womanhood to convey a message that resisted that same standard. In so doing, she was "writing, from and toward women" (Cixous 881), ensuring that her words would not fall "upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in masculine" (881).

Chapter 4: Contemporary Black British UK: Historical Context

Black British history is seldom regarded as the integral part of British history it really is. Instead, when we hear about Black British history it is often as something that runs alongside History and only occasionally taints the accounts we know to be true (Olusoga 27). However, Black British history is, in fact, part of what is known as mainstream History. In the words of historian David Olusoga "Britain's interactions with Africa, the role of black people within British history and the history of the empire are too significant to be marginalized, brushed under the carpet or corralled into some historical annexe" (27). The present section aims to recollect some of the key historical moments that will help the reader gain understanding of the events that shaped the construction of the present-day UK, where the authors discussed below write, as well as the position from which these authors write within it. In so doing, the texts that will be analysed in the following sections will be situated within the literary history of the country and its people.

One of the most common misconceptions we are faced with nowadays when looking at what is often called 'Black British history' is that Black people came to England as a result of slavery. In reality, there were Africans in England before the English arrived, they were citizens of the Roman Empire who held respected positions, such as soldiers (Fryer 1). Indeed, the first encounter between the people of Africa and those of the British Isles took place in the third century AD, when together with others, people from the African provinces of the Roman Empire settled in the British Islands. These were people from different parts of Africa, who had passed through the borders of the Empire and joined in in the settling in the British Isles (Olusoga 29).

However, the situation changed with the fall of Rome, as from the moment in which the Western Roman Empire fell (fifth century AD), the British Isles, just like the rest of Europe, existed mostly separately from Africa (33). Not only did the fall of Rome mean that Europe became cut off from Africa, it also "marked the end of an era of extraordinary connectivity and mobility" (33). This division widened with the rise of Islam in the seventh century because this brought with it the creation of new states which functioned as a "political, religious, military and cultural barrier spreading northward the physical barrier of the Sahara" (33). It was the Arab traders that mediated the contact between Europe and Africa for the next millennium, as they were in control of the caravan routes across the Sahara (34).

Despite this great divide, we know that there were small numbers of people of African heritage who still lived in Britain or travelled there during the medieval period (34). In addition, the limited physical presence of African people in Britain did not mean that the inhabitants of the British Isles had no knowledge of Africa or its people. In fact, medieval scholars, priests and monks who were in charge of learning kept Africa alive as myth, legend and scripture. By means of the Bible, a text that had Africa very present, the continent remained present in the minds of medieval people in Britain (34). The accounts from this period presented Africa as a wondrous land that was populated by savages who had customs and habits that seemed unnatural to European authors (Olusoga 38). The Bible was not the only text that played an important role in keeping Africa alive in the minds of the British during this time, though: the texts of the classical world were also instrumental because it was in these ancient writings that the educated Europeans of the time "were able to read travel accounts that described the geography of Africa and portrayals of the nature and reputed habits of her people" (34). Yet, it is worth mentioning that the descriptions these texts offered were often far from accurate and showed a deep misunderstanding of life in Africa. What is more, Greek and Roman writers are known to have taken myth and verifiable facts to be the same and, as a result, Africans were often portrayed in an unfavourable way (34).

Until the 15th century, the regions of Africa located south from the Sahara were inaccessible for Europeans. It was the 'discoveries' that Portugal made after venturing deeper into the continent, and the trades that emerged as a result that made the interest in Africa grow. British people were just as interested in these newly-found exotic products as the Portuguese were, and these commodities went on to became symbols of wealth and status creating a social divide between those who had them and those who did not (34). Of course, things went further as the British saw the perfect opportunity to set up similar trades and benefit from the wealth the new trades were producing. The British became part of this new business venture as early as 1480, when they had already joined the Spanish, Florentine, Genoese and the Portuguese as business partners. They operated from bases in Andalusia and not only did they trade commodities, some of them were slave-traders and owners too (51). It can be argued that the British were late to the party when it comes to slave trade and acquiring 'New World' slave colonies but, nevertheless, they were active in the trade before that operating from abroad (52).

The first official British expedition to the African coast took place in 1553 (44) and it was only two years later that the first group of black Africans of this era arrived in England. The bringing of these men to England had to do with "the pursuit of riches" (Fryer 5). Even though there are accounts that refer to these men as slaves, they had been borrowed and not bought since the English were not trafficking slaves just yet at this point. Instead, they were dealing with African gold, pepper and ivory (5). However, finding their own place within the system that the Portuguese had been controlling for over a century was not easy and the English required the help of Africans. This was the reason these five men were brought to England: the plan was for them to learn English and help by acting as interpreters (6).

As a result of these business trips to Africa, many accounts emerged about the animals, the continent and the people who inhabited it. As Olusoga has explained "human physical difference, and most importantly the blackness of African skin, posed profound challenges to thinkers, chroniclers and philosophers of the sixteenth century" (54). As a matter of fact, these accounts reveal that the chroniclers were poorly informed about Africa and its peoples. Real life observations of Africa, inaccurate as they were, together with what was made up about the continent and its inhabitants meant that "sober facts began to get mixed with the accepted myths" (Fryer 6). The ideas compiled in these texts had a great impact on the way in which the British thought of Africans and some myths, such as the fact that all Africans were lazy and lustful or that they had huge penises, became almost universally accepted (7). In fact, it was precisely accounts like these ones, which objectified and dehumanised Africans, that helped the British put their minds at ease about enslaving them. Consequently, they also helped justify and spread slave trade, a trade that was already widely was encouraged. In order to legitimise these actions, "the myths were woven into a more or less coherent racist ideology" (7). According tho this ideology, Africans were just inferior in all respects: morally, culturally, spiritually and mentally. It was believed that Africans were "sub-human savages" (8) and, therefore, it was acceptable to kidnap them, send them to different parts of the world and sell them to be worked for the rest of their lives. As Fryer claims "English racism was born out of greed" (8).

Up until this point, before the Atlantic slave trade set off properly, the Africans had been in an advantageous position when dealing with Europeans both because of their cultural and military power and because the geography of their coastline keep them protected (Olusoga 48-49). In fact, Africans had been trading with the Portuguese for a long time before

the English joined in and, at the beginning, they welcomed their new customers. It is important to note that at this stage neither the English nor the Portuguese were a threat to Africans, which is not to say that all transactions were peaceful (48). However, during this time, many more reports on Africa and Africans were created by the English who traded with them and which heavily contributed to the imaginations about Africans that had previously been in circulation. The first English slave trafficker was John Hawkyns who completed the first English triangular-voyage in 1562-3, ten years after the first English merchants established relations with their African business partners (Fryer 8).

It must be noted that during this time, around the mid-sixteenth century, London was the main place where people of African descent settled in Britain although smaller numbers of them also settled in other places. Most of them seem to have lived quite common lives: raising families and mostly working as domestic servants (Olusoga 57). By the end of the 16th century rich families in Britain were beginning to keep one or two black servants in their houses (Fryer 9).

In 1660, the English monarchy was restored and with it came a king who understood the profit to be made from slave trade (Olusoga 72). The Royal African Company was created and it became responsible for "transporting and enslaving more Africans than any other company in British history" (73). Thanks to this company, England became the "dominant slave-trading power in Europe" (73) by the eighteenth century. As a result of the increase in slave trade and the expansion in the sugar economy, thousands of Black people were sent to England by plantation owners or captains of ships who were returning to their country. From the end of the 17th century and all through the 18th century, more Black people than ever before arrived in England and ever since then their presence has been continuous and notable (76).

Slavery was, of course, common in England during this period. However, not all the Black people who arrived in England at this time did so as slaves. The ones who did arrive as slaves would mainly be used as household servants, as prostitutes or as court entertainers (Fryer 8-9). Some others came to England by their own will, many were sailors or worked as servants, a position that was often extremely close to slavery (Olusoga 80). Slavery in Britain was not as brutal as that of the Caribbean and North America, but it did still exist and "unfreedom and the sale of black human beings was a feature of British life between the

1650s and the close of the eighteenth century" (83). Even those black people who managed to escape slavery lived hard lives in Britain as their lives were marked by poverty. The majority of those who escaped were left without skills, family or help from the Poor Law system as they had no records that connected them to a parish (97). However, the existence of free black people encouraged enslaved Africans to escape because they believed that they could receive help and succeed at improving their situation (99).

Understanding the attitudes towards race in these periods, from the 15th to the 18th centuries, is difficult as the ideas around it were complex and often contradictory and, although slavery was racial in that it affected people of colour only, it was not racism that led the English to participate in slave trade initially. As Fryer explains,

> the theory came later. Once the English slave trade, English sugar-producing plantation slavery, and English manufacturing industry had begun to operate as a trebly profitable interlocking system, the economic basis had been laid for all those ancient scraps of myth and prejudice to be woven into a more or less coherent racist ideology: a mythology of race. (135-136)

It appears that opinions about black people were varied. We know that some of them made it into parish registries which means that they were accepted by the community and the Church, some of them got married (likely to white people) and raised families and some of them even went to hold important positions in the society of the time. Despite all this, the colour Black carried negative connotations and, even though slavery was illegal in England, many English slave-traders engaged in the practice (Olusoga 63). The contradictory nature and hypocrisy of these opinions as to the rights and humanity of these black people characterised the attitudes towards race at the time. However, even though "racial intolerance was present" (66) relationships and interactions between white and black people were still possible and not improper.

If we briefly look at the connotations of the word black in the 16th and 17th centuries we learn that it was "associated with the night, the supernatural and the diabolical" (Olusoga 65) and it "traditionally stood for death, mourning, baseness, evil, sin, and danger. It was the colour of bad magic, melancholy, and the nethermost pit of hell" (Fryer 137). In addition, black was a word that was considered an insult (not because of the reference to race, but because of the meanings it carried) and it opposed the meanings carried by the word white which made allusion to purity, virginity and divinity (Olusoga 65) as well as "good magic,

flags of truce, harmless lies, and perfect human beauty" (Fryer 137). Of course, following this logic, it made sense to the English people of the time that, since Africans had black skin, they could be nothing but demons (137-138). Many works of literature available to them at this time seemed to prove this as well, a couple examples being *La Chanson de Roland* and *Epistle of Barnabas*. "By the early seventeenth century this equation was a commonplace of English literature" (137-138). Alternatively, many thought that, rather than devils, Africans were just monsters and they "often appeared in lists of freaks and undesirables" (139). Of course, these traditions had an impact on the way in which the English perceived Africans, especially when those who had been to Africa reported on the inhabitants of the continent as though they were beast-like (140).

Elizabethan literature was no exception when it comes to the negative portrayal of black people. Similarly to the above-mentioned examples, "degenerate black men" (142) were very much part of the works produced during this time. According to these, Africans were "not merely devilish, monstrous, ape-like, lustful, treacherous, and given to cannibalism. They were also inherently lazy: 'generally idle and ignorant'" (144). This is an ironic stereotype if we take into account that the same people who were being described as lazy were the ones whose work was being used to produce the sugar and other goods that Europeans were consuming and enjoying. (144). In addition to their character faults and monstrosity, Africans were often described as simply ugly, despite the fact that some found African women to be sexually attractive (144). Religion played a very important role in justifying the negative portrayal of black people as Ham's curse was used to argue that they had been punished by God and that was the reason why their skin was black (144-145).

All of these stereotypes were part of what came to be understood as racism which by 1680 had become respectable and could be discussed openly. As an ideology, racism served to "justify the planters and merchants in their own eyes as well as in the eyes of the rest of society" (151-152). It would still be a while, however, until these ideas started to be spread in print as well a by word of mouth.

Until the beginning of the 17th century, when the Jamestown settlement was established, the English "had no permanent colonies in the New World, and had played only a minor part in the Atlantic slave trade" (Olusoga 67). What propelled the settlement of colonies in the Caribbean was sugar, which is what connected the prosperity of the British so firmly to

Africa (68). Barbados was the first place in the Caribbean they took over and, for this, as well as for the tobacco plantations in North America, they used mostly indentured servants, a class formed by the poor of England who were abused in the colonies. However, a problem arose when, after the Civil War, fewer and fewer people were signing up to go to the colonies to work in the plantations (68-69). The combination of this with the intensity of sugar production was what made planters transition to the use of slavery. This resulted in all other crops being abandoned in favour of sugar production and the number of slaves in the Caribbean growing rapidly (69).

During this time, the first half of the 17th century, the black population in England remained small and it was composed mainly of slaves who were used in the houses of the rich as status symbols. After 1650 this population started to grow steadily and more and more people used black slaves/servants (Fryer 14). By the end of the century, London's black community was of a considerable size and "racial intermarriage was not uncommon" (12).

The situation changed when in 1713 the treaty of Utrecht granted Britain permission to supply Spain's American colonies with slaves. This turned things around for the British and made them the world's greatest slave-traders, with control of over half of the trade between 1791 and 1801 (36). By this point, abolition movements were arising but, considering that it was slave-trade and slavery that made the existence of Britain's industry possible and profitable, they were widely opposed. In fact, a powerful system had been built to protect the interest of planters, merchants and agents (51).

It was during the mid-eighteenth century that racist ideas started to be spread in print, enabled by Sir William Petty, John Locke and David Hume who had helped "make respectable the notion that Africans were intellectually inferior to Europeans" (Fryer 153-154). Racist ideas quickly evolved into English people demanding no more black people to be let into their country as well as a strong desire to remove the ones that were already there (157). An argument that was often used to justify such demands was that of intermarriage and by 1790 this was one of the main concerns of the English (166). Racism came to be so important that it became "a principal handmaiden to empire" (168). From 1770 a "pseudo-scientific mythology of race" (168) that developed from racism was established and it slowly took the shape of 'the improvement of the natives' who were inferior to Europeans. These facts prove that racism was central to the British Empire and, in fact, from the 1770s

"the empire and the pseudo-scientific racism that served it developed side by side" (168). By the end of the century, these ideas had developed into new racial theories that planters and merchants used to "defend the slave trade and their right to own slaves" (Olusoga 109-110). Since it was slavery that made luxuries such as rum, sugar and cotton possible for the English "the common attitude seems to have been, so be it" (Germina 28). As Germina further explains "judges were unwilling to rule on the side of human rights when the national economy and a great deal of human comfort seemed to depend upon its avoidance. As long as they appeared to have no voice or power, black people's enslavement could be viewed as an improvement not only over their former unchristian state, but over the difficult lives of millions of white English citizens" (28).

This change in the ways of thinking of the English coincides with the moment in which the Empire's first phase was approaching its end to emerge as something somewhat different. As Sanghera argues, from the 17th century until the 1780s, the Empire was "founded on the development of sugar plantations on the West Indies and involved large numbers of settlers to the American colonies and the Caribbean" (36). During this time, these matters were managed by private individuals and the power was shared (36). The Independence of America, in 1783, brought with it a shift in priorities and the second phase of the British Empire is defined by a "power grab of India and Africa" (36), which was initially dominated by the East India Company and later by the British state itself (36-37). The racist ideologies mentioned above were essential tools for the new development and approach of the empire.

This was also the period when a shift took place in the narratives that still remain of Black people in Britain. The accounts of black people before the mid-18th century are the accounts by white people who lived in Britain and they consist of documents such as "royal proclamations, entires in parish registers, instructions to slave-ship captains, offers of slaves for sale, advertisements for runaways" (Fryer 69). However, from around 1750, there is evidence that black people in Britain had developed their own social and community circles, and they were slowly getting organised. As a result, texts such as autobiographies, political protest pieces and journalistic text were written and published in English both by Africans living in Britain or visiting the country (69). In London, this also took the from of occasional informal gatherings where servants discussed and topics that were of common interest (70). However, this was not the only way black people got together during this time. Apart from

these gatherings and others where music and dancing were involved, "there was also community observance for christenings, weddings, and funerals" (71), all of them events of great importance cultural and social in Africa. Generally speaking, the lives of Black people in Britain at this time were "an odd mixture of isolation and assimilation, of separation from each other and the larger society while being connected to both" (Germina 33).

There is also no doubt that black people were organising themselves and working to improve their situation. For this mission, they had the help of what has come to be known as the 'Mob', a group of London's working people who were fiercely opposed to slavery and capitalism and which fought violently against it. In their eyes, black people were similar to them in that they were all victims of the system and working towards similar causes. Their association to black people helped make slave-owners scared of recapturing runaways. These people did not share in the sentimentality of middle-class abolitionists nor did they aim to interfere with black people's own ideas, but with their help, and mainly thanks to the work of the Black people themselves, "London had by the 1760s become a centre of black resistance" (Fryer 73-74).

Most of these black people were house servants and their masters saw them as "charming, exotic ornaments, objects of curiosity, talking-points, and, above all, symbols of prestige" (75). Many of these servants escaped their masters's houses and tried to make a life for themselves. This proved to be a very difficult task everywhere but particularly in London where, from 1731, black people were not allowed to learn a trade and, therefore, their chances of making a living were minimal (66-67). When it comes to black women, the situation was not all that different: some of them worked as "laundrymaids, seamstresses, and children's nurses" (78) but a great number of them were forced into prostitution, as this was the only way they could survive (78).

As well as the increasing activity to fight for better living conditions, it is also during this time that we find the first few pieces of writing by black authors. In 1773 the first book written by a black woman was published in London. Its title was *Poems on various subjects, religious and moral* and it was written by Phillis Wheatley, a slave from the US. She is considered "the first black poet of any significance to write in English" (Fryer 93). When it comes to prose, the first piece of work by an African author to be published in Britain was Ignaitus Sancho, whose *Letters* were published in 1782, two years after his death (95).

Other relevant black authors from this time are Qubona Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano. Cugoano's *Thoughts and sentiments on the evil and wicked traffic of slavery and commerce of the human species,* which he wrote with he collaboration of Equiano, was a significant contribution to the abolitionist cause. In it they "demolished the arguments in defence of slavery" (101). According to Cugoano, black people had a moral duty to resist slavert (101). Equiano, on the other hand, was an active campaigner: he wrote and spoke in anti-slavery meetings around the country. In doing so, he managed to build a following for his book, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African* (1789), which in turn helped people realise the importance of the movement (112).

With the ever-growing number of slaves coming to Britain at this point, it was inevitable that their status would eventually become a matter to be discussed in the courts. The first time this ever happened was in 1677 when the Court of King's Bench decided that "since black people were usually bought and sold among merchants they ranked as merchandise" (115). This would remain this way until 1796, when an English court ruled that slaves should not be treated as merchandise (132). Nevertheless, the situation was very different in the colonies, where the trade was protected by the law (133). As it can be observed, the rules where different depending on location and, while it felt necessary to regulate slavery in Britain, the same did not apply to the colonies, where ugly realities could be hidden.

Despite the increasing opposition, at the beginning of the 19th century slave trade was essential to Britain. It played a key role in the factory system that was emerging and nourished the industries of London, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham and Bristol. However, the implications of this are deeper that they might seem at first sight. Although we it is not quite clear to what extent, "the threefold profits of the triangular trade as a whole financed Britain's industrial revolution" (Fryer 16). It was with funds proceeding from the triangular trade that the steam engine was financed, as well as the iron and coal industries in South Wales, the iron industry in south Yorkshire, the slate industry in north Wales, and several railway networks (16). As Fryer explains, "rising British capitalism had a magic money machine, an endless chain with three links: sugar cultivation; manufacturing industry; and the slave trade" (16), the slave trade being considered the essential connection. As it has often been observed, all of this depended on the supply of black labour for the Caribbean. As a consequence of this, the

black population of Britain also grew because the planters who had made their fortunes and returned home brought some black servants with them (18).

It was not until 1833 that slavery was abolished in the British Empire and slavery was replaced by other forms of oppression that were more acceptable to the Christian conscience (Fryer 134). However, by the time it came to be legally abolished, slavery had "almost entirely disappeared from the British Isles themselves" (134) and it did so, largely, "as a result of the slaves' own resistance" (106). Although many accounts claim that slavery was abolished by Mansfield in 1772, the reality is that this only encouraged and somewhat protected slaves who ran away from their masters and freed themselves (134). The abolitionist movement was formally created in 1787, when an assembly held by twelve men discussed slave trade and concluded that it was immoral, which lead them to commit themselves to the fight against it (Olusoga 205-206). The group formed by these men came to be known as the Society for Effecting the Abolition of Slave Trade and it slowly expanded and turned into a mass movement (208).

Despite the fact that the abolition of slave trade and slavery is often seen as an act of humanity and realisation of the horrors that were being inflicted on other people, the reality is that by the time slave trade came to be abolished, it was "already in decay" (Fryer 66). Deeply affected by the 1793 economic crisis, Liverpool's slave-traders realised the importance of diversifying the source of their income and some of them turned to banking as an alternative, while the majority simply switched their trade to cotton. As Fryer states "for the next quarter of a century cotton, slavery and Liverpool made up a trinity no less rewarding, and no less important to British capitalism, than the triangular trade it replaced" (66).

Black Britons and the enslaved Black people, of course, also played their part in the fight against slave trade and slavery. Together with others, Equiano and Cugoano "formed the Sons of Africa, a group of men who had known slavery themselves or who were descended from enslaved parents, and who met to fight against that institution" (Olusoga 212). Organised opposition to slavery did not take place in the Britain alone. In fact, the slaves of the Caribbean often revolted and fought for their freedom during this time in places such as Haiti, Jamaica, St Vincent, Grenada and St Lucia (219-220). However, the people that participated in these rebellions and whose actions were so valuable to determine the direction history would take were forgotten, as Olusoga states "the notion that the enslaved people had played

a role in their own emancipation, that liberty had been demanded and fought for, rather than simply given, was for the most part forgotten" (232).

When slavery was eventually abolished, a decision was made that slave-owners would be compensated for their loss and, even though slaves were to be freed, that would not happen immediately. The bill passed by the government established that those slaves that worked the fields would have to continue to do so for an extra six years, work for which they would not be compensated economically or otherwise. As for the slaves that worked as house-servants, they were expected to work for an extra four years, unpaid as well. The way this was justified was by claiming that this was a period of time in which the slaves would learn the skills that were necessary to them to live in freedom (230-231).

> In the same way that freedom in paper did not mean literal freedom for the slaves, it also did not mean that they would be easily accepted as equal members of society. Abolitionists were just as likely to view Black people as stereotypes as their opponents had been, even though their stereotype was a different one: "The abolitionist stereotype of the African was of 'new black Christian subjects - meek victims of white oppression, grateful to their saviours, ready to be improved and transformed'". (Olusoga 258-259)

This racist way of thinking was not limited to a few sections of society, quite the opposite, as Fryer appropriately explains:

> First, racism was not confined to a handful of cranks. Virtually every scientist and intellectual in nineteenth-century Britain took it for granted that only people with white skin were capable of thinking and governing. […] Scientific thought accepted race superiority and inferiority until well into the twentieth century. […] Second, amid all the ramifications of contending schools of racist thought, there was total agreement on one essential point: "Whether the 'inferior races' were to be coddled and protected, exterminated, forced to labor for their 'betters', or made into permanent wards, they were undoubtedly outsiders – a kind of racial proletariat. They were forever barred both individually and collectively from high office in church and state, from important technical posts in law and medicine, and from any important voice in their own affairs . . . They were racially unfitted for 'advanced' British institutions such as representative democracy.". And third, there was an organic connection in nineteenth-century Britain between the attitude the ruling class took to the 'natives' in its colonies and the attitude it took to the

poor at home. […] The English governing classes in the 1860's regarded the Irish and the non-European 'native' peoples just as they had, quite openly, regarded their own labouring classes for many centuries: as thoroughly undisciplined, with a tendency to revert to bestial behaviour, consequently requiring to be kept in order by force, and by occasional but severe flashes of violence; vicious and sly, incapable of telling the truth, naturally lazy and un-willing to work unless under compulsion. (Fryer 172-173)

These ideas were accompanied by a politics of non-interventionism when it came to other parts of the world, such as America, where slavery was still very much present as were questions as to whether it might have been a mistake to abolish slavery in the West Indies (Olusoga 282). This was, partly, because despite the abolition of slave-trade and slavery in their islands, Britain was still heavily involved in Southern cotton slavery as it was this cotton that fuelled the British economy (346) and they were aware of the money they were failing to make due to the fact that they could not compete with countries that were still using slaves (367-368). Another reason for this, however, was the already mentioned 'scientific racism', according to which slavery had been abolished as a consequence of the spreading a message that was flawed, one that had ruined the colonies and they strongly opposed now: the argument for the humanity of Black people (369). In fact, by the mid-nineteenth century "ideas of inherent white superiority" (Fryer 184) were widespread and commonly accepted.

The British Empire "grew and peaked in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Sanghera 155) and racism was a convenient tool that allowed the British to justify "what Britain had already done through its empire" (158). Othering the people from the colonies was fundamental to "permitting subjugation" (158). In turn, European fascination with the 'other' grew hand in hand with the Empire as evidenced by the creation of human zoos (159). The case of the British, however, was exceptional as not only did they believe they were superior to the Black and Asian peoples, they also believed that they were superior to other Europeans: they believed that they were God's chosen people to govern over all the other people in the world (Fryer 186).

The key historical event of this time was the Scramble for Africa which, in only thirty years, shifted the control of Africa from its native people to European hands. In 1870, 90% of Africa was controlled by Africans and Europeans had control of the other 10% a situation that

had been reversed by 1900 (Olusoga 401). Britain managed to take control over a large amount of those territories and, as a consequence, "one in three Africans became British colonial subjects; forty-five million people, more than the entire population of the UK at the time" (401). The agenda that accompanied the appropriation of land in Africa was paternalistic and had been approved in 1837, claiming that "the power exercised over a 'native' race ought to be used ultimately for that race's benefit" (Fryer 188-189) which was an euphemism for "conversion to western ways" (188-189) carried out by the means of "Commerce, Colonization, Civilization, and Christianity" (188-189). This agenda was affected by the new needs that the Scramble for Africa brought up and it gave way to the strengthening of these measures. The new way of relating to Africans was to make them their 'trustees' an approach that was a "blend of the missionaries' view that Africans 'represented unregenerate mankind, sinful and unwashed' and the pseudo-scientific arguments for racial superiority" (188-189). Ultimately, the aim of the Scramble was to make Africa into an "outlet for Europe's energies, ambitions and manufactured foods and an arena in which Europe's internal rivalries could also be played out at a safe distance. […] To protect peace in Europe, Africa was to be divided and colonized" (Olusoga 400-401). Another important change brought about by the Scramble for Africa was the way in which African people, of different backgrounds and origins, became a fascinating idea for the British. With the arrival of people from these foreign places "all manner of stereotypes and judgements were blithely made about the various peoples of Africa" (404).

It is worth remembering, however, that alongside the more dramatic issues, there were also some regular Black people who lived in Britain and went about their lives more or less like their white contemporaries. As Olusoga has acknowledged "while racism undoubtedly affected the lives of all black Victorians and Edwardians, some were able to navigate within British society and often move around within the empire and within certain British institutions – the churches, universities, the army and the professions" (419). In addition, a few well-to-do Black people were accepted in white society, thanks to their money, even though this tolerance was often tokenistic (Fyer 237). What would never be accepted, however, was for a Black person to marry a white one, as this was seen as going against nature (238).

Of course, these attitudes towards black people were not without reaction. The beginning of the 20th century saw the emergence of a new major political tradition which was

created, mainly, by Black people living in Britain: Pan-Africanism (Fryer 277). The basic ideas of this movement were the following "racial solidarity and self-awareness; Africa for the Africans; opposition to racial discrimination; emancipation from white supremacy and domination" (277). The first Pan-African Conference was held in 1900 and its aim was to challenge the imperialist system that was prevalent at the time. To this aim, Black people from different parts of the world met up in London to discuss issues that concerned their race. Their work was successful and "within two generations decolonization was no longer a dream, but a fact" (277).

Another key event of the 20th century was the First World War, which provided Black people around the world with a deeper understanding of the empire and the position they were assigned within it. Since soldiers were needed to fight this war, many of the barriers between races were left aside for a period of time and large numbers of Black men were recruited to play this part, as well as to carry out other jobs that had previously been done by white men only (Olusoga 427-428). However, as soon as the war was over, the jobs that had been assigned to Black men were taken away and given back to white citizens (Fryer 303). The year that followed the ending of the war was marked by violence and riots in Britain as the "returning soldiers and local men turned upon the country's black population, which had considerably increased in size during the war years (Olusoga 451). Timing is key here, as the war "had increased the size of the black population at the very moment in which forms of racism that affirmed and celebrated white, Anglo-Saxon racial supremacy were on the rise" (461) although they were not the only immigrants (numerous people from European countries were immigrating to Britain at this time too) they were definitely the most visible ones (451-453). It is important to understand these events within the context of social unrest that dominated both Britain and its colonies at this time which, in turn, resulted in the general increase of black-consciousness in all the territories, hastening the "growth of anti-colonialism in the British West Indies" (qtd. in Fryer 317). This, together with the growing black movements in the US had the British government worried and a general air of unrest kept expanding (318). One of the reasons why the government was so concerned about what was to come was, undoubtedly, the possible reaction to the anti-black riots that were taking place. But another, equally significant reason must be mentioned too: "the already visible signs of resistance to colonialism" (Lawrence 60). The unrest in the colonies was becoming

increasingly noticeable and difficult to ignore, making the Empire more challenging to control as time went on (60).

The final straw to the already intensified unrest was the decision "not to allow any black troops to take part in London's victory celebrations" (Fryer 321) after the war, which was an harsh reality check for the many black people who had fought in the war. Together with the attacks they underwent in their everyday lives, this moment helped the general black public realise that they would have to fight back for the space and recognition they were due (321-322). The main form that everyday racism took during this period, namely the years between the First and the Second World Wars, was known as 'colour bar', which meant "the refusal of lodgings, refusal of service in cafés, refusal of admittance to dance galls, etc., shrugs, notes, whispers, comments, etc., in public, in the street, in trams and in buses" (qtd. in Fryer 361-362).

With the end of the Second World War came the slow journey towards the unacceptability of racism. Theories that had previously been used to justify racist behaviours and attitudes, such as Racial Darwinism, were in part what the Nazis' theories had been based on and, once the war ended, these were widely rejected. The "racial pseudo-sciences of eugenics and 'racial-hygiene'" (Olusoga 489-490) were challenged and dismissed. The years after this war were also the ones when many people from various British colonies started migrating to Britain in larger numbers than before. A great example of this is the *Empire Windrush*, which in June 1948 arrived in England bringing 492 Caribbeans in it (Fryer 378). Nowadays, this event is considered "the symbolic beginning of the modern phase in the relationship between Britain and the West Indies" (Olusoga 493) but, at the time, Britain was set in preventing this from becoming a recurrent occurrence (493), as the ship arrived at a time when ways to control immigration were being discussed (495). However, soon after its arrival, the British Nationality Act was passed, and it "gave the people of the empire who had formally held the status of British Subject the new status of Commonwealth Citizen" (495). With the passing of this Nationality Act, those who had been British Subjects were granted the right to enter Britain and settle there and it was one of the reasons why, in the years following the war, around 125,000 people from the Caribbean were able to permanently move to the centre of the collapsing empire (Fryer 378). This was highly convenient for Britain, where the

economy urgently needed the labor of those willing to work (378). The consequences of this were twofold. As Hena has argued "in the 1950s, Britain would become both economically dependent upon the labour that immigrants provided in jobs not desired (or taken) by whites and socially adverse to the presence of racial others within Britain's borders" (518). After Hurricane Charlie hit Jamaica in 1951 (Olusoga 497) and "the US McCarran-Walter Act restricted immigration into the United States, including the West Indies" (Fryer 379-380) in 1952 the attitudes towards black migrants specifically worsened. Unlike the numerous European migrants who also settled in Britain at this time, Caribbeans were perceived as an 'immigration problem' and accused of being lazy and having nothing to offer to the country. However, even though we still often think of the majority of them as unskilled manual workers, that was not the case. These people were highly disappointed when, upon arriving in England, they saw themselves forced to take the jobs that white people did not want to do, jobs that were often of lower status than the ones they had had back in their countries (380).

The disenchantment they felt when they arrived in England was more than justified. Educated in their countries, these people had been taught that Britain was their 'motherland' and that they were deserving British citizens. However, the majority of white people they encountered in Britain had a different opinion:

> They saw them as heathens who practised head-hunting, cannibalism, infanticide, polygamy, and 'black magic'. They saw them as uncivilized, backward people inherently inferior to Europeans, living in primitive mud huts 'in the bush', wearing few clothes, eating strange foods, and suffering from unpleasant diseases. They saw them as ignorant and illiterate, speaking strange languages, and lacking proper education. They believed that black men had stronger sexual urges than white men, were less inhibited, and could give greater satisfaction to their sexual partners. (Fryer 380-381)

In reaction to the general attitudes towards Black people and fearing they would lose votes if they did not react appropriately, both Labour and Tory politicians "accommodated themselves to racism" (Fryer 387) and, in fact, "step by step, racism was institutionalized, legitimized, and nationalized" (387). The prevailing conclusion seemed to be that the fewer Black people there were in Britain, the healthier race relations would be (387). Violence was not unexpected with politics like that and, in 1958, two 'riots' took place, the first one in

Nottingham and the second one in Notting Hill. Despite these events being commonly referred to as riots they were "attacks launched against black people and their homes by white mobs" (Olusoga 509).

Fuelled, partly, by the social unrest that predominated in Britain, the year 1962 saw the passing of the first law that would restrict immigration from the Commonwealth Countries: the first Commonwealth Immigration Bill. This new law stopped the free entrance of citizens of all Commonwealth countries into Britain and, instead, it allowed only those that had been provided with employment vouchers to move to the 'motherland' (Fryer 388). This law brought with it the written confirmation that Black immigrants were seen as second class citizens and it made deportation and separation of families possible (388). It is clear enough that this law was a "piece of discriminatory legislation" (388) but the matters went further when, two years later, a Tory politician incorporated ending immigration and the deportation of Black people as points in his campaign. As Hall explains, this was a key turning point because it was "the first moment when racism is appropriated into the official policy and programme of a political party and legitimated a basis for electoral appeal" (qtd. in Fryer 388-389) it was, indeed, "the beginning of racism as an element in the official politics of British populism – racism in a structured and 'legitimate' form" (qtd. in Fryer 388-389).

There was, certainly, a level of opposition to these racist measures. An example of this is the Race Relations Act, passed in 1965 and which made racial discrimination illegal, as well as stating that incitement to racial hatred was a criminal offence. However, two more immigration acts were passed, in 1968 and 1971, and these effectively "removed the last remnants of the rights of entry and residence that had been awarded to Commonwealth citizens" (Olusoga 512-513) up until this point. Black British people did, rightly, react to these policies and, influenced by the American Civil Rights movement, gave rise to black militancy in Britain (Shukra 24). Resistance, however, was met with the tightening of immigration laws, with a new act that came into force in 1973 and which restricted entry into the country even further; as well as this, help was offered to those who wanted to be repatriated. The passing of this law meant that "the black communities were now condemned by law to every kind of abuse, to harassment, detention without trial, separation of families, 'fishing raids' – to all manner of personal indignities, humiliations, and sufferings" (Fryer 391).

An important shift took part during this time: a transition from imperialist racism to one that was more focused on how to deal with Black and Asian immigrants in British society. With the beginning of the new decade, the 70s, "the issue of race ceased to focus on guarding the borders doom the incursion of 'alien' blacks and began to be discussed in terms of how to live with the black migrants already in the country" (London Crossings 55-56). As the position of the British changed, so did that of the immigrants who were slowly beginning to claim the space that was theirs, their belonging within British society (55-56). This was, in part, because many of the people living in Britain at this point had been born in the country, this was their homeland and they had no other country they had come from. As well as this, they "lacked the immigrants' sense of being outsiders and their willingness to accept rejection and tolerate shabby treatment" (Olusoga 514). This was by no means enough to grant them a peaceful existence and throughout the 70s Black people were repeatedly attacked by fascists and the police. Having no one that was willing to protect them, young Black citizens found the way to protect themselves. Fryer has explained that "The rebellion of black youth in the inner cities was the logical and, as is now clear, inevitable response to racist attacks" (402).

People fought back in more organised ways from this time and the term 'black' came to be used as an umbrella term "under which all ethnic groups could struggle against racism" (Shukra 50). This was a means for Asian, Caribbean and African people of different origins to come together, in relation to politics more than culture and its aim was "inclusion into the mainstream by means of exerting as much pressure as possible from the periphery to extract rights, politics and resources from the state" (32). Nevertheless, when social issues arose, such as the unemployment problem that dominated the decade of the 80s, Black people were the ones to be blamed, despite the fact that they were some of the most affected members of society (Olusoga 514-515). As much as it was marked by racism, this time was also marked by "a growing consciousness of racial oppression [which] ruptured political activity across Britain" (Shukra 27). The form that this resistance took was mostly local, with small groups reacting to specific incidents as and when they came up, rather than bigger and stronger political organisations (27).

In fact, the 80s began with the New Cross Massacre, a tragedy that took the life of 13 young Black people in a house fire. While initially the police rejected the idea that the fire

could have been started deliberately, the evidence showed that it was a racially motivated arson attack that killed the youths (Olusoga 515-516). As a consequence of this, Black people organised and marched in the biggest demonstration ever held by Black people in Britain (D'Aguiar 58-59). This incident pushed a community that was already fed up with the police to the limit and it contributed to the relationship between young Black people and the police becoming even more tense than it had already been as a consequence of the 'sus' laws (Olusoga 516). This is only an example in a longer list of events that have been referred to as 'riots' but which were actually uprisings, the response of Black people to "years of systematic persecution and prejudice" (517).

More generally speaking, 1980s were a significant period in two different aspects. Firstly this was a particularly relevant time culturally speaking, as this was the decade then the "second Black cultural renaissance in Britain in the postwar period" (Owes 7) started. Secondly, this was the time when it was accepted that there are "many experiences, approaches, histories and meanings" (Shukra 59-60), a time in which different perspectives and communities were considered important in the process of creating social change. People focused on making small changes, which involved "movements in policy, working methods, representation and resourcing to ensure that diverse lifestyles, religions, perspectives and heritage" (59-60) were taken into account as equal opportunities were sought. To this end, black people increasingly participated in mainstream organisations such as the Labour Party Black Section (LPBS) (70). As we can see, the 80s were a defining decade when it comes to the development of what we know as 'Black British culture'. Arana accurately put it into words when she claimed that "The importance of the 1980s to the development of the current boom in (non-'white') British culture and art cannot be overestimated. A sudden concatenation of extraordinary events —cultural, literary, and political— imparted an embattled tone to the era, and many of the new voices in fiction, poetry, and theatre immediately sounded the topic of racial insurgency" (231).

Yet the 1990s brought change once again. One of the main factors in this change was the ending of the Black British renaissance, which had to be finished after the funds for it were removed and saw its members separate and move in their own directions (Owusu

11-12). But as this was happening the African Diaspora was maturing "into second and third generation identities no longer prepared to remain on the boundaries" (Kelleher 241).

When 1998 brought with it the 50th anniversary of the landing of the Windrush, multiple acts were organised to commemorate this moment, a moment that "formed a significant part of the process of becoming embedded in British culture whilst re-constructing and re-defining what 'British' means" (Young 13). As Young further explains, even though this by no means implies that struggles over racism have disappeared, significant progress has been made in the ways of thinking of the British (13).

These advancements when it comes to race in the UK, however, are far from meaning that equality is a reality in our society. While people from ethnic minorities hold only 5% of most senior jobs today, ethnic minority academics are pretty much absent in senior leadership positions, the pandemic hit the job prospects of Black people harder than those of any other group in society, and the Metropolitan Police and Home Office are officially considered institutionally racist (Sanghera 169-170). Additionally, a 2016 report by the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that Black British graduates get paid, on average, 23.1% less than their white counterparts, Black people are more likely to have worse working conditions such as temporary contracts or agency work and they are also more likely to be victims of crimes while, in the event of being accused of a crime, they are more likely to be prosecuted and sentenced (Olusoga 525). Despite the advances of the past few decades, it is impossible to overlook the long-lasting effects of British colonialism; as Wang has claimed "At its apex, Brtiain's was the largest empire in history. Every person on this planet lives in the wake of the structures, logics, ideologies, and aesthetic principles bestowed by this domination" (11).

What this means, in terms of production of poetry and other literature, is that Black British authors in, the ones considered in this dissertation and the ones who are not, grew up, live and write in a country that, despite claiming multiculturalism and acceptance of all, is still run with structural racism at the core of its organisations. These poets are, thus still othered in Britain and, as a consequence, find themselves writing from the only subject positions that are available to them: those in the periphery.

Chapter 5: Black British Writing

5.1 General

Following the overview of Black British History provided in the previous section, it is now pertinent to look at the place that writing has taken within this history. It is with the aim to put the years in which the poems under consideration were published into perspective that the present section will offer an account of Black British writing, focusing with more detail on the time period between the year 2000 and the present but covering the decades preceding that time too. Despite the fact that Black people have been living in Britain for centuries and, therefore, are intrinsically part of the literature produced in this country, not much research has been conducted in regards to the work of these authors. It is true that there are a couple of well-known Black British authors, mainly fiction writers, and that, as it has been mentioned previously, the publishing industry seems to be slowly moving towards a more accurate representation of what writing in the UK actually looks like. However, the number of authors and works of literature is far greater than what is studied and the efforts to diversify the industry often feel tokenistic. This is particularly true when we look at poetry, as will be discussed in the following section, but it is a trend that can be observed in contemporary Black British literature at large.

The first thing that must be kept in mind when approaching Black British writing is that these writers do not "form a school or share a style" (Arana and Ramey 5), which is to say, there is no such thing as a singular Black British literature. It is, in fact, a varied and diverse field in which authors from very different backgrounds and with various interests have been grouped. This grouping, where the work of Black authors has been put into a separate 'canon', unrelated to the work of white British authors, accounts for the invisibility of a lot of their work (Walters 314). Having made this point, it follows that the present dissertation is, by no means, attempting to claim that all the authors considered below belong to some sort of group and there is no intention of portraying Black British literature as a sub-category of literature in general. However, in order for 'minorities's' voices to be heard and recognised, that being women, black people or any other group attention must be paid to these groups. Although, as in the case of Romantic women poets, in an ideal situation this distinction should not be necessary the current climate requires it.

Before proceeding any further, a brief remark must be made as to the chosen terminology. We are referring here to Black British writing, rather than postcolonial writing. This is due to the fact that we are looking at younger generations of writers here, writers who were, as Kadija Sesay explains,

> Born in Britain, educated in Britain and because of heritage and parentage their 'take' on Britain is viewed through different glasses from those born elsewhere, and possibly raised or educated here. And it is not always because they want it that way, but because they are forced into it. They are reminded constantly that they are 'not of here' even though they believe and feel that they are, so they consider the 'hybridity' of themselves and their situation in a way that does not refer to their 'alienness' and even a different kind of 'otherness' than their 'post colonial' writer peers. Not suggesting here that the term 'post colonial' is an outmoded one, but for many emerging writers a shift away from the canon to a development of another one. (15-16)

The term Black British, however, was widely contested since its coining until and up until the mid-1990s, when some of the authors that this term referred to started to be respected by the mainstream cultural organisations (Kelleher 241). While a term such as this one is effective in that it provides common background, a "shared history and cultural politics of race across a range of disciplinary fronts […] to guard against a whitened version of Britishness" (Low and Wyne-Davies 4-5) it can sometimes feel like it blurs the specificity of certain ethnicities or individual authors. Therefore, despite the fact that this is, to a certain extent, a shared experience it should not be mistaken for a single history, nor should it justify the grouping of all people of colour into one same category. In any case, while it is true that all of these authors' writing shows that they are aware of their position as Black people in the UK, it also "figures a substantial contribution to British culture and politics" (4-5). Therefore, although the term Black British seems the best option under which to group the authors whose work will be analysed in subsequent chapters, this is not done with the intention of "glossing over debates about black aesthetics and a black British canon, ignoring disputes in favour of a smooth and seamless history" (4).

As well as this, it is important to consider that, as a result of what has been discussed above, Black British authors write from a very specific position in society. A reflection from Toni Morrison, who was writing about writing from the position of an African-American

woman is relevant here. As she claims, all writers write from their "genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world" (*Playing in the Dark* 4). This argument prompts an exercise of reflection about the work that is produced in societies which are "highly and historically racialized" (4). In a similar way to what happened in the US, where it is widely thought that "American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by" (5) the presence of Black people, when we think about British literature we tend to only consider a canon that is white and male, bar a few exceptions, influenced by an essence, an "Englishness" that shapes the consciences of the authors as much as their work. However, history shows that this is far from accurate, and it is to this that we turn now. The consideration of the black presence in the UK is vital and urgent if we are to gain full understanding the body of literature the country has produced over the centuries.

English literature has been shaped by other cultures to a greater extent than we realise. The first influences of African people in English literature and culture can be found as early as the appearance of African coins in *Beowulf* or "the importation of Islamic motifs from North Africa into manuscript illumination" (Kelly 10). In fact, medieval Europe was connected to the rest of Europe and the world through numerous trade routes that ensured cultural influences (10). Therefore, Medieval English citizens were often exposed to non-Christian civilisations as a result of their travels to places such as Jerusalem. These cultures most definitely had an influence on their own and, although it was not that common for these encounters to be represented in the literature of the time, they are some of the earliest examples of ideas from around the world influencing English literature (10).

It was with the Renaissance, however, that things took a great turn. The emergence of print technology made it possible for works of different origins to be translated and published in Britain. This "did much to increase the colonisation of the collective English mind with paradigms from civilisations based on radically different premises" (Kelly 10). This also brought with it the portrayals of Africa and other far-away places that arrived via works such as translations of Classical texts and other travel accounts written by contemporary English travellers. As a consequence Africans, both portrayed as heroes and villains, started to appear on the stage (11).

The end of the 18th century saw the emergence of the first texts by, and not just about, Black people living in Britain. This was the time when the testimonies of those who had

suffered the horrors of slavery or were used in the abolitionist movement ("Postcolonial Writing in Britain" 574). The texts produced during this time by writers such as Phillis Wheatley (Fryer 93), Ignatius Sancho (Fryer 95), Ottobah Cuogano (Fryer 101) and Olaudah Equiano (109) were of vital importance in the process of abolishing slavery and slave trade as well as somewhat improving the living conditions of Black people in Britain. However, these texts are exceptions rather than the norm and, other than these, "we know little about the black people of the eighteenth century through their own voices words or desires" (Germina 29).

It was not until the 20th century that the circumstances of Black people in Britain changed and, as a consequence, writing by Black British authors became more widely spread. As the previous chapter showed, following the migration of Caribbean people in the mid-twentieth century, several changes were made in the constitution, local and central governments, urban planing and housing arrangements and policing, among others. This was in response to the conflicts that arose from those Caribbean citizens settling in Britain and these same citizens, including the post-migrant generations of Black writers, wrote about these changes. They did so as active agents who were involved in the process of re-shaping the city of London, as well as other places around the country (Phillips 14-15). In fact, these writers, among which we find many that would now be considered part of the Black British canon, such as Reid, Mais, Selvon, Lamming, Naipaul, Achebe and Ngugi, appear at first sight to write following models that drink from the English literary tradition. However, upon closer inspection, it can be noticed that these writers were "beginning to draw on the sources available to them in the myths and languages of their region" (*London Crossings* 144-145).

Most often, Black writers in Britain are broadly divided into two 'generations'. The first of these generations, encompasses   the writers who have roots and history that are "clearly locatable in the Caribbean or Africa" (Thompson 122), usually known as 'postcolonial writers' such as the ones mentioned above, while the second one includes those who were born in the UK and have lived their entire lives in this country, which are the ones we know as Black British. The writers known as 'postcolonial' believed that personal identity was a result of certain variables such as skin colour, geographical location, or the relationship to a certain ethnic group/place. For this reason, they aimed to create clear outlines for this identity, a self that was authentic and "sprang out of a specific historical continuity, and whose

health could be determined by the extent to which it resisted the invasion of alien elements and cultural dominance" (Phillips 26-27). A key feature that emerges from this way of thinking and can be found in their writing is the focus on the moment of arrival in the UK that occupies the minds of 'postcolonial' writers and which contrasts with the Black British interest on "a daily negotiation about crossing boundaries and barriers, about expanding limits. At the heart of this routine negotiation is a reshaping of the self, and in the process what emerges is a divided, fragmentary, contradictory, consciousness" (26-27). The way of thinking of postcolonial writers was highly convenient for the English, since it made it easy for them to look at them as "migrant voices that belonged to the place from whence they came and not to the place to which they came" ("Negotiating the Ship" 257-258). The concept of Black-British-ness, on the other hand, is complex and it has been built and developed over time. It is specific in that it speaks about things that took place in a particular place, where the individual is placed in the public realm, giving way to questions about national identity and its multiple meanings (Phillips 27). Moving away from the limits of the alien identity that was often imposed on the first generation of writers, the younger generation of Black British writers emphasises the need and ways to break those limits, to challenge and modify the way they related to the environment, and it is this, precisely, that "the work of black British artists its radical tenor, and the potential for radicalising our nation's view of culture and what it means" (29).

Decolonisation brought with it a new historical epoch with important changes in the society of the US, which, in turn, had a great impact in that of the UK too. Among the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, Graveyism, the struggle against apartheid and the anti-racist movements in the UK, the word Black was redefined after the 1960s and it "acquired its positive contemporary connotations, and profoundly transformed the possibilities for popular life" (*Familiar Stranger* 99-100). These new possibilities manifested themselves in the normalisation of black identities, which were expressed in all forms of art (99-100). At this point, however, the writing of Black British authors was not referred to as 'Black British'. In fact, it was not until the 1970s that this term began to be used more widely, since "prior to that period, Black people wrote in Britain but their work was not conceived as speaking of the British experience per se" ("Black British Poetry" 256).

With the 1980s and 1990s came the "emergence and consolidation of an important body of creative writing, visual and performing arts that circulates under the sign of 'Black

British'". In fact, the 80s are often seen as a turning point when it comes to the development of non-white British culture ("Sea Change" 231-237). This was a particularly productive moment in history for Black artists and it resulted in the acclaimed status that some of them enjoy today, including the critical attention they have received (Low and Wynne-Davies 1). The reason behind this, partly at least, is the "civil insurgence of 1981 (and the concomitant 1981 parliamentary legislation" ("Sea Change" 23). As a generation of Black people who had been born in Britain and spent the entirety of their lives here came of age to be confronted by the harsh reality that the country still considered them to be outsiders, there were no people wishing to hire them and the police were set on making their lives more difficult (D' Aguiar 58-59), both an intellectual reaction and a large amount of artistic responses emerged against the overtly racist policies and actions of the government and society. This was, therefore, the beginning a key development in the scholarship dealing with Black British people ("Sea Change" 23) and, as they worked to define their identities in their own terms, they came to write "not as rejected outsiders, but critical insiders" (Arana 236-237) . One of the problems the authors of this decade had to deal with was that of demonisation, which prompted Black British authors of the time to write in a way that allowed them to "to take control of representation of Black Britishness at the time when they were becoming increasingly unsavoury within the national media" (Getachew 328).

The work that emerged during the 80s was consolidated in the following decade. The 90s saw some big names of Black British literature establish themselves, as the "African diaspora matured into a second and third generation" (Kelleher 241). We are speaking of authors such as Caryl Phillips, Hanif Kureshi and David Dabydeen, and poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, Fred D'Aguiar, Grace Nichols and Jackie Kay, all of which experienced both national and international recognition (Low and Wynne-Davies 1). English Literature from the post 80s era made an active effort to make Englishness diverse: these authors did not want to internationalise the country's culture, their aim was just the opposite: to represent their cultures as still English, just as an updated version of Englishness which accommodated their identities and experiences too (Arana 232). Another important factor in the evolution of Black British literature from this period was the emergence of "independent film and video workshops" (Low and Wynne-Davies 1) which became instrumental in for Black British culture in general. One of the fundamental images that emerged in the urban novel of this time was that of the council estate, which is still present in many texts from nowadays. The representation of these ways of life, framed by concrete and unpredictable streets, offered

citizens from other parts of the country an idea of the lives of many Black British people. However, the effects of this were more permanent as, even in our contemporary imaginary, we can still say that there is a "symbiosis of the 'Black experience' with general urban depictions in today's mainstream media" (Kelleher 24).

The texts produced during this time by Black British authors are some of the ones that have come to create a 'Black British canon' of sorts, one that comes with the potential to transform the society of the UK. While there is no doubt that these texts are evidence that some Black British writers have made their way into the cultural institutions of the country, a presence in the establishment they have earned at no small cost, looking at these authors only can be limiting as it affects "the ways in which certain writers are mapped, remembered and read" (McLeod 98) by situating them within an isolated national paradigm. It would, perhaps, be more beneficial to consider the transnational influences of texts that write about Britain from other locations (102). It is essential to "preserve the specificity of black history in Britain and yet also acknowledge its distinctive connections with black cultures within and outside the national polity" (Low 68). Nevertheless, it must also be remembered that the work produced in the second half of the twentieth century by Black authors in Britain, has contributed by means of its thematic and formal originality, to the wider British culture and literature (Ledent 244).

Towards the end of the decade, mostly after 1996, some key scholarly texts began to be published regarding the work of Black British authors (Low and Wynne-Davies 2). Some of these texts were to have a huge impact on the way Black British authors would write during the following decades and also on the way they would be perceived publicly and in academic settings. Three of these fundamental texts were "an updated *Reader's Guide to Westindian and Black British Literature*; Clare Alexander's *The Art of Being Black;* and Houston Baker et al.'s collection of critical essays titled *Black British Cultural Studies* ("Sea Change" 32). As well as academic texts, two conferences held in 1997 were instrumental in the development of Black British literature and culture: "Re-inventing Britain" and "Tracing Paper", where Black British writers participated and argued that they did, in fact, belong to the British society in which they lived in England (32). However, the process of being allowed to belong within this culture was not an easy one. Very often, writers who looked for acceptance and belonging were instead perceived as alien ("Black British Poetry 257).

At this time, witting in 1999, Kwame Dawes came up with a possible way of categorising the work of Black British writers of fiction of this time. He divided them into three groups and, although things have changed since, it is a useful categorisation of the work produced until the end of the 90s. The first of these groups, according to Dawes, is "is an expansion of the pattern of anti-colonial nationalism that rooted its sense of geography and ideology in the formerly colonised worlds that developed a complex relationship with Britain" ("Negotiating the Ship" 260-262). One of the traits of this group is that they look at their countries of origin in order to find meaning for their lives in Britain. They share a sense of exile, they write of otherness, but sometimes they do so because they are interested in the market value of doing so (260-262). Secondly, he defines a group of authors who, having been born in Britain, write about the country as their home, with no feeling of being exiled and do not look at any other countries as their home. The work of this second group focuses, logically, on challenging notions of England not being their home and they are willing and working on redefining Englishness as something that can include them. However, a key detail here is that, according to Dawes, what prompts these feelings is a failure to find a place of origin and essence elsewhere, and this search and failure is a constant reminder of their difference (260-262). Lastly, we arrive at the most radical of the groups, the one that is less concerned with tradition or notions of a home in other countries. They refuse the idea that they might come from elsewhere and do not see themselves as 'others' in Britain (260-262).

By the time the new millennium started, writing by Black British authors was addressing one of their big concerns: the need for mainstream culture to change in order to include and accommodate them and their lifestyles ("Sea Change" 32). Rather than trying to adjust to a certain idea of "Blackness", writing about certain topics and subscribing to specific looks in order to be published, the new generation felt more comfortable in their own skin, with all the differences that entailed and refused to conform to pre-defined ideas of "Britishness" or "Blackness". As Kwame Dawes argues, these were writers "unwilling to or incapable of wearing that ship that points to a migrant identity or an identity of 'otherness'" (257-258). Many of them rejected any connections to the writers of the previous decades and it is from this attitude that a new voice emerged: what we nowadays refer to as the Black British voice ("Negotiating the Ship" 258).

In the last couple of decades an eclectic and avant-garde movement has emerged which has been supported by organisations such as the British Council and the London Arts

Council and formed by "egalitarian young Black Britons" (Arana and Ramey 2). The poets that I refer to here are "performing their poetry, producing their plays, and reading their fiction across the United Kingdom and throughout the world" (2). These artists consider themselves as such as much as they think of themselves as 'activists' and they are often involved in other forms of popular culture as well, such as music and film (2). A clear difference between these authors of the new millennium and those that came before them, the 'postcolonial' generation from which they wish to be separated, is their attitude. Since these authors were mainly born in Britain and are not immigrants themselves their world views are somewhat different to those of the ones who came before them. They are aware that this is their country and, thus, their work has less to do with making claims of belonging, of their right to stay, and more with explorations of identity, language and imagery. As Arana and Ramey state, "they are now rewriting Britain's literary history as well as drafting its future" (3). Their work makes an active effort to "expand and redefine what it means to be British" (Sea Change 20-21), "navigating a more problematic relationship with their racial identities, often having to straddle two different, conflicting cultures" (Thompson 122), writing from a country that has commonly been perceived as a "place of oppression and restriction" (qtd. in Thompson 122). Nevertheless, the talent of these artists and awards they have often received was by no means enough to grant "full, let alone automatic, admission to the literary mainstream" (Ledent 244).

When it comes to Black women's writing in Britain, an author's ability to find a position within the recognised body of literature becomes an even greater challenge. This is a trend that has been maintained throughout the decades since as previous sections have shown, women have always had to fight to make space for themselves within the literary world. Nasta speaks about this issue as it concerns Black women specifically:

> specific histories and stories relating to the positioning of black women's writing in Britain today and the whole question of the voice of the writers and the significance of that voice in relation to theory. The history of this writing raises several controversial questions. It is not a question of volume or quality, of whether any is being written, but one of visibility: whether or not the voices of these writers are heard, listened to and echoed back into a mythic consciousness. This, as we all know, is obviously linked to the cultural politics which surrounds them. I say `surrounds' because, from the outset, writing by African, Caribbean, Asian and Black British women has been (when viewed from the outside as it usually is) pocketed, ghettoized. (71)

This reality is even harsher when we consider the work of Black women in Britain, where their struggles are greater than in other countries, such as the US where a few authors like Maya Anglou or Toni Morrison are highly renowned in the literary scene of the country. In the UK, Black women authors rarely receive "any serious or indeed scholarly attention" (Nasta 72). In addition, these authors are seldom studied "in the curricula of academic institutions in any permeated sense" (72). The functioning of this system, therefore, effectively places Black British Women writers outside its limits, being categorised mostly in relation to their ethnicity and competing for their work to be considered in a serious way, often being placed in a secondary position as in relation to their counterparts from the US. As Olufemi reminds us, working class women artists are "actively excluded from the opportunities, internships and mentoring schemes that might equip them with the skills and resources to develop their artistry" (88) especially when "liberal arts organisations refuse to consider their work beyond narrowly conceived ideas of 'identity' or as markers of cultural diversity" (Olufemi 88).

Another issue that Black British writers face in the current climate is the fact that publishers seem to want to reduce all Black British authors to one singular kind of voice. As Agbabi, one of the authors studied in this dissertation and navigating the publishing industry, has spoken about, there is an abstract idea of what 'Black' writing is and writers find themselves having to conform to this idea in order for their work to be published and promoted, while white authors are afforded the freedom are allowed the chance to explore with different styles and genres ("Interview with Patience Agbabi" 152). Academic writing about Black British writing faithfully reflects the strict limits that these authors have to navigate as only works that focus heavily on issues of identity and belonging are the only ones considered worth studying. This paradigm shifting slowly and young Black British authors are starting to claim their right to write about topics other than racism, identity struggles, colonialism or class-oppression, even though this might come with a greater difficulty to get their work in print (161). Much of the literature we know as Black British until nowadays is political in nature. However, this should not be a must in order for their work to be considered because as Getachew argues "for as long as Black literature exists as a *political* category of literature, then its relevance to the general *literary* community will be undermined" (331).

As Kelly argues, and this chapter has demonstrated, "a knowledge of cultural collisions gives us a fuller understanding of English literary production" (10). This

dissertation keeps this aim in mind throughout, remaining aware of the importance of considering the entirety of the British literary production if we are to understand what this term actually means and the country and society it represents and speaks about. In fact, it is impossible to speak about what we refer to as Black British writing without adjusting our understanding of British culture. This new understanding of Britain must take into account the connections that Black British people have to Black British people elsewhere, as well as the social relations within Britain, digging deep into the contradictions that shape both of these (*There Ain't No Black* 203-205).

5.2 Black British Poetry

What we know as Black British poetry, similarly to what has been observed when it comes to Black British writing in general, is not a homogeneous body of work. It encompasses work by authors from multiple backgrounds, with different relationships to the UK and with different thematic and formal interests. When using this term, the present dissertation does so with awareness of what Stuart Hall referred to as 'historical forgetfulness', a concept to refers to the blurring of differences and particularities in the work of these artists in favour of the formation of a consistent group (Lawson Welsh 181). There have, no doubt, been a few attempts at simply referring to this poetry as British. This is often done in an attempt to include the work of these poets within the wider canon of British literature, an idea that, by doing so, the resulting category will be post-racial, without hierarchies of any type. However, despite the good intention behind it, in the current context this does, without any doubt, overlook the "transnational forces, influences and cultural exchanges which have made it what it is" (180). This poetry is, most certainly, part of what we call British poetry, but the social and political context of the UK in our times calls for this differentiation which will be needed until the work of these poets is valued equally to that of white British authors. In this line, the term Black British poet in this section will be used to refer to "British-born or British residents, who write from the perspective of their identities as poets who live in the United Kingdom, and who are black, but who may otherwise demonstrate as many differences as they do similarities" (Ramey 114-115).

The importance of these works of poetry, which are entering the body of British literature at large and, in fact, have done so for decades, have a transformative effect on the

'canon' of British poetry and they modify the way we relate to texts of the past, such as Romantic poetry. As T.S. Eliot stated, these new works of literature "reconfigure the very essence of that canon" (qtd. in Arana and Ramey 1). It is for this reason that the present dissertation places Romantic poetry and contemporary Black British poetry side by side.

As it has briefly been touched upon above, Ramey has argued that "there is no single cohesive genre of contemporary black British poetry". However, there are some themes and techniques that are recurrent in the works of these poets, including but not limited to:

> "music and song; the importance of family, cultural heritage, and memory; the body; love and relationships; current events; poetry as a political force; re-presentations of history; community; pan-African identity; alienation and otherness; freedom from authoritarian domination; techniques of witness that 'give voice' by allowing characters to speak in the poems (whether or not otherwise disempowered); narrative and storytelling; and double voicing, where private feelings are represented alongside the face one puts on externally".(Ramey 133)

These considerations speak to the need to look at Black British poetry in a more nuanced and realistic light, as well as "to widen the public conceptions of British poetry" (Ramey 114-115). In so doing, Black British poetry, which has often been considered more experimental by the narrow standards of the British canon, will finally break free from its invisibility and be stand a chance in the mainstream literary/poetic world (114-115).

An important element to keep in mind when speaking about Black British poetry is the page/stage divide. As a matter of fact, the majority of the Black British poets currently writing in the UK started their careers as performance poets ("Negotiating the Ship" 283-284). The performance scene, not as popular nowadays as it was a decade ago, is often considered an 'alternative' poetry scene, one that has nothing to do with the 'establishment' and which accentuates the divide between spoken-word-poetry and poetry for the page, implying that the poetry that is published in written form is of higher quality and thus worthy of being included in the canon, academic curricula, etc. This idea contrasts with the orality that was key for the expansion of poetry centuries ago, as well as with the idea of poetry that authors from different parts of the world have. Speaking on this topic Kwame Dawes argues that poets who have deep connections to traditions such as the Caribbean, African or African-American ones,

despite their deep knowledge and understanding of Western poetry, "tend to regard the poem as a largely oral form — a form that ultimately finds meaning in the idea of performance" ("Negotiating the Ship" 293).

From the starting point of Black British writing, poetry always took a secondary place to several forms of writing in prose, such as essays and autobiographies written by black people or testimonies and accounts of black lives transcribed by white liberals who were allies in their cause (D'Aguiar 52-53). This is not to say that Black people of the time were not familiar with poetry and did not see is as a valuable part of their everyday lives. One clear example of this is that of slave songs, which, if not British in origin, were known by the Black people of the time in Britain (52-53). The first work of poetry by a Black person published in Britain was *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (London, 1773) by Phyllis Wheatley, an American slave who was given an education by her owners before she was set free (51). These first bodies of Black British writing, both in prose and poetry, would play a key role in determining the future of Black British poetry: because of the aim with which these texts were written, the very nature of them was political and their main goal was to bring about social and political change for the lives of Black people living in England. The assumption that Black British poetry is inherently political in themes and is written purely for its content and the effects this can have in society is one that, sadly, still remains present in our times (Adebayo 171).

With the arrival of the *Windrush* and the increase in immigration after 1948 came the possibility for Black and Asian writers to move to Britain to do a variety of different things, including having their work published in their new country (Lawson Welsh 178). A common trait often found in these authors is that they identified with the nations from which they had come, not with the 'motherland', and, by extension, "they saw themselves first and foremost as exiles and only gradually as West Indian or Caribbean" (182). This generation of writers is often looked at when trying to establish the beginning of a Black British canon and the authors from this period were mostly male and Caribbean, publishing very little poetry and focusing instead in other forms of writing. This focus on the few male authors who wrote prose during this time has "tended to overshadow other black writing of the period and the contribution of women and poets in particular" (182). Two important, if mostly overlooked, voices writing poetry during this time were Una Marson and James Barry. The work of both

of them was of great importance for the Black British poetry written in the following decades (182-183).

The period during which decolonisation took place, accompanied by great numbers of people moving to Britain, was one that "contributed significantly to the flowering of multi-ethnic poetries" (Hena 517-518). Despite the "profoundly important contributions to literature in English" (Ramazani 1) that postcolonial poets have made, their work is far from well-known. Their work, as Ramazani argues, is responsible for contributions such as the following:

> They have hybridized European with indigenous forms, inventing new literary structures for cultural expression in lyric and experimental styles. They have vitalised the language of poetry, enriching it with the sounds, rhythms, and wordplay of creoles, pidgins, and local idioms. They have recast their cultural inheritances, remembered the histories that shaped the, and renewed local cultural resources, sometimes critically reconsidering them in light of distant affiliations. They have found new ways of aesthetically embodying probing, and dramatising the divisions and complexities of postcolonial worlds. (1)

However, these new features are precisely what has lead, in part, to their work being marginalised (Ramey 118-119).

As a consequence of these modifications in the British poetry of the time, when speaking of the poetry of this period experts have often described it as one of "creolising the metropole" where, as a result of the contact between different cultures, linguistic and cultural transformations took place in the way that poetry was written (Robinson 113). This coming together of different cultures gave rise to a new dimension, one that was at once able to provide a measurable identity and deeply marked by radical displacement. It was the space that emerged as a consequence of this that worked as the perfect ground for a poetry that was interested in exploring the contradictions and consequences of the British Empire in Britain (113).

Similarly to what happened with Black British writing in its other variants, in the 1960s and 70s the poetry of Black British authors became more radical both in its ideology and aesthetics. This shift was a consequence of the social movements that defined these

decades and the influence of ideologies such as Pan-Africanism, Black Power and the growing interest in the politics of Africa and other parts of the world can be traced in the poetry of the time (Lawson Welsh 184). Of great importance during this time as well is The Caribbean Artists' Movement, which was active between 1966 and 1972 and the activities of which "advanced some of the enduring aesthetic and political questions concerning the postcoloniality of poetry in Britain: the role f performance and the significance of an emergent black Britishness" (Robinson 115). Overall, Linton Kwesi Johnson's *Dread Beat and Blood*, published in 1975, has been considered the most remarkable work of poetry to be published in this decade by a Black poet living in Britain (D'Aguiar 53).

The 1970s and 80s saw an increase in the apparition of "alternative or oppositional poetries in Britain" (Ramey 118-119). One of the reasons why this was the case was that this was the time when the second generation of the mass-migration of the previous decades was coming of age, the children of African and Caribbean migrants were now able to write about their own lives and experiences. A group of poets, who had no other home apart from Britain, wrote poetry that is a prime example of how deeply poetry by Black British authors has contributed to shape and re-shape what we call British poetry (118-119). This group includes names that are still well-remembered in contemporary times, as well as others who did not enjoy as great a success: Linton Kwesi Johnson, Louise Bennett, James Berry, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, John Agard, Grace Nichols and E.A. Markham are some of them.

In the 80s specifically, some of the most important Black British poets were women, such as Nichols and 'Binta' Breeze, whose work became more visible both thanks to the "new national and local funding streams for 'ethnic minority arts' and growing networks of black feminist associations" (Lawson Welsh 186). This was also the time when an ideology of multiculturalism, with many defects of its own, but trying to work for inclusivity, was pushed forward and thus some anthologies were published that reflect the political climate of the time (187). Most significantly, perhaps, this was the decade of the "emergence of an extensive network for Black performance poetry" (Owes 8). Performance poetry has, unquestionably, been instrumental to the development of Black British poetry over the decades, even if today it is seen as an obstacle.

The year 1981 has been considered the "most significant date in the history of the black experience in Britain during the second half of the twentieth century" (qtd. in Robinson 118). In fact, the poetry of this time is of great importance because of its value as a mixture of reportage and the reflections on identity and belonging prompted by the social injustices of the time. The efforts to write about inclusion, race, belonging and hate are still very much present in some of the Black British poetry of today and have forced the definitions of Britain after the empire to expand and accommodate them too (Robinson 118).

It was not until the 1990s that the work of Black British poets was slowly and in small amounts introduced into more generic collections of poetry, rather than those defined as Black British from their beginning (Lawson Welsh 187). At the same time, as some authors were finding their way into the 'canon', a variety of new poetic voices, both in print and performance, emerged during this time. This came accompanied by the creation of a few small publishing presses who focused on work by Black British authors like Bloodaxe, Mango Publishing, SAKS, and Peepal Tree Press. These presses were small and independent but they were important in the development of Black British writing (188). The increase in the amount of theoretical work on race and gender that took place during this decade also helped Black British women poets become slightly more visible than they had been up until this point (Montefiore xxiii). With the ending of this decade came the 50th anniversary of *Winrush*, in 1998, and this created an abundance of short-term media interest for Black British writing. According to Roy Sommer, this event "initiated the process of cannon formation" (qtd. in Lawson Welsh 188-189) but it seems that what might have happened in reality is that this outburst of interest and attention in the media was masking "a long-term neglect and lack of critical tradition for the Black British writers" (Lawson Welsh 188-189).

During the later decades of the 20th century, the influence of African-American writers on Black British literature was significant in general, but especially when it comes to poetry since they are "often cited as having served as role models and voices of permission for many contemporary black British poets" (Ramey 116). Nevertheless, even though this was an important referent at the time, this meant, in Phillips' words that "we're stuck with a notion which has been partly constructed in Britain, but not for Britain" (qtd. in Ramey 116). Consequently, poets have worked to maintain some of the values that were inherited while creating a poetic tradition that spoke to the Black British poets in a more relatable way. The

values that were inherited "continue to be evident, if not paramount, in much of the poetry and poetics of the African diaspora, including black British writing" (Ramey 116), just not as all-encompassing.

The new millennium brought with it a variety of changes that remain with us today. These changes are significant although by no means sufficient. One of the key changes in the last couple of decades is that the work of some Black British authors has been included in the National Curriculum for English. These include some well-known and respected authors such as Agard, Nichols, Imitaz Dharker and Alvi. However, as some of these authors have noted themselves, they were added to the curriculum under the sub-category of 'Poems from Other Cultures and Traditions' (Lawson Welsh 192) which shows a lack of full acceptance into the British literary tradition, making their inclusion seem tokenistic.

It is also worth noting that there has been an increase in the number of anthologies of Black British poetry that have been published in recent years. Often, these books are published by smaller, independent publishers such as Bloodaxe or Peepal Tree and, more rarely, by the leading publishing house in the current climate, Penguin. In addition, as Lawson Welsh argues, more and more British universities are studying Black British writing as part of their curricula (192). However, despite these small advancements, the current situation is not looking particularly optimistic for Black British poets. Free Verse, a report sponsored by The Arts Council England, showed that, notwithstanding their somewhat successful performance careers, Black British and Asian poets "face considerable difficulties reaching the printed page" (Hena 534). If we look at the figures, Black and Asian poets only make up for 0.64% of all the poetry published in Britain by mainstream presses, and this figure only grows to 1.8% if we look at smaller specialist presses specifically (534). Very few names of Black British poets continue to be known, even within the poetry scene and for poetry readers in general (Lawson Welsh 181). In the words of Kwame Dawes "the publishing world [still] does not reflect the kind of activity that is going on in poetry among Black British writers" (qtd in Lawson Welsh 181).

If Black British poets find themselves marginalised in the current literary/poetic climate, the ones who dare experiment formally or deviate from the notions of Black British poetry should look/sound/be like, the themes it should explore and the conventional authors'

preoccupations do so even more. Publication of the work itself is a rite-of-passage-like step that "means the breaking of a first seal, the end of a 'no-admitted' status" (Minh-ha 8) and, for it to the possible, Black poets find that their work needs to be sellable in out market-dependent society. This set of expectations that Black British poets have to navigate in order to see their work published has been described as a 'double marginalisation' by Ramey (120) and it is said to reinforce "racial and cultural stereotypes, creates a distorted view of black poets as not being involved in all areas of literary dialogue and influence, and effectively deprives black British poets from being seen as wielding total agency" (Ramey 120). It is important to consider the wide range of Black British poets and their work, both thematically and formally, in order to break with the limitation to "political themes and weakened by its primarily performative mode" (Lawson Welsh 179).

While it is true that Black British poetry has been unfairly limited to the realm of performance poetry, it is also true that, as a consequence of their exclusion from the printed poetry world, many Black British poets have found in this variety of poetry a space where they can spread their work and ideas. The relationship of Black British poets themselves to the label of 'performance poets' is in itself complicated: while some of them feel trapped by the label and others have embraced it "with defiance and as a kind of statement of race and aesthetics" (Dawes 282). Either way, their position and work is now inextricably linked to this concept, and the majority of Black British poets who are producing work nowadays started as 'performance poets'. Following on from the tradition of dub poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson, as well as African and African-American 'spoken word artists', this medium is "seriously aware of voice, idiom, dialogue and popular discourse" (282).

Performance poetry is markedly separate from what is known as 'establishment poetry'. The body of work referred to as 'establishment poetry' is the one that is published in certain journals or that of the poets who have their work published by specific publishing houses. These are the poets that are accepted as the nation's poets, British poets with no attached labels (Dawes 286). The poets that populate these journals and publications tend to be white, as is, according to Dawes, Britain's publishing world (287). Unlike 'establishment poets', 'performance poets' use stages in bars and theatres to spread their work. These events, known as readings or slams, are popular and often attract large numbers of people, and the

performers who share their work are mostly non-white. These artists are often linked to the music world and are known to record their work in audio form (287). This division is maintained and reinforced by a determined idea of what 'good' poetry means, of what tradition is and how to maintain it, which is deeply embedded in the publishing industry. What publishers and editors fail to realise is that the poets they do not consider good, the ones who they do not consider part of their tradition, Black British poets "are embarked on a sophisticated encounter between the western tradition and the non-western traditions that form an elemental part of their work" (283-284).

The combination of elements from different literary traditions is, therefore, a characteristic that can be traced in many works of Black British poets. As it was argued above, there is no such thing as a singular Black British poetry tradition that repeats a set of traits, but some generalisations can be made in order to pinpoint the interests of these artists.

Ramey proposes a wide grouping of contemporary Black British poets into two categories. The first of these encompasses the poets that see themselves as 'urban griots' "narrate contemporary Britain as a citified and diverse diasporic village, partly defined by its external connections" (110-11). In this category, Ramey places names such as Roi Kwabena, Breis, Fatimah Kelleher, Merle Collins, Adisa, Vanessa Richards and Malika B. The second group is constituted by the poets who use trickster identities, such as SuAndi, Roger Robinson, Benjamin Zephaniah, Lemn Sissay, Anthony Joseph, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Patience Agbabi and Lorraine Griffiths and their mission is completely different: they "hold up British culture to a mirror, providing knowing reflection and pinpoint critique" (110-111).

Regardless of which of these groups a certain poet could be placed in, they tend to share what Dawes calls "poetic instincts [that] emerge out of the tradition of Caribbean poetry, African poetry, post-colonial poetry, African American poetry mixed with a strong understanding, even if a conflicted relationship with traditional western forms" (293) which often means that they understand the poem as something that is fundamentally oral, a form of art that reaches its maximum potential when it is performed out loud (Dawes 293).

Following from the combination of different traditions, hybridity, of theme and form, is central to Black British poetry. The reason why this is so is that these authors often live

"between discrepant cultural worlds of global North and South" ("Poetry and Postcolonialism" 940) and this divergence is lends itself well to hybrid forms of poetry that explore hybrid identities. However, this notion of hybridity is not without its problems: it has often been seen as

> reinforcing formulaic dualities of Western and non-Western influences, glossing over uneven power relations between colonizer and colonized by its false symmetries, depoliticizing postcolonial studies, recycling a tainted term, and hypostasizing as homogeneous the already heterogeneous traditions fused in hybridization. (940-941)

When it comes to themes explored in the poetry of Black British authors, of course, there are as many as poets themselves. However, Ramazani identifies three themes that are common to many of the works of these poets. Firstly, he mentions the want to "nurture a collective historical memory" ("Poetry and Postcolonialism" 941), for which they turn to precolonial culture and societies. Secondly, he speaks of the struggles of working with a language that might spark feelings of alienation (941). Hena expands on this point, arguing that poets often mix and overlay languages in an attempt to "illuminate the tensions and ambiguities of representing their positions as minority subjects with overlapping allegiances within and beyond Britain" (517). Lastly, Rmazani points at the use of poetry as a tool for self-definition ("Poetry and Postcolonialism" 941 942). As well as this, the use of the dramatic monologue, a poetic form that is native to the West, can often be found in Black British poetry as well. It is often used to give voice to people who have been marginalised by the mainstream society (Neigh 174).

Let's turn our attention, now, to the specifics of poetry written by Black British women. As it has been noted by Montefiore, the position of any woman in relation to literary tradition is a complicated one (25). According to her women are "largely excluded from the canon and […] misinterpreted within it" (37). In line with this, Innes argues that women poets who write under the influence of the postcolonial often abandon the traditional English poetic tradition and aim to create "a voice which is in tune with female speech, and with the oral tradition often claimed to be the special preserve of women" (230). However, there is a variety of attitudes towards tradition: while some women poets "have wished to free themselves from relegation to orality and dialect, and to make manifest their mastery of

literary English on the published page, others have celebrated the distinctiveness and expressiveness of the hybrid English" (Innes 230). While it is certainly true that there is no single women's poetic tradition, Black or otherwise, it is also true that the being a woman is enough to be relegated even further in the ranks of the English literary canon. As Minh-ha has explained, "imputing race or sex to the creative act has long been a means by which the literary establishment cheapens and discredits the achievements of non-mainstream women writers" (6). That is, the mere fact of being a Black woman writer is enough to grant that reactions to their work will overemphasise the author's race and gender (6). In addition, academic work focusing on the poetry written by Black British women specifically is close to non-existent and, therefore, no trends or common traits have been defined other than what has already been considered regarding Black British poetry in general.

This section has shown the struggles Black British poets face in order to have their work published as well as to be respected and admitted into the canon. Despite the recent inclusion of some poems by Black British authors in the UK school curriculum and the creation of the few curses that concentrate on poetry of this kind, there is still a long way to go firstly, in order for poetry to be given the space it is due within the publishing industry and, secondly, to ensure that Black British authors put their work into an industry that is fair and regards them in the same way as it does its white counterparts.

Chapter 6: Theoretical Framework

Because of the way the West has been constructed, the binary divisions that it relies so heavily on to maintain its power, although simplistic, affect people's everyday lives to their very core. In our Western societies, good is defined in terms of profit and for the system to be upheld an lesser category of people must be created to occupy the position of the dehumanised inferior, a position that will be maintained through systematic oppression. As Audre Lorde explains, this group is made "of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women" (Lorde 114), to which gender non-conforming people can be added. She further argues that "institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people" (115). It is this way of operating that has caused for humans to react to differences with hatred, making us unable to establish relationships as equals instead of ignoring or destroying what we see as inferior. It is, thus, not the differences between us that create division but rather the lack of capacity to recognise, accept and allow those differences to exist (115). As a consequence of this, a 'mythical norm' is created, a blueprint of what the original is and looks like. In Western societies, this corresponds with someone who is "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure" (116). This is the kind of individual that holds power within these societies, an individual that prompts for the definition of those around him to be constructed in opposition to what he represents (116).

In the specific case of the U.K., a great number of the citizens of the country are placed in this inferior position, not being able to identify with the 'mythical norm'. What is important to remember is that both the migrants and the descendants of the migrants who account for a significant portion of the population of the country are there because "Britain, at best, had close relationships with its colonies for centuries, […] or because Britain, at worst, violently repressed and exploited its colonies for centuries" (Sanghera 79). The following sections aim to explore both the historical and cultural narratives that are at work in the U.K. as the country that it is today. These are the circumstances under which the poetry that will be analysed below was produced, and thus this section offers the appropriate theoretical background to analyse such poems in their racialised nature.

6.1 The Construction and Workings of Race in the U.K.

Since, as the sections above have shown, Black authors and poets in Britain today find themselves in a disadvantageous position when it comes to having their work published, promoted and taught precisely because of the way in which they are racialised, this section will look at what race is, how it is constructed, and the importance it has in the literary world.

One of the most basic ideas that must be remembered throughout is that, when race is discussed, the discussion does not involve those who are racialised as non-white only. In fact, it is important to bear in mind that whiteness is not the norm and that other races should not be approached from a point of view that looks at Black, Asian, and other groups of people as non-white. White people are just as racialised as any other groups (Dyer) and when we fail to acknowledge the racialisation of white people we create a view of the world in which "they/ we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just human" (9-10). This 'just human' position is one of great power and privilege, one that allows the members of this category to "speak for the commonality of humanity" (9-10) while people who are raced can only speak for their own race.

Definitions of race abound in the literature regarding this topic. In general, "the social sciences have come to reject biologistic notions of race in favor of an approach which regards race as a *social* concept" (Omi and Winant). More specifically, race is often thought of as a socio-historical concept, which means that it is specific social relations and a specific historical context that gives race its meaning (Omi and Winant). Race, thus, becomes something that is not natural, not fixed and unchangeable. The races that we now understand to be permanent, a basic way for us to divide the world are just the result of "diverse historical practices and are continually subject to change over their definition and meaning" (Omi and Winant). For this reason, race must be understood as an unstable category, a set of social meanings which evolves and is changed by political and social struggles over time (Omi and Winant).

The British writer Afua Hirsch defines race as "a social construct, designed in relatively recent human history to artificially distinguish between members of the same biological species" (24). However, she points out that the fact that race is not but a social construct does not make it meaningless or any less important. Humans have learnt to "self-identify along cultural lines, and to discriminate based on vital differences. Our attachment to

created, cultural, racial and religious difference makes these things real" (24). Dyer explains further that "racial imagery is central to the organisation of the modern world" (9).

Stuart Hall, on the other hand, argued that as well as being a social construct or a discursive 'event', race is also a "socio-economic 'fact'" (*Familiar Stranger* 105). What he means when stating this is that race is both discourse and practice and, by extension, racism is also both discourse and practice, at once physical and cultural (105). Despite the fact that race has often been defined as something that is scientifically provable and permanent, the truth is that the classifications of humans according to race have always been "bent to the perceived needs or wills of ruling groups" (Akala 53). The judgements that we make based on the way people look, their countries of origin, the way they speak and other variables such as the food they eat take on a bigger significance when they are used as the basis to determine someone's worth and capacities. Race is "never not a factor, never not in play" (Dyer 9) when it comes to the way we perceive others.

Race in Britain is a particularly complex topic. One of the reasons why this is the case is the country's position, for decades, as the centre of the British Empire and the changes that this brought into the 'motherland'. Mirza explains the ins and outs of this specific political and cultural reality in the following way:

> many are born here, all [four] million of us 'ethnic minority' people, as we are collectively called in the official Census surveys. Black people in the UK have long had a significance — as representatives of otherness, as symbolic markers of the limits of Englishness — that Black British historiography has only recently begun to acknowledge. In fact, it was colonialism itself that provided the opportunity for Britons of all classes to conceive of the nation and to experience themselves as members of a 'national culture'. Although the presence of Caribbean peoples, Asians and Africans in the metropolis changes its politics, its intellectual traditions and cultural ideologies, at the same time, the presence has not been sufficiently represented, not to mention validated. Empire was, as we have noted, not just a phenomenon 'out there', but a fundamental and constitutive part of English culture and identity at home. As 'mother' country, however, England has left many of its children (by virtue of empire) orphaned, since it has rejected them as 'other', not-English, when they arrive. (qtd. in Lima 58-59)

Scholar and critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha further elaborates on the topic of unequal relationships between different racial groups in the UK. He argues that the host society, with its dominant culture, creates what he refers to as a 'transparent norm' which means that other cultures are okay, somewhat acceptable, but only for as long as they can be located within the host society's system of belief. As a result of this constructed system, a certain oppression of values is created and maintained, and cultural difference is contained within the bigger framework of the dominant culture. Ultimately, this creates an environment where "even in societies where multiculturalism appears to be encouraged, certain 'roots' are privileged over others" (Thompson 136). In the case of the UK, this 'transparent norm', what we know as the British identity, has been "built upon a notion of a racial belonging, upon hegemonic white ethnicity that never speaks its presence" (qtd. in Lima 58-59). Despite the fact that the loss of the Empire started an identity crisis of sorts for the British and the definition of Englishness has been somewhat adapted, the current climate is still close to this.

The process by the means of which these people have been othered in Britain works in a variety of ways. One of these ways is the creation of ideologies in the media and literature "which then play a key role in the constructions of positions of identification for people" ("The Whites of their Eyes"). This is one of the reasons why historical and literary traditions are so important: it helps groups that have been othered create roots in the UK, it promotes a feeling of belonging (Young 14).

Another UK specific problem which deepens the othering process is the fact that people raised here are taught not to see race (Hrisch 10; Akala 11). Despite the good intentions behind this kind of education and upbringing, the reality is that this approach does nothing to "deconstruct racist structures or materially improve the conditions which people of colour are subject to daily" (Eddo-Lodge 84). As Eddo-Lodge continues to explain "In order to dismantle unjust, racist structures, we must see race. We must see who benefits from their race, who is disproportionately impacted by negative stereotypes about their race, and to who power and privilege is bestowed upon —earned or not— because of their race, their class, and their gender" (84). In fact, "colonialism has ensured that Britishness shaped significantly by race and the discourse of whiteness and Blackness are central to this definition ("Negotiating the Ship" 256). That is, race is central to the definition of Britishness and, by extension, so is the systematic racism that prevails in our institutions. Attempts to build a Britishness that is

'racially unified' are abundant in the discourse of this nation and it has been a key element of the Neo-conservative ideologies.

Racial theories must be understood in relation to the historical moment that saw them emerge ("Sex and Inequality" 86). In the case of Britain, these theories were developed "at a particular era of British and European expansion in the nineteenth century which ended in the Western occupation of nine-tenths of the surface territory of the globe" (86). More specifically, the origin of these theories can be traced back to the times of the Enlightenment, when a new form of racism emerged partly due to "a political discourse which aligned 'race' closely with the idea of national belonging" (*The Black* Atlantic 10). A new organisational system emerged, one in which different degrees of 'civilisation' and 'barbarism' were attributed to various groups and which reconfigured the way we understand the difference between the West and its others. This was a system that "requires a more exquisitely differentiated and continuously sustained marking of various grades, degrees, and levels within an overall system of human difference" (*Fateful Triangle* 53-55). A fundamental point of these discourses is that they understood race to be a scientific fact, which provides race with a status of something that cannot be challenged (56-57). As a result of these ways of thinking, "blackness and Englishness appeared to be mutually exclusive (*The Black* Atlantic 10), and immigrants were labelled as 'Others', defined "in opposition to 'pure' or 'real' Englishmen" (Morely and Chen 12). From the early days, "racialism was a cultural as much as a scientific idea" ("Sex and Inequality" 87). These discourses of the nation, which are heavily racialised, still nowadays predominate in Britain and claim that "a group settled 'in' a place is nor necessarily 'of' it" (Brah 3). Consequently, 'home' becomes a floating signifier and the notion that people of African, Asian or Caribbean descent are outside the nation become part of the national narrative (3). The very fixation on defining Britishness and arguing that it was a stable notion came precisely from the fact that it was "continually being contested, and was rather designed to mask uncertainty its sense of being estranged from itself, sick with desire for the other" ("Hybridity and Diaspora" 2). For decades race and nation were closely aligned in Britain. More generally, as Hall argues, "in the modern world, national cultures have been a powerful source of cultural and political identity" (*Fateful Triangle* 134). In his opinion, national identities are created by systems of representation and passed down to the members of one society, they are not innate features that one is born with. It follows, thus, that national identities can be said to be a series of shared meanings and values that are common to the inhabitants of a certain nation. It is these shared ideologies that

give us an idea of what it is to be 'British'. These identities, which are shaped by different historical events and other shared experiences, "are always, of course, closely articulated to power and to the way power functions in society" (137).

In recent years, however, a shift is slowly taking place. With the settlement of identities such as what we call 'Black-British' the previous model has become obsolete. In Carly Phillips's words "race can no longer define nationality, and neither does it define the individual" (qtd. in Lima 72). The citizens of nowadays Britain are often defined by hybridity which makes the racial classifications used until now seem reductive and simplistic. Stuart Hall's approach to ethnic identities becomes applicable here: in his opinion, notions of ethnic identity should be understood in relation to the concepts of movement, hybridity and multiple origins. This way of looking at race and ethnicity is not particularly welcomed in Britain, where a narrative of shared origin, common ancestry and cultural cohesion is predominant and preferred by many (Thompson 133-134). This attitude, however, contrasts strongly with the way many Black British people, and other so-called ethnic minorities, understand their identities. For these groups, identity formation is a process that happens in line with the ideas developed by Hall: they see their identity as something that is an "open, dialectical and dynamic process of permanent renegotiation" (Arana 237). In doing this, they understand that, although importance of roots is recognised, it also acknowledges cultural diversity and the cross influence of all cultures on each other (237). Once again, Hall's notion of identification becomes useful here; according to him, identification means "taking up positions of identity—rather than identity as a fixed essence, because identification in this sense is never complete, is always in process" (*Fateful Triangle* 126-127). This way of understanding identity reflects the way younger Black British citizens, as well as other groups, look at themselves and the construction of their identities. One of the reasons why this shift is happening is that, contrary to the situation of the nineteenth century where societies were changing and transforming rapidly, we now find ourselves in a more stable time. Since our times are not as marked by instability, fixed identities are no longer as necessary ("Hybridity and Diaspora" 3). Immigrants and their descendants have abandoned, to a certain extent, the assimilationist notions that claimed that all humans could belong to one same group as long as it was the people who were not originally from the West that adapted their ways of being and living in order to be more palatable to our societies (*Fateful Triangle* 87-89). Nevertheless, despite the recent changes "the fundamental model has not altered: fixity implies disparateness; multiplicity must be set against at least a notional singularity to have any meaning. In each

case identity is self-consciously articulated through setting one term against the other" ("Hybridity and Diaspora" 3).

Yet, race and racism can not be understood in isolation. Other social categories such as gender and class intersect with race and have an effect on the way they manifest in people's lives (Crenshaw 1242; *There Ain't No Black* 19). Gilroy explains that racism is a process, something that changes over time and depending on place, rather than an "eternal or natural phenomenon" (*There Ain't No Black* 19). As a result of specific historical events, Black people in the West are still placed in the categories of victim and problem, and this will only change if we gain an adequate understanding of "political, ideological and economic change" (19). It is at this point that class becomes a key point of the process. Class is "a complex, multi determined process in which racialization currently plays a key part" (22-23).

As this section has shown, then, the biological/physiological approach to race fails because it is not able to do what it claims to be able to do. There are, in fact, differences among human beings which are visible such as skin colour or hair texture. With a definition of race that is loose we could, to a certain point, divide the world's population into sub-categories. However, as Stuart Hall states, there are many things this discourse is not capable of doing: "it cannot establish permanent differences among diverse families of races; it cannot give these cultural, social, economic, and historical differences a guaranteed basis of inheritance in genetic distinctions; and it cannot fix, for either negative or positive purposes, the cultural, cognitive, emotional, and other social characteristics of the populations to which it refers" (*Fateful Triangle* 67-68).

Nevertheless, both race and racism are key factors that determine what people's lives look like in the U.K. In the case of authors it also has a great impact on the ways in which their work enters the publishing and literary world, if it manages to do so, and how it is read and received by the readers.

6.2 Postcolonialism, Language and Poetry

Definitions of what constitutes the postcolonial and Postcolonialim are many and one of the clearest ones was offered by scholar Stuart Hall who understands it in the following way:

after the epoch when imperial power was exercised by direct colonization, but it also means an era when everything still takes place in the slipstream of colonialism and hence bears the inscription of the disturbances that colonization set in motion. The term indicates a moment when everything in the conversation makes reference to the colonizing dominant, to the West, which may be resisted, but whose presence as an active force, as an interlocutor, cannot be denied, since the configurations that characterized the earlier epoch re- main visible and operative, having real effects". (*Fateful Triangle* 101)

In the same line, he argued that "we are what comes 'after' because the after-effects of what was in place 'before' have not been superseded, overcome or […] sublated" (*Familiar Stranger* 24). What Halls's words try to convey here is the long-lasting effects of the colonial times, what the present still carries from the past. Postcolonial studies aim to explore the connections that were created between the metropole and the colonies, the relationships between race and the nation. In so doing, it aims to provide a 'critical return' and to show that the British empire was "a fundamental and constitutive part of English culture and national identity at home" (Lima 56). Even nowadays, it is important to understand the colonial and decolonial processes because they are what explains the neo-colonial structures that are in place in the current times (Morley and Chen 10).

Emphasising these same persistent effects of the colonial times, Ashcroft et al. state that when they speak of the post-colonial they mean to "cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (2). According to them, the specific uses of the English language, in all its variants, are a key tool of literatures produced within this framework. As they state, Literature was used as one of the main instruments that aided the expansion of the Empire. In this process, English had two uses: firstly, it was used as propaganda, spreading the ideological bases necessary for the growth of the Empire and, secondly, it also worked in an unconscious level, contributing to the naturalisation of the British values that they claimed to spread. These values included things such as civilisation and humanity and, created an opposition to those they aimed to civilise, who became savage and primitive natives (Ashcroft et al. 3-4). Nowadays, many varieties of postcolonial English exist and are used to various extents both in the previously colonised countries and in Britain. However, Standard English is still regarded as the superior variety, and is often preferred over the 'lesser' variants (8). The distinction between English and

english is historical and it creates a divide between the 'centre' and the 'peripheries' which is "shaped by an oppressive discourse of power" (8). Despite this inequality, these 'lesser' varieties of English have been "the site of some of the most exciting and innovative literatures of the modern period and this has, at least in part, been the result of the energies uncovered by the political tension between the idea of normative code and a variety of regional usages" (8). These varieties of English, commonly used in everyday life, are a way in which Black British poets can explore and express the sense of Otherness, the feeling of difference and non-belonging they often refer to when speaking of their experience. This points at the need to find a variety of english that feels natural and genuine to authors and poets, as well as one that allows them to explore post-colonial lives and experiences appropriately and accounts for the need to subvert the structures that are in place (11).

Uses of varieties of English other than the standard take many forms in the works of different poets. One feature that can be found often in their work is the use of untranslated words inserted into the text. These words inscribe difference and they "signify a certain cultural experience which they cannot hope to reproduce" (Ashcroft et al. 53). This is how cultural difference is brought into the texts of these authors, "constituting cultural distance and at the same time bridging it, indicates that it is the 'gap' rather than the experience" (65).

When we speak of postcolonial poetry in particular, the definition provided by Ramazani proves quite useful. According to him, postcolonial poetry is "a poetry written in the shadow of colonialism, the time leading up to and in the aftermath of independence, especially by peoples from regions of the so-called global South or Third World" (1). Following this definition, Ramazani explains the importance of opening up the constraints of contemporary poetry studies to include the postcolonial, to pay attention to the way in which "global human histories of colonization, power, migration, and economic inequity share the world out of which that poetry emerges and to which it responds" (7-8).

When it comes to the literature written in Britain by Black authors who were born and raised in this country the question of whether or not the term "postcolonial" is one that can be used to refer to them accurately often arises (Sesay 15-16). It is important to remember that, although in theory what were once British colonies are now independent from Britain, there are still connections between these countries and the metropole. As Lima explains, "the Empire was a phenomenon that influenced and still has an effect on what the UK is, as well as

in the writing that is produced here" (56). Postcolonial writing takes many forms and, despite the fact that generalisations can be made sometimes, it is important to be aware of the limitations of the theoretical approaches used when analysing this type of writing. In the first place, we must avoid "an overly narrow understanding of the postcolonization author's relation to metropolitan tradition; second, the virtual absence of reference to the postcolonization author's relation to indigenous tradition" (Hogan 19).

As this suggests, the power structures that were in place at the time of Empire and that still operate in post-colonial societies such as the one of contemporary Britain have a great impact on the daily lives of many living here, particularly for those whose appearance sets them apart from the whiteness that is still considered the norm.

A postcolonial setting, such as the UK nowadays, creates a discourse that makes certain positions available for writers to take. This takes us back to Hall's notions of identification (*Fateful Triangle* 137). His ideas about how nations and societies lend themselves perfectly to this scenario in which Black British poets find themselves: one in which a full identification with the nation is impossible and which places them in positions of 'others' and 'alines'. Since this is the way authors and poets are inserted into the social discourse, these positions that they have to take dictate whether or not authors will receive attention within the publishing industry and in academia, the topics they will be expected to write about if they want to do so and the dorm and language they are expected to use.

One of the consequences of existing in a postcolonial reality, of being a person who was born in the metropole and has roots in the former colonies, is the emergence of a 'double consciousness' the feeling of belonging to two places at once and to none of them at all. This is one of the central preoccupations of postcolonial studies, be it for literature or other forms of cultural production, is the notion of hybridity. Homi Bhabha defined this concept as a 'third space' that enable us to "find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others . . . [and] elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves" (qtd. in Goal 183). Hybridity is, thus, a tool for subversion and it is often manifested in the form of linguistic processes such as 'creolisation' or mestisage' (Goal 183).

Notions of hybridity are best understood when looked at from a framework that takes into account another one of the big preoccupations of postcolonial scholars: that of a society understood to be framed by sets of binaries. Hélène Cixous's table of binaries which explain

the sexist organisation of our society has already been mentioned in previous sections. When it comes to postcolonial studies, this same table is applied to the dynamics between the Europeans, which represent the civilised section of humanity, and the natives, which are seen as barbaric savages, following the theories of Sartre, Fanon and Memmi ("Hybridity and Diaspora" 4). In fact, this is the perfect example of "how he traditions of European knowledge and culture, deeply complicit with the power structures of imperialism, have depended on stereotypes of 'inferior' races and peoples" (Montefiore 182-183). The binary division that this perpetuates prompts us to look at the cultures of Black people, of people from other regions of the world, as 'alien', as a dangerous threat to the Britishness that even today is seem as homogeneous by many (Lawrence 45). The consequence of this is that the existence of those two antithetical groups (colonizer vs. colonized; self vs. Other) results in the second only being "knowable through a necessarily false representation" ("Hybridity and Diaspora" 4). However, third spaces, hybrid realities, just like diasporas more broadly, are not only places of dislocation and trauma. Although this is certainly one side of diasporic realities, they are also "sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, resemble and reconfigure" (Brah 190).

6.3 Cultural Studies

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was created by Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall at the University of Birmingham in 1964. Under the direction of Hall from 1969, this research centre was "instrumental in developing approaches for the study of postcolonial cultures, their social formations and signifying systems" (Arana 234). Among other things, the work carried out at the CCCS "opened up new dialogues on Black cultural identity, effectively challenging the notion that British culture was quintessentially 'white'" (Owusu 3).

At the time of its creation, this discipline known to us as Cultural Studies, "sought to disentangle the question of the intrinsic literary and cultural value of particular texts from the practice of cultural classification" ("For Allon White" 292). In stating this aim Hall observes the ways in which the classification of culture into the 'high' and the 'low' was affected by the currents of thought brought forward by Modernism and Postmodernism. They realised that 'popular' culture, the 'low', was not something defined by a specific content or qualities

associated with a specific cultural expression. Rather, they claimed that what we know as 'popular' culture is only defined in relation, and even in opposition, to the canon, the 'valued' cultural expressions. From the sixties, as a consequence of the new currents of thought, 'popular' culture could no longer be defined as just what was excluded from the canon, that which was not the valued cultural creation ("For Allon White" 293). However, even though this approach to culture is dated and not accurate, the sections on Black British writing and poetry in this dissertation have shown that this way of looking at certain cultural products still remains.

Hall explained the reasons we still approach culture from this lens: the binary that results from this process, that of 'high' vs. 'low' culture, 'canon' vs. 'popular' is one that is maintained through cultural hegemony. According to him, the culture that we consider to be canonical continues to be so because it works to control the diverse and transgressive nature of the cultural creations which are seen as 'lower' ("For Allon White" 301-302). It follows, therefore, that one of the functions of the art that is produced for the masses by the few who are considered worthy of the title of artists, is to " enforce its elitist values. The wider the distance between the two, the firmer the stand of conservative art" (Minh-ha 13). This is closely related to "questions of cultural authority containing the transgressive danger of social, ethnic, gendered, and sexual hybridity" ("For Allon White" 301-302). In challenging these notions, Cultural Studies centres its focus on the politics of culture and pays attention to the "voices, positions, experiences which have been ruled out of any dominant intellectual and political formation" ("Cultural Studies and the Politics" 397).

Cultural works produced by Black British artists and cultural workers have historically been placed in the 'lower' category described above. In the 90s, Stuart Hall spoke of a shift that was taking place when it came to Black cultural politics and, even today, it can be claimed that this is an ongoing shift. When speaking about this notion, Hall spoke of a past that had finished and a new beginning that was starting to be discerned. Nowadays, almost thirty years later, we are deeper into that beginning, yet the way ahead is still long. The past and beginning that he referred to are "two phases of the same movement, which constantly overlap and interweave. Both are framed by the same historical conjecture and both are rooted in the politics of anti-racism and the post-war black experience in Britain" ("New Ethnicities" 442-443). The first part of this corresponds with the time in British history when the term 'black' came to be used as a way "of referencing the common experience of racism and

marginalization in Britain and came to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance, among groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities" (442-443). 'The Black experience' became an umbrella term, even though it did not make differences between cultural/ethnic groups disappear, and offered a more unified way to address the othering of Black people in the predominantly white British culture. Their aim was to challenge, resist and modify the hegemonic cultural representations that were the norm in Britain a the time, starting from music and style and slowly moving onto literature and visual cultural representations, such as cinema. These are spaces in which, up until this point, Black people had been objects rather than the creating subjects and, for this reason, representation was a central concern. Two main issues are worth mentioning here: on the one hand, there was a notable absence of representation and, on the other, the little representation that existed was objectifying, fetishising and negative: a simplified and stereotyped construction of Black people. Therefore, their work focused both on getting access to representation and on contesting the images of Black people that had predominated in the mainstream British cultural discourse (442-443).

As important as the umbrella term 'Black' was at the time when it was created, it obscured the diversity of "subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities" ("New Ethnicities" 444) it encompasses. However, this is evidence that the category 'Black' as we know it nowadays is politically and culturally constructed and it has "no guarantees in nature" (444). In acknowledging the possible diversity of Black subjects we facilitate the end of the essential Black subject which brings with it the recognition that race is a notion that is in a constant process of formation and intersection with other categories such as class and gender (445).

Since what is often referred to as the 'Black experience' is not something natural, biological or essential but rather constructed through historical, cultural and political discourses, 'ethnicity' becomes a more applicable concept. When speaking of ethnicity there is an acknowledgment of the roles that history, language and culture play in "the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual" ("New Ethnicities" 447-448). Subject positions emerge from specific circumstances and, therefore, the hegemonic discourses of the West, which are commonly thought of as universal, are revealed to be a product of their particular time and place just as the discourses of the 'others'. Following this line of thought, we can see how the

'difference' that is often the basis of racism, the one that sets apart the 'high' and 'low' cultural representations is in need of reassessment, and it needs us to engage with it rather than suppress it (447-448). The result of understanding that "we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position as 'ethnic artists'" (448) is the beginning of a shift towards a more positive way of approaching and engaging with the work of cultural creators that have been marginalised by the mainstream British culture. By accepting that all subjects are 'ethnically located' and that the ethnic component of our identities is a key aspect of who we are and the culture we create, without the need to marginalise or silence those that do not conform to the dated identity of Britishness (448).

It is precisely the voices from the 'margins' that have completely transformed cultural life in the West in the last few decades. The margins are a particularly productive space and this is the result of "the cultural politics of difference, of the struggles around difference, of the production of new identities, of the appearance of new subjects on the political and cultural stage" ("What is this 'Black'" 470). As Hall further explains, Black popular culture has always been a mixture of different cultural traditions, a constant negotiation of boundaries and limits, and a struggle between the positions of dominant and subordinate. That is, we speak of cultural productions that are hybrid, impure by traditional standards (474). It must be kept in mind, however, that hybridity does not mean opposition to the identity categories it combines. In fact, the identity category 'hybrid' works in very similar ways to other categories such as 'indigenous' or 'Western', its function remains to define groups and create norms, even though the definition of the groups and the norms created can be, and tend to be, different (Hogan 4).

The way the margins, or the 'bottom' interact with the mainstream or the centre, or the 'top' is particularly complex and interesting. Despite its attempts to eliminate the 'bottom', because the 'top' aims to maintain its status, its privilege, the truth is that the 'bottom' tends to be included within the 'top'. It is included

> symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear, and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level. It

is for this reason that what is socially peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central... ("What is this 'Black'" qtd. in 478)

The Black cultural identities that inhabit the margins of the current cultural climate in Britain, just like any other collective identities, are constantly being created and re-created, never complete or finished ("Old and New Identities" 47). However, identity politics, in their ever-changing form, are an active part of British cultural politics and they are "subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (Cultural Identity" 225-226). When what "Identity Politics One", as Hall names it, emerged in the seventies, it was a reaction to the racism that people were suffering in their daily lives. In its original form, this was a defensive collective identity, a response to a society where people "were being blocked out of and refused and identity and identification within the majority nation, having to find some other roots on which to stand" ("Old and New Identities" 52-53). This journey towards the discovery or re-discovery of roots led people to finding stories about themselves that were not part of the mainstream narrative about people in their positions and, according to Hall, it represented an indispensable step in the construction of counter-politics (52-53). This was the moment when the margins started to speak, to challenge the mainstream and to represent themselves in ways that feel fair and realistic (53).

This new Black, politically Black, identities that emerged were the ones that found the voices to contest centuries of negative representations of Blackness. They reclaimed the term Black and cleared the negative connotations that had been attached to it for so long. "In that very struggle is a change of consciousness, a change of self-recognition, a new process of identification, the emergence into visibility of a new subject. A subject that was always there, but emerging, historically" ("Old and New Identities" 54). These complex, hybrid, multiple social identities are the ones from which the poets analysed below write from, creating some of the most exciting work that is being produced in Britain.

In order to understand these hybrid identities in depth, it is worth returning to the concept of hybridity as explained by Homi Bhabha. When speaking about hybridity, Bhabha emphasises that the key point of this concept is not trying to find the two original points that created this hybrid identity. Rather, he focuses on the hybrid itself, to which he refers asa 'third space' "which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories

that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Bhabha 210-211). It is the new, the unrecognisable, the emerging area where meaning and representation can be negotiated that interests him (211). This is the moment in which "the discourse of colonial authority loses its univocal grip on meaning and finds itself open to the trace of the language of the other" ("Hybridity and Diaspora" 21).

Racial theory, and some of the other concepts discussed in the previous two sections are a form of cultural self-definition, even after the supposedly scientific claims have been proven to be false over the years. It is a defining trait of Western culture in general that it has been always "defined against the limits of others, and culture has always been thought through as a form of cultural difference" ("Sex and Inequality" 88). The task remains to re-think "cultural difference in discursive terms" (*Fateful Triangle* 31-32). When he explains the importance of this process, Hall defines discourse as "that which gives human practice and institutions meaning, that which enables us to make sense of the world, and hence that which makes human practices meaningful practices that belong to history precisely because they signify in the way they mark out human differences" (31-32). In his opinion, race is one of the main categories that we use to classify the world and it is a central element of the hierarchical system in which we live, the one that is responsible for producing difference (*Fateful Triangle* 32-33).

These hierarchical systems, in which categories such as race and gender are used to categorise the world according to the similarities and differences they create produce meaning. The meaning they create and subsequently organise are "inscribed within the practices and operations of *relations of power* between groups" (*Fateful Triangle* 47-48). What this means is that these meanings are much more than simple textual or linguistic: they are discursive systems and, as such, they are the place where

> the signifying relations of similarity and difference depend not on some one-to-one relationship of race with a given order of "real" distinctions—biological or physical—out there in the world but on the ways in which the enormous spectrum of (apparently randomly distributed) differences that exist in the material world are constructed as a system of differentiations in language and thus *made meaningful,* constituting a system of intelligibility for

human understanding, knowledge, and everyday practice. (*Fateful Triangle* 47-48)

Place is another notion that is deeply connected to that of cultural identity. According to Stuart Hall, the way in which place operates are twofold: on the one hand, it is a particular space in which, over time, peoples ways of living have become established and settled, forming a distinctive set of rules and customs. On the other hand, place is also a guarantee of stability and consistency, where cultural patterns are carried forward through tradition and custom, a place where the connections among the inhabitants are mirrored and by the continuity of the ways of living themselves (*Fateful Triangle* 105-108). It is the combination of these that creates what Hall refers to as the 'strong' version of cultural identity, that is, the one where ethnicity takes form and where the sharing of social interactions or activities, a shared world, and "all-encompassing systems of meaning are imagined as taking place in the same real […] landscape, a place fixed discursively at another level by shared blood ties […], and thus to a certain degree, […] by shared physical features or characteristics" (105-108). As a result of these shared meanings, in situations in which people feel like they share a common way of being, the cultural identity of a group becomes stronger and more homogeneous. This means that, despite the fact that cultural identity is culturally and historically constructed, it creates a powerful sense of unification and connection both among the people and to the place itself where they live.

Our changing world, however, with its increasingly globalised arrangement, destabilises and challenges these cultural identities and their formation. One of the main examples of this is the decreasing identification of members of a nation with that very nation and this points at a "strengthening of cultural flows and collective ties that operate 'above' and 'below' the level of the nation-state" (111-112).

The reason why these concepts remain important and are relevant to the analysis of the texts below is that the formation of these cultural identities, which are constantly in formation, shaped by culture and history, do, in fact, have "real, material, and symbolic effects" (126-129). These identities, such as 'Britishness', have come to be understood as a set of shared "meanings within the national cultures in which they are shaped" (137). But these

cultural creations are very closely linked to power and the way power operates within a society (137).

6.4 Contemporary Gender Studies, Intersectional Gender Studies, Black Feminism

6.4.1 General Concepts

For decades, Feminism has claimed to fight for equality between men and women in various different areas of life. However, this feminism was, for the most part, for and from white middle-class cis women and it undeniably excluded women from other races, working-class women, trans women and other non-binary people. For feminism to be valid and for its goals to be achieved, the ideas and theories spread by the movement need to be intersectional: it is imperative that the experiences of women and people from all of these backgrounds be taken into account and given the space and importance they are due. History has put different kinds of women in different positions and, even though all women are certainly oppressed in patriarchal societies, the extent and form of the oppression they undergo varies depending on other variables such as race, class, gender identity and the part of the world they live in. For this reason, it is of utter importance that issues such as these are considered when conducting any kind of research that approaches a topic from a gender studies perspective. With this in mind, the present section aims to expand on some of the points mentioned in the chapter that has previously introduced some ideas related to this field of study. In so doing, it is the aim of the author to provide a framework that is truly intersectional and accounts for the experiences of all the women under consideration throughout this dissertation.

When Feminism is looked at from the traditional 'historical' point of view it is often divided into waves which reflect the progress that white middle-class women made in terms of rights and legislation (Olufemi 12-13). The preoccupations of each of the waves is summarised by Olufemi in the following way:

> First wave feminists fought for the vote and property rights. The second wave broadened the conversation to women's subjugation in the family, the workplace, sexual relations, bodily autonomy and reproductive rights. The third wave was heavily influenced by the advent of the internet, and the

emergence of concepts like intersectionality, which became embedded in their feminist ethos. (12)

However, this approach excludes other historical events such as slave rebellions orchestrated by women from history while also contributing to conceal the fact that "the movement for female emancipation in Britain was closely linked to theories of racial superiority and Empire" (Amos and Parmar 5-6). The kind of so-called feminism that Olufemi summarises has often been called 'civilisational feminism' because it is an ideology that perpetuates oppression based on gender, race and class despite its claims to support women's rights (Vergès 4-5). This supposed feminism proved useless to Black women living in Britain who looked at the rebellious slave women and other Black and female historical figures for inspiration. It was, in fact, in the line of the work carried out by those slave women and other women of African origin that many Black women in the UK positioned themselves during the 70s and 80s (Olufemi 12-13), the work of whom remains of utter importance today. The ideology emerging from this time is what we know as 'decolonial feminism', a movement that aims to be free from "racism, capitalism, and imperialism" (Vergès 4-5).

When we speak of decolonial feminisms we are referring to a current of thought that is "part of the long movement of scientific and philosophical reappropriation that is revising the European narrative of the world" (Vergès 13-14). As Vergès explains, these feminisms challenge the "Western patriarchal economic ideology" (13-14) that places different groups of people in positions of inferiority. There is a wide range of people affected by this, including Black people and Indigenous people from various different places. 'Civilisational feminism' argues that these people are defined by what they lack: beauty, reason or intelligence. In short, it claims that certain groups of people have been and are currently underdeveloped, but could develop themselves if they adopt Western ways (13-14). It is in opposition to these attitudes that decolonial feminism constructs itself and is understood as the logical evolution of decolonisation. In do doing, it rejects the assimilatory nature of civilisational feminism that aims only to grant women the same rights that white men have been allowed and benefit from thanks to white supremacy (11-12).

In our contemporary society, defining both sex and gender has proven quite challenging. Even though many attempts have been made at coming up with definitions that reflect the lived experience of people, the reality is that both concepts might be impossible to define. As humans, it is our instinct to categorise the world around us as well as the creatures

living in it. This makes it easier for us to understand our surroundings, it makes the world intelligible for us. Sex and gender are two of the areas in which these categories come in handy: if we divide the entirety of humanity into a male-female category classification, we find it easier "to organise the world and attach feelings, emotions and ways of being to each one" (Olufemi 50). However, defining gender is, as Olufemi has stated, an increasingly complicated task, since every attempt at defining it "does a disservice to the shifting, multiple, and complex set of power relations that come to shape a person's gender" (50). The definition of gender feminists have sort of agreed on explains that gender refers to "our sense of self in the world, how we present our bodies, speak, move - anything that refers to our presentation and relationship to our own bodies" (50). This definition still relies in a male/female division of the world and it is the conclusion drawn from the idea that if when we speak of sex we are referring to the biological construction of our bodies, when we talk about gender we are referring to its social equivalent (i.e. "the social roles that are ascribed on the basis of sex") (50). In addition, when ideas about gender were institutionalised and studied and discussed in academia, this was done by the women who were part of the academic world, that is, the same kind of women who had defined feminism and participated in the movement for their own interests only, undermining and rejecting the radical side of the struggle (12).

When, in 1990, Judith Butler published her seminal text, *Gender Trouble,* and suggested that biological sex is, in fact, not natural but a social construction, the previously agreed on definitions of sex and gender were upturned. As a consequence of Butler's arguments, it was now observed that there was no real distinction between what had been called "sex" and what had been called "gender" until that moment. As Butler argued, both sex and gender are performative, that is, they are built through a group of people consistently behaving and presenting themselves in one specific way and another group of people doing so in what is thought to be the opposite way. This reaffirms the belief that an actual difference exists between the two groups even though that is not the case. Male and female bodies can have different physical capabilities in specific contexts but the actual difference in regards to testosterone and oestrogen are, in reality, quite small and it does not account for the wide difference in performance within the members of one group. This is an example of how differences deemed biological can be "exaggerated to explain phenomena that are entirely unconnected: personality, social and political interests, cognitive ability" (Olufemi 52-53).

To claim that sex and gender are socially constructed categories, however, is not to say that their relevance in our society is small. As a matter of fact, these and other socially constructed categories, such as race, have served as a tool for power to be "clustered around certain categories and is exercised against others" (Crenshaw 1296-1297). Understanding that these categories are not 'natural' or 'stable', they are not strictly defined with clear limits, does not deny the fact that violence occurs as a result of their social importance and that it is this violence, rather than the social constructs upon which it is based, that define the experience that different groups have of the world (Olufemi 54). It is also worth noting that "Western conceptions of gender are not and have never been, universal" (54). In fact, cases of people who were gender non-conforming and variant gender expressions are abundant throughout history and all over the world. These strongly challenge the notions of 'man' and 'woman' that are so central to our understanding of the world and each other since there are centuries worth of examples that prove that these categories are not in fact biological. Colonialism is greatly responsible for the spreading of certain religious and imperialist ideas which contributed to gender and sexual practices that were normal in different parts of the world to become taboo. As Olufemi explains, "colonial projects used penal law to outlaw expressions of gender variance and 'homosexual' acts between men in places such as India, Kenya, Australia and Uganda" (54). In claiming this, she does not mean to argue that these practices were always accepted and free of prosecution in pre-colonial times, but simply to show that gender is not as clear-cut as we understand it to be in Western societies.

As well as colonialism, slavery had a great impact on the way in which gender is understood, especially when it comes to Black people. At this time, Europeans were willing to accept that Black women were, as a matter of fact, not real women. Female slaves were seen as beasts of burden, just as their male counterparts. However, their specific position as closer to women added another dimension to their identity: they were also sexual objects, not real humans and definitely not ladies whose gender made them worthy of a gentler treatment. In this system, therefore, gender is erased and replaced by lack of humanity. This, then, shows that gender is in fact fluid, specific to different times and locations in history. Gender is "a historical and cultural category, which evolves over time and cannot be conceived in the same way in the metropole and the colony, nor from one colony to another, or even within one colony" (Vergès 31).

This point also shows the intersection between race and gender and how central racism is to sexist oppression. As hooks argues "in the West, the philosophical foundations of racist and sexist ideology are similar" (hooks 53). Nevertheless, although these two systems aid each other in the oppression of people, feminist and antiracist practices have been kept separate for the most part, a division that relegates the position of Black women to exclusion from the feminist movement (Crenshaw 1242). While all women struggle under a sexist system, this does not place them all in the same position, nor does it create a bond amongst them for the simple fact that they are women, as feminism has tried to claim often (hooks 4). Lorde further looks into this and states that "To imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because they are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other" ("An Open Letter" 40). The differences of race are consistently ignored by white women, who are the ones that have been able to define what a woman is turning Black women into 'others' or 'aliens' who exist outside their reality (Lorde 117).

While Black women have been "locked out of womanhood as defined by a white supremacy" (Olufemi 2), joining those who do not exist since they are outside the boundaries of the acceptable, Black feminism has "provided a space and a framework for the articulation of our diverse identities as black women from different ethnicities, classes and sexualities" (Parmar 106-107). Over the last few decades, the organisation of Black women has been instrumental in the process of bringing the question of Black women's oppression and exploitation into politics and feminist and race theory. As a consequence of this, the representation of Black women in white feminist literature has been questioned and is starting to become more accurate (Amos and Parmar 3). Giving issues such as race, sexuality, class and age the importance they are due, examining the differences between different groups of women strengthens the discussion of feminist theory ("The Master's Tools" 89). This is what provides a solid foundation for feminist thought and offers an appropriate alternative to the Western patriarchal minds, including the so-called feminist ones, that "mystify woman's reality by insisting that gender is the sole determinant of woman's fate" (hooks 15). As we make this shift towards a feminism that is inclusive it is important to understand the historical and political context of racism which helps discard the paternalistic nature of white

supremacist ideology, which by extension means that white women will need to re-evaluate and challenge their own positions of privilege (hooks 13).

The idea that Black women need to be liberated by white middle-class feminists needs to be left behind (Amos and Parmar 5). A big portion of our society seems to continue to believe that when women that have connections to other cultures live in Britain, they live in a place that is more liberated and enlightened, a society that is more emancipated that others they might be familiar with (Carby 216). When we look at it from this perspective, everyday things such as "Black family structures are seen as being produced by less advanced economic systems and their extended kinship networks are assumed to be more oppressive to women" (216). Socio-cultural differences such as these and the women who partake in them are often seen as subjects of investigation that can prompt exotic comparisons (Amos and Parmar 6).

Whiteness is a political structure in the same way that patriarchy is a political structure (Eddo-Lodge 168). Eddo-Lodge elaborates on this idea and explains that

> Whiteness positions itself as the norm. It refuses to recognise itself for what it is. Its so-called 'objectivity' and 'reason' is its most potent and insidious tool for maintaining power. White feminism can be conceptualised as the feminist wing of said political consensus. It's a set of white-centered feminist values and beliefs that some women like to buy into. Other factors, like class indicators, play a huge part in it. White feminism in itself isn't particularly threatening. It becomes a problem when its ideas dominate — presented as the universal, to be applied to all women. It is a problem, because we consider humanity through the prism of whiteness. (169)

In fact, as bell hooks argues, sexist oppression is the form of domination that most people are "socialized to accept before they even know that other forms of group oppression exist" (36). When it comes to men and women, this is most commonly materialised in the form of male domination over women. It teaches women to behave as sex objects that are meant to be desired by men and, at the same time, it encourages a feeling of superiority over the women who reject this role. However, this goes further, as it also creates a need to compete among women, it makes women perceive each other as threats and it divides the world into two

groups which represent the only possible behaviour patterns: dominant or submissive (hooks 48). This binary division is repeated throughout white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy societies in which "men are the powerful, women are the powerless; adults the powerful, children the powerless; white people the powerful, black people and other non-white peoples the powerless" (118-119). Black feminism makes a point of remembering the importance of re-learning the norms that tell us that using coercion or force when in control is not, in fact, acceptable, and this extends to all humans (119).

An issue that has been central to Black feminisms and that is of utter interest for the subsequent analysis of poems is that of the representation of Black women in the media and in literature. There are ways in which Black women have been made invisible throughout history, and the times when they have been made visible it has been by constructing their femininity and their sexuality in opposition to that of white women, who have been prized in Western societies (Carry 211). Because of the prevailing racist narrative of the super-strong, almost superhuman, Black woman we have been led to ignore the "extent to which black women are likely to be victimised in this society, the role white women may play in the maintenance and perpetuation of this victimization" (hooks 15). These stereotypes that portray Black women as people who have no need for care or protection because of their exceptional strength and resilience do not leave space for true humanity, for just normal existence. What this shows is that even the stereotypes that are often considered to be positive and not harmful still play an active role in the dehumanisation of Black women and negate the damage that can be created as a result of them (Kendall xvi).

6.4.2 Beauty

Although the section on beauty above offered some key points about this topic, the analysis of Black British poems calls doe some additional notions and ideas to be introduced, since it applies to a more specific group of people at a different point in time. Nowadays, just as it was the case in the Romantic period, "Women are stuck in their bodies. Constantly haunted by what they look like, what they don't look like, how they should look and how we can change them" (Olufemi 122). Despite the fact that, as shown above, concerns about women's bodies are by no means new, the increase in the use of social media is worsening the

relationship of women with their bodies. Of course, the desire to be perceived as beautiful, to try to control our weight and other aspects of our appearance was not invented by social media, it has been passed down through generations of living with the need to resemble the beauty ideal as closely as possible (122). But "the body is a key site of social calibration, where symbolic markers draw the boundaries of social hierarchies" (Wood 19). For women in particular, this means living with the constant attempts to make us doubt the validity of our bodies, both in our private and public lives (Olufemi 122). Extensive research as been done in the field of beauty studies and, when approached from a feminist point of view, the focus has been mainly placed in the existence, analysis and effects of a beauty ideal rather than focusing on defining beauty as such (Tate 1).

Beauty is becoming increasingly important in our society, rendering the beauty ideal more important than it previously was. However, "the extent to which beauty defines meaning and identity, constructs the self, structures daily practices, and against which individuals are valued (or not), is not well recognized" (Windows 1). Naturally, ideals and definitions of beauty change over time and depending on location, which means they are contextual, "shaped and reshaped by the flow of material capital and variable symbolic discourses" (Balogun and Dodds 29), and, therefore, serving different "state interests corporate investment, and political action" (29). Beauty is thus political, in that it is used as a mark of superiority by the people at the top of social hierarchies against those that they consider ugly and inferior to them (Leeds Craig. Introduction 3). While it is true that beauty politics and ideals affect everyone on the planet, they do so to a greater extent when it comes to women. More attention is paid, both by strangers and people who are close to us, to women's bodies across the different areas of life, such as leisure, love and work and, of course, other social markers such as race, class and gender intersect with this (3). The body is the place where all of these signifiers gather, and as a result of this process we carry markers of culture written on our bodies. When it comes to Western culture, as Bourdieu explains, the body that is deemed 'respectable' is always "white, de-sexualized, hetero-feminine, and usually middle class (qtd. in Wood 22). Oppressive as this may be, however, beauty culture can also be positive, offering those who participate in it pleasure, a sense of belonging or solidarity. This place of convergence between oppression and pleasure, the meanings associated to beauty practices, have lead many scholars in different fields to study the politics of beauty (Leeds Craig. Introduction 3).

A key point that is often considered when studying beauty and its social and cultural importance is that of institutional influence vs. individual agency when it comes to participating in these practices. The most common assumption when looking at this is that multinational corporations which operate following capitalist principles have a great impact on beauty culture and that they "dictate a narrow set of homogenizing beauty standards" (Balogun and Dodds 29-30) which reflect Western ideals of beauty, since it is Western corporations that have the greatest power. If we take this to be true, it follows that women are simple victims of beauty exploitation, a victimhood that is aggravated when we consider non-white women who consume a beauty culture that is largely Western. In this paradigm, thus, gobalisation has brought with it the imposition of Eurocentric beauty ideals and there is not much that can be done about it (29-30). When we speak about the Eurocentric/European/ Western ideal/standard we refer to the notion that the people that more similar or more closely embody a set of European features are considered to be more attractive. These so-called European features are "closely related to whiteness, such as lighter skin, straight hair, a thin nose and lips, and light colored eyes" (Bryant 80-81). These features can be traced back to ideas about the 'classical' body as defined in the Renaissance and it is the notion notion that the 'classical' body is most commonly juxtaposed to that of the 'grotesque body'. While the first one is "associated with transcendental aesthetic and ethereal effects" (Wood 19), the second one "belongs to the earth, bound to animalistic connotations" (19).

While this is a widely accepted theory, and it is true that beauty cannot be judged as something that belongs to an individual because it is based on a larger societal system (Tate 4), recent studies have tried to show that countries which do not belong to the West have an increasingly important role in redefining beauty ideals (Balogun and Dodds 29-30). Oppressive as beauty politics have been throughout the centuries, to women and other non-male people, an interesting aspect to consider is the way these people, women in particular for this dissertation, have used beauty practices and ideals to control the way in which they are perceived (Leeds Craig. Introduction 4).

When looking at beauty culture and politics as it concerns Black women in particular, it must be remembered that, within societies in which the leftovers of colonialism are very much present, looks matter because "discourses about the body [are] crucial to the constitution of racisms. And racialised power operated in and through bodies. Moreover, racialised power configured into hierarchies, not simply between the dominant and

subordinate categories of people, bit also among them" (Brah 3). A good way of understanding the extent to which the importance of looks affects people's everyday lives is to observe those who do not adhere to the norms, trans women and disabled women for example, who navigate the consequences of not complying to these standards in a wold where appearance is of such great importance (Gill 14) as it can affect not only the mental well-being of those whose looks do not fit the ideal but also the material conditions of their lives. Black people, certainly, have often been placed in this category of non-compliance to beauty norms. In fact, as Mercer argues, "the question of how ideologies of 'the beautiful' have been defined by, for, and—for most of the time—*against* black people remains crucially important" (17). One of the reasons why this is so significant is that, historically, external beauty has been interpreted as a "manifestation of inner moral qualities" (*Ain't I a Beauty Queen* 49). The supposed connection between beauty and inner worth has been often been taken as a representation of a race's worth (49).

Contemporary beauty discourses in the West are a combination of different, often contradictory, trends and ideas. Gill summarises the current climate in the following lines:

> A plethora of different trends is circulating: the increasing entanglement of the beauty industry with surgical, pharmaceutical, and genetics industries; a growing overlap between beauty and "wellness," including "clean eating" and positive health discourses; an emphasis upon feeling good as well as looking good, and on beauty as a "state of mind" (*pace* Dove) linked to confidence and authenticity; the impact of smartphone technologies on the way in which we learn about and practice appearance work – from social media micro-celebrities and infuencers to beauty apps that can filter images, evaluate our appearance, and recommend or book beauty treatments; the diversification of mainstream beauty ideals to include bigger, older, and disabled models as well as women of color, queer, and non-binary models across media; and yet, simultaneously, an intensification and extensification of beauty pressures, and their institutionalization as a compulsory form of "labor" for women, and, increasingly, men and non-binary people. (9)

What we see, thus, is an increase in the importance of beauty in our societies, expanding its branches to include and, therefore, oppress more people.

A shift has taken place in postfeminist societies which has brought women's bodies more to the forefront than they had been in the past. While in previous times ideas of femininity and womanhood, of what assigned women their worth and value, were linked to roles or tasks they carried out, motherhood or being carers, for example, in present times a greater focus is placed on how women's bodies look, rather than on what they can do. As a result of this shift, women's bodies become their product, their asset, a brand and their tool for empowerment and freedom (Gill 11-12). This means that the need to be perceived as beautiful, as sexually attractive, is the highest marker of success for women. No matter what else they do, there is a need to be perceived as beautiful by the social standard, even while carrying out the roles and work that used to afford them value in the past. A logical consequence of this is, of course, the raise in 'appearance surveillance', an almost obsessive fixation with looking at and analysing bodies of women, but also of trans and non-binary people in negative, often envious ways (11-12). Continuously having to present oneself as beautiful requires a considerable amount of labour that is both expensive and time-consuming and the only aim of which is to always look as close to 'perfect' as possible (Tate 17).

As well as becoming more intensely prevalent in our lives, the beauty ideal is also becoming increasingly globalised, threatening to become completely global if the current trends of expansion continue. The norms as to what constitutes an acceptable body are narrowing bringing with it an even stronger imposition a Western beauty ideal on people of all races. These physical ideal norms are accompanied by a series of ethical features which lead mostly women but increasingly people of other genders to undergo cosmetic procedures and surgeries in order to adhere to this ideal as closely as possible. It is these ethical dimension to the beauty ideal which makes it harder to reject (Windows 3).

The ideal is not monolithic, it shows itself, rather, in a series of narrow acceptable models. These models have a few characteristics in common that are expected regardless of other small variations. These include "thinness, firmness, smoothness, and youth" (72). Eddo Lodge offers a deeper approach to this when she states that it is youth and whiteness that the Western beauty ideals are focused on. Black bodies, which are not believed beautiful enough to be worth objectifying, are only included in Western media representations as a novelty and described by using words such as "'ebony', 'chocolate' or 'caramel'" (176). These narrow

sets of features are the ones that are considered normal and, by extension, the needs of those who are represented by these characteristics are what is considered normal too, while the needs of non-white women, trans women and non-binary people are classed as 'other'. This marginalisation of the beauty needs of Black women in particular is remarkable as they constitute the group of people that spends the largest amount of money on beauty products (Hirsch 105).

As well as not being monolithic, beauty ideals are also not unchangeable. The beauty ideal, as described above, is an example of cultural hegemony and, as such, it is maintained by an unstable balance which in all its versions and locations it is constantly competing for power (Leeds Craig. Introduction 4-5). What we see as beautiful is the outcome of that competition for power, but it can be destabilised. As many studies have shown, in our current societies, these beauty ideals "serve to reinforce male supremacy" (*Ain't I a Beauty Queen* 5). Despite the fact that these studies successfully explain the damaging nature of these ideals for women, they fail to analyse the ways in which the ideals were used to place white and Black women in different positions in relation to the ideal, excluding Black women as non-beautiful while objectifying white women and reinforcing ideas that are in line with Eurocentric beauty ideals (5).

One of the ways that mainstream society has emphasised the differences of the marginalised is respectability politics. Respectability politics refers to a set of rules that marginalised people are expected to follow in order to be accepted by the mainstream culture and, as Kendall argues, these rules "reflect antiquated ideals set up by white supremacy" (89-91). The respectability that is achieved by sticking to these rules comes at a great price, both financial and emotional as it means that big changes have to be made in the way people present themselves. Kendall describes it as "a non-stop remodelling of body language, wardrobe and hairstyles so as to be seen as nonthreatening, engaged, and somehow ready to join the broader world. In many ways, respectability politics treat assimilation and accommodation as mandatory" (89-91). Despite the requirements, specifically for Black women, to control every aspect of their appearance, speech and sexuality, however, there are no guarantees in adhering to respectability rules. The pressure for Black women to be morally superior, to be someone that makes Black women as a group look good is great and it comes

from stereotypes that are racist, sexist and classist and that have their origins on the outside. However, in adhering to these rules and adjusting their behaviour to racist stereotypes, Black women can replicate these standards for other Black women who might be different from themselves (Kendall 89-91). Ultimately, this behaviour and the adherence to respectability comes from "understanding that you already occupy a position of social inferiority and must therefore show deference to a white middle-class norm. This is also a racialized politics where Other bodies are bound to political stigmatization" (Wood 23). It means adjusting one's behaviour to a way of acting that does not threaten traditional masculinity. For Black women this often looks like managing "their identities and sexual reputations in order to fit into a mixture of virgin and vixen constructs" (Kendall 87-88). Those Black women whose way of presenting themselves in the world is closer to the innocent virgin are often more likely to receive better opportunities, despite this being a behaviour difficult to uphold. Ultimately, "respectability politics are about controlling group behavior with designations of appropriate or inappropriate behaviour rooted in structural inequality" (87-88).

Beauty politics and the way one looks are part of respectability politics. Often, beauty is considered to be something that is achievable if a person wants it; it is a result of the effort people puts into themselves and, ultimately, what will offer people the ability to occupy the position they desire in society. In reality, this ideology only serves capitalism, as it is a strategy to sell the products that are deemed necessary to achieve the looks and the status (Wood 23). However, physical appearance is not enough. In addition to putting in the effort and using the right products to look similar to the ideal, women are expected to act confidently and display a positive attitude, regardless of whether or not this reflects the reality of how they feel or perceive themselves (Gill 15). This shows, once again, that the requirements of the beauty ideal are as much physical as they are behavioural.

Colourisim is a further issue when it comes to Black women and beauty. Over the decades, light-skinned Black women have been considered more attractive and beautiful than those who have darker complexions. The result of this is a disparity in the opportunities that Black women with different skin colours are afforded making it an issue that affects their material conditions. As Bryant argues, "if society rewards lighter-skinned black women with more opportunities, dark-skinned black women may be set up for failure from childhood"

(82). The consequences of being perceived as inferior to lighter-skinned women can be as brutal and central to their lives as the fact that "black women who do not meet the established standards of European beauty are more likely to be unemployed than those who have more of the preferred European physical characteristics" (Bryant 84). Not only are dark-skinned Black women more likely to struggle professionally, they are also more likely to have more difficulties when finding a partner. When looking at heterosexual dating, studies have shown that men of higher socioeconomic status marry light-skinned women, making dark-skinned women less likely to be part of a household with the security that two incomes provide, a situation that aggravates their already difficult position (85). Hall speaks about the consequences that Black women's in general and particularly dark-skinned women's position in society have in their lives listing issues such as the higher likelihood to experience self-hate, distorted body image, depression and eating disorders, as well as experiencing feelings of inadequacy (qtd. in Bryant 85-86). If Black women see themselves as representing the opposite of what the society they live in considers beautiful self-acceptance becomes a challenge, one that can "perpetuate into a lifelong, intergenerational culture of self-hatred" (Bryant 81).

These ideas and systems have been in place since colonial times when the dominant colonial ideologies were used to "secure the social stability of the nation through ideals of the virtuous woman — where dangerous, exotic, sexualized 'others' threatened white middle-class purity" (Wood 22). In this process images of Black women as being deviant and sexually excessive were constructed and backed by medicine and science. These images were used as a point of reference from which the middle-classes knew to stay away (22). But the uses of beauty politics to serve colonial and imperial ideologies does not stop here. In fact, "beauty has been used as a form of civilizational discourse to promote racist ideologies about the superiority of colonizers and the inferiority of the colonized. Black women's beauty in particular has been central to constructions of race" (Balogun and Dodds 33-34). A clear example of this practice was Saartjie Baartman, a Southern African woman from the 1800 that was displayed around Europe to expose the voluptuousness of her body, which was considered largely abnormal. The aim of this parade was to prove to European minds that Africans were primitive in comparison to the advanced Europeans. As a result of this Saartjie's body became a representation of the Black feminine and was contrasted with the

Venus the Medici, her classical Western counterpart. At this point, however, this idea was only being reinforced and setting itself more deeply into European minds. The conception of the bodies of Africans as dark, ugly and contrasting with the whiteness and light of the superior bodies of European women had been around since the first Europeans started chronicling their experiences in Africa and the perceived ugliness of Africans was instrumental in dehumanising them (Hirsch 98-99). It is worth noting that, despite the fact that Black women were seen as hyper-sexual they were not considered beautiful in many Western societies (98-99). This idea is central to our understanding of Blackness and beauty.

Another stereotype that has been has been equally as damaging to Black women and their image in the popular imagination is that of the 'strong Black woman'. While this image of Black women as stronger and more resilient than white women is usually presented as something benignant, it is just as limiting and problematic as other stereotypes. When traditional images of womanhood have been constructed around the ideas of delicacy and frailty, presenting Black women as just the opposite excludes them from what 'womanhood' is understood to be. This image was built in opposition to that of the lady, "defined by those it excluded — men, prostitutes, and black women. Black females, defined as they were by either their assumed capacity for arduous labor or their supposed lack of morals, were not, in the dominant culture, ladies" (*Ain't I a Beauty Queen* 7). The mention of the lack of morals when trying to argue for essentialist differences between Black and white women is particularly telling because this idea of Black women as lacking in virtuousness is a consequence of "the fact that enslaved women did not have the right to refuse the sexual demands of white men" (Kendall 60).

These stereotypes are much to present still noways and Kendall summarises the general direction these stereotypes go in when it comes to specific groups:

> Popular media continues to perpetuate racial stereotypes that were part and parcel of imperialist propaganda, particularly about women of color. Portraying Black women and Latinas as promiscuous, American Indian and Asian women as submissive, and all women of color as inferior legitimizes their sexual abuse. Portraying men of color as sexually voracious and preying on innocent white women reinforces a cultural obsession with Black-on-white stranger rape, at an expense of the vastly more common intra-racial acquaintance rape. (59)

While it is true that to European minds whiteness had been associated with the divine light and beauty and blackness with evil and demons, it was not until the 18th century that an openly white supremacist theory was established, thanks to the works of thinkers like Kant, Hume and Voltaire (Akala 58-60). This way of rationalising a racist sentiment through beauty continued into the nineteenth century, where stereotypes such as the Sambo and the Golliwog, its British equivalent, appeared in popular culture. Both in the case of these stereotypes and the Black characters that appeared in children's books, their 'frizzy' and 'woolly' hair was a clear marker of inferiority. Hair was, indeed, "charged with symbolic currency" (Mercer 119-120) as it had been in real life, particularly in the societies of the New World that had been built upon slave trade. Race, and its physical markers, such as hair texture and skin colour, were key in the creation of social structures and divisions. As Mercer explains, in these societies 'pigmentocracy' was at the centre of everyday life, where labour was divided among the slaves according to racial hierarchy (119-120).

Nowadays, this system might not be as obvious or display itself as openly as it did once but it does, disguised by the use of other names, still play an active role in our lives. As Kendall explains, both in the US and in the rest of the world, "skin color continues to serve as the most obvious criterion in determining how a person will be treated" (109). She maintains that, despite the general claims of antiracism, Black skin continues to be demonised while lighter skin shades are prized in our society (109). Whatever one's aesthetic might be, our society has some standards that affect the way we all navigate the world. Generally speaking, these include "an hourglass figure, smooth, clear skin, and symmetrical features, there are some distinct differences based on your proximity to whiteness in terms of skin color, hair texture, and body type" (Kendall 104). As well as this, women are expected to look like they put some effort into their appearance, like they underwent beauty treatments and picking clothes and hairstyles that are considered to be flattering. When it comes to Black women, this takes on a new dimension: some looks that might be considered effortless yet stylish, messy but fashionable are accepted when white women embrace them while they are seen as careless and are mostly disapproved of when it is Black women that present themselves in these ways (104). All of these rules are derived from the necessity that the beauty ideal creates to assimilate in order to receive validation. However, those who live in bodies that will never, regardless of beauty treatments and procedures, fit the norm and manage to assimilate receive

very little validation from the media or elsewhere. The combined result of these ideologies that underlie our societies is that Black women are placed in an even more vulnerable situation and at a higher risk of developing issues with their bodies (115).

The ideas associated with Blackness and whiteness that can be traced back to the first chroniclers of Africa are still prevalent in our contemporary minds in deeper and more subtle ways than these, however. These are concepts that are present in a great number of our daily tasks and more general existence in the world. If we look at something as seemingly innocent as the story books we read to children, we can observe that heroes and heroines are described as being young and beautiful while the evil characters, whatever kind of creature they might be, are depicted as ugly (Windows 17). Roelofs adds that "the signifcance of the beautiful and its apparent antitheses such as the grotesque and the horrifc must be regarded as being of a piece with the norms that govern our day-to-day surroundings, structure bodily existence, and regulate our bonds with people, things, and places" (37-38).

An interesting and subtle distinction when it comes to the relationship between beauty and virtue or goodness is that, while it is true that physical beauty has generally been connected to moral superiority in our imaginations, this idea also has its limits. Women who are considered exceptionally beautiful have often been "regarded suspiciously and potentially as morally corrupting; the devil's gateway" (Windows 18).

As it has been shown above, Eurocentric beauty ideals can be and are damaging for people racialised as non-white. Many scholars have taken this to mean that Black women want to be white, overlooking beauty ideals that exist within non-white communities and disregarding the fact that Black people can be content within their skin. However, as Tate rightfully states, not all the women want to be white and "there is no one beauty standard, white beauty is not iconic and there are different investments in beauty within the cultural circuits of the Black atlantic diaspora" ("Not all the Women" 195). A mistake that is often made by scholars who work within the field of beauty studies is that their research often "does not see white beauty as racialized and misinterprets Black women's beauty practices as signs of psychic damage (195). The truth of the matter, however, is that, in order to continue to maintain the illusion that whiteness represents civilisation, advancement and superiority, beauty discourses have defined and continue to define blackness and all its attributes as ugly

and inferior. This discourse is nothing but the continuation of a centuries long the binary established by imperialism and slavery and the counter-discourse of Black nationalists which fought against those ideas and promoted african-centred beauty notions (196). The consequence of this is a 'beauty empire' that is heavily racialised and which spreads the myth that all Black women would prefer to be white. Once again, this reminds us of the importance of remembering that "beauty is racialized and politically constructed" (196).

However, as Tate argues, "there are different Black beauty models which have their own aesthetics, politics and race-ing stylization technologies" (197). What we now know as 'african ugliness", the notion that people of African descent are ugly, is an ideology that was constructed by the means of slavery and colonialism and which is now widespread across the world, including in the U.K. (197). The 1930s were a key turning point in the expansion of these ideas as the Rastafarian movement, originating in Jamaica, gained strength and popularity. The ideas spread by Rastas "decentered white beauty's iconicity" (198) and, instead, they developed a more positive narrative of "anti-colonialist, anti-racist aesthetics focused on natural hair (deadlocks), praised darker Black skin, african features, Black self love and promoted a return to africa" (198). These ideas then travelled to the U.S. and they constituted the basis for much of what the Black Power Movement in the 1960s and 70s worked for. In short, these ideas represent a redefinition of the concept of Blackness that predominated up until this point. However, it was also as a consequence of these movements that "hair straightening and skin bleaching came to be equated with self-hatred while afro hairstyles signalled political change and Black self love/knowledge" (198). As will be observed below, hair is and has always been one of the central places in which discourses about beauty and racialisation take place, a place of cultural meaning and conflict.

What must be kept in mind, nevertheless, is the fact that the beauty practices and desires of Black people are still a determining aspect of their lives. The approach to beauty that became generalised during the racialised beauty empire that Tate refers to claim that there is no crossings between Black and white beauty, that one ideal and the practices of the groups that believe in it do not influence those of the other groups. Reality is far from this, though. As a matter of fact, in everyday life there are beauty crossings either side of the 'racial' divide which trouble this incommensurability. aesthetic surgery is one example in which the

prohibition on beauty crossings is beginning to loose its grip. it is also an area in which the myth that Black women want to be white has its greatest purchase in the popular imagination ("Not all the Women" 199). As well as this, the variety of different looks and beauty practices across different Black cultures should be remembered. The common claim that it is only Black women who are influenced by cultural norms, and further, that all of these norms are white, is not an accurate representation of the way in which these processes operate. When we carefully observe the way cultural and beauty practices and transferred from what culture to another, whatever those cultures might be, the conclusion is that the beauty myth, together with the ideas about Black women wanting to be white, is destabilised. What we find is a paradoxical combination of different practices where "the imperative to valorize and perform a static 'natural' Black body beautiful coexists with the normalization of what is seen as 'unnatural' onto the Black body through stylization's race-ing technologies and practices, the rise of Black and rasta 'chic' and the emergence of the global multicultural beauty, alongside the continuing iconicity of white beauty" (202-203). This is the current climate, one that is unquestionably more complex that the theories many Beauty Studies scholars have proposed. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that "whiteness is not the necessary model. We have our own ideals within the Black community that carry their own histories and particular consequences for our psyches" (Tate 58) and, in fact, there is not just one single beauty ideal, but many.

As we re-learn these notions and we let go of racist stereotypes, it is also important to remember that there is no such thing as "the Black aesthetic" or the "real Black look", just as there is no white counterpart for them. Despite this, these ideas of 'the real Black' and 'the real white' do very much "still function as the beauty binary even in the twenty-first century" ("Not all the Women" 203). The effects of the racialised beauty ideal that was constructed centuries ago still prevail in our society and have a great impact on the material conditions of people, mostly women, trans and gender-non-conforming people. As Tate states, the aim here is not to deny the power of this empire, the key role it plays in defining and shaping what beauty looks like and how these concepts are theorised. Instead, the shift that needs to take place is one towards the acknowledgement and acceptance that not all Black women want to be white but, rather, they aim to have the option to be Black in all its different versions ("Not all the Women" 205). It is worth emphasising here that, ultimately, Black women could only ever mimic but never own the whiteness and that elements of different white cultures can be

used by them for reasons other than these (203-204). Once again, notions of mimicry and hybridity become relevant here as, like Homi Bhabha suggested, both of these as strategies "of colonial power and knowledge" (205). By taking advantage of these strategies, bodies that are othered can not only subvert the established order in that they help create something different from what they were allowed to and expected to create within this context (205). The aim is to understand that

> an inclusive Black beauty across the Black atlantic diaspora entails sustaining an identificatory process that resists the hegemonic discourses on beauty and leaves space open for multiple experiences and stylizations of beautiful Black bodies. This means that we have to engage in a disidentification from these discourses in order to decentre Black beauty so that other Black beauties can be recognized. notice that 'Black' is still central as 21st century 'race' consciousness forms the basis of this disidentification across the Black Atlantic diaspora structure of feeling. (145)

6.4.2.1 Hair

Hair is a "raw material, constantly processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with meanings and value" (Mercer 118-119). Hair is worn in different ways depending on various different religious and cultural practices. These including shaving one's head, growing the hair out, covering it… Together with skin colour, hair is one of the most visible markers of race, which endows it with a further layer of symbolic meaning and it is, certainly, closely related to ideas about beauty. As Mercer further explains, "within racism's bipolar codification of human worth, black people's hair has been historically *devalued* as the most visible stigmata of blackness, second only to skin" (118-119).

Hair is an important element of how a person's looks are judged and how they are categorised regarding their beauty but, in the case of Black people, the difference between 'good' and 'bad' hair is a particularly pronounced. When a Black person's hair is referred to as 'good' this often means that it is hair that has a looser curl pattern, hair that looks "European, straight, not too curly, not that kinky" (Mercer 118-119). These ideas of what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' hair, which are often accompanied notions about 'good' and 'bad' complexions, noses and other features is often passed down to women by their own parents all around the African diaspora and from an early age and they are "the reflection of one of the

dominant beauty paradigms which privileges white/light skin, straight hair and what are seen to be European features" (Tate 35).

Historically, Black people's relationship with their hair in general, and Black women's hair in particular, in the West has been one that has been made difficult by Western societies yet a meaningful one. In fact, "there is perhaps no hair, no body, that has been so overtly controlled and policed than that of a Black woman" (Odedra 48-49). A reality that began with slavery, a time when slaves who were made to work as house-servants would be required to wear their hair in ways their owners deemed acceptable which meant covering it with a wig or styling it in a way that did not let the natural texture of their hair show (48-49). The styling of Black women's hair even came to be regulated by law in some parts of the United States, such as Louisiana, where white women became jealous of the attention their husbands were paying to Black women who decorated their hair with ribbons and other accessories. As a result of the discomfort this created for white women a law was created to "control the women of colour, to tame them" (48-49). For decades after that, respectability politics meant that the majority of Black women had to conform to an unspoken but intensely felt rule that said that they should try to get their hair to look as similar to European hair as possible, since that was the look that was thought looked tidy and neat. To this end, Black women engaged in practices such as straightening their hair or wearing weave-on extensions or wigs (Hirsch 50). It is essential to understand here that these grooming practices that Black women took part in were imbued with social meaning: they saw them as "personal actions that could be taken to win respect despite living in a hostile environment" (*Ain't I a Beauty Queen* 78). This is not to say that Black women had a problem with their hair and how it looked but, rather, that this is what was expected of them in Western societies. As it is evidenced here, "there are hundreds of years of control and shame and fear wrapped up in the natural hair of African women" (Odedra 49).

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a selection of Black women entrepeneurs, such as C.J. Walker, whose work contributed to straightened hair becoming a symbol of middle-class status. Hair straightening as understood by the many women who participated in it was a part of the efforts to conform to the neat and tidy appearance, a movement came from Brazil and emphasised the importance of 'boa aparêcia' (Tate 198).

However, with the rise in prevalence of black pride in the 1960s came the option to wear Black hair in natural hairstyles. Black hair worn in natural styles became a "defining symbol of racial pride" (*Ain't I a Beauty Queen* 78). This, of course, was not the beginning of people embracing their features, such as dark skin and kinky hair, it was merely the process of this becoming more public and visible than it had been up until this point. Despite the fact that during the 60s many people did wear their hair out purely because they considered it beautiful, during this decade natural hair became a political statement more than something that was considered attractive or pretty. It was "a practice that was both individually healing and collectively transforming" (89). Natural hairstyles were most definitely "a public act of self- acceptance that was both personal and a way of being part of what felt like a solidifying community" (91) as much as they were a refusal to "assimilate to white standards by choosing to be natural" (Odedra 47). While there certainly were other ways in which Black people were solidifying an aesthetic that could be easily identified with them, hair was particularly influential feature of their appearance because it was much more accessible to the majority of the population than, let's say, fashion. As Odedra explains "hair is generally more of an accessible route into a trend or visual representation of the group you identify with" (44-45). It is from this movement that what we nowadays now as Black anti-racist aesthetics originated, a movement that "opposes the presumption that long straight hair is necessary for Black women's beauty and is opposed to skin bleaching. Instead, Black anti-racist aesthetics promotes the idea that Black people can be beautiful just as they are naturally because of the recognition that beauty is racialized" (Tate 198).

With this, though, came the creation of a new beauty standard, the afro which is not a hairstyle that all Black women can achieve naturally. Suddenly, the way Black women's hair grew, the length it could reach and the fullness of their head of hair became a matter that concerned their whole families. Women who were not able to grow afros had to reclaim concepts such as "nappy-headed" or "bald-headed" and claim their own beauty regardless of the fact that they could not conform to the ideal (*Ain't I a Beauty Queen* 127). These changes are further evidence of the existence of beauty ideals within Black cultures, and that they are beauty ideals that have little or nothing in common with those we find in Western societies.

Nowadays, natural hair continues to be viewed as a marker of difference, as a refusal to conform to societal rules and it is often considered unprofessional or messy. Not adopting the grooming practices that make one's hair look more 'European' can be "perceived as an act

of radical politics, which threatens to upstage our other professional accomplishments. In an environment where being black places you in a tiny minority, proudly displaying black hair appears to be seen as a threat" (Hirsch 50). These racist prejudices are some of the ones that need deconstructing and re-thinking in Western societies as, like this section has shown, natural hair has a great significance for different groups of Black people. As a matter of fact, "hair doesn't just bind communities, it's a way to express and communicate powerful, complex emotions" (Odedra 63). This being said, a more positive approach to hair is slowly evolving and becoming more present in our societies, at least among the Black people, who are working to rid hair styling practices of the meanings they have accumulated over the years. Increasingly, Black people are looking at styling in all its versions simply as options, possible hairstyles that can be chosen for no other reason than taste and personal preference and refusing to let society tell them that there is anything hidden in their choice, just in the same way that white people are not assumed to want to be Black when they sunbathe (qtd. in Tate 56). Nevertheless, it cannot be forgotten that "hair continues today to have emotional, political and social significance in a context in which stylization choices often mean acceptance or rejection and affect how we feel about ourselves. The centuries' old debate on women's hair continues to be read by, for and against Black women" (Tate 152).

6.4.3 Evil

Before completely delving into the notions related to evil that will be relevant for the analysis of the texts below, it is pertinent to note the lack of academic work or criticism on the topic of evil related to the work of Black British authors and poetry in general. For this reason, this section only introduces a few key concepts and the analysis of the poems by Black British authors will be carried out combining these new concepts with those presented when speaking of Romantic poetry. Some of the notions presented here have been collected from historical accounts, as well as from other literary genres, and although they do not specifically address or engage with poetry in any shape or form they have still proved useful to analyse the texts in depth.

As it has been shown throughout this dissertation, notions of beauty and evil often appear tightly connected when it comes to the portrayal of women in literature. Black people have gone through centuries of being demonised and portrayed in a negative light because of

the colour of their skin. The symbolism of the colours black and white, the connotations of these words have existed for as long as the modern world has. In very basic terms, this is a case of the word white being associated with that which is good whereas the word black has a negative connotation and is often associated to that which is bad. It is, in addition, a symbolism that existed in places other than the Western world, such as Africa (Akala 112-113). The issue here is that this precise symbolism was applied to human beings to attribute meaning to the colour of their skin.

Having black skin came to be as a negative thing during slavery in the colonial period. Of course, slavery had existed before in history in its many different variants (112-113). However, when we look at the slaves that lived during this time, the main difference is clear: these slaves were clearly visible and identifiable and the meaning associated to the word black had been passed down and assigned to the slaves. As Morrison explains, "it was not simply that this slave population had a distinctive color; it was that this color meant something" (*Playing in the Dark* 49).

The first Europeans that went to West Africa on 'exploration' journeys were some of the first people to set the way in which Black people would be perceived in history. As their journals show, they saw blackness as the defining most noticeable feature of the people they encountered in this continent. It was as a consequence of this that Africa came to be known as *black* Africa to the British. Because the word black was already full of meaning back in Britain, the colour black being known as "an emotionally partisan color, the handmaid and symbol of baseness and evil, a sign of danger and repulsion" (Lawrence 57-58), West Africa and its inhabitants inherited the meaning of the word. Upon initiating contact with black people, discussions as to the origin and reason for their black skin sparkled and many British people struggled to understand the origins of a condition such as this one. Definitions of the word black that were available to them became of great importance in order to clarify this matter and a definition provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is quite telling here. A pre-sixteenth-century version of this dictionary defined black in the following way: "Deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul.... Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant, etc." (Lawrence 57-58). These were the words that the British had at hand when trying to make sense of a reality they found so shocking.

In addition to this, Africans presented their bodies in a different way to what Europeans were used to. Europeans saw the body as the site to lust and temptation and thus covered their bodies in ways they considered modest. Africans did not have these beliefs and they covered their bodies considerably less than Europeans did. This resulted in Europeans seeing Africans as "sexuality personified" (61), an idea that had a strong presence in the following centuries, peaking with notions of white women needing protection from the extremely sexual Black men living in Britain, and that are still present in the UK today. At the time, this difference in the way Africans presented themselves was enough for Europeans to describe them as being close to animals in their sexuality, an idea that was reinforced by the lack of shame they displayed towards their naked bodies (61). A clear link was established between blackness and sin.

As the relationship between continents progressed, the bourgeois became increasingly anxious about the possibility that these new relations might disrupt the social order they were accustomed to. The uneasiness they felt was reflected in the form of projections of the meanings of the word black onto the people with black skin. Connections were made between "evil blackness, 'disobedience' (to God) as a reason for the 'curse' of blackness, and 'carnal copulation' as evidence of a fall from grace" (qtd. in Lawrence 59). As the centuries went on, these racist ideologies expanded, during the 19th and 20th centuries to include, as well as the threat to nationhood, "the threat to Empire and white supremacy" (Lawrence 61). Throughout the decades, and more firmly in post-war times, "the Black presence has been constantly identified as a source of problems, the precise shape and dimensions of these problems have constantly changed, reflecting a shifting balance of political forces" (*There Ain't No Black* 87-89). During the 19040s and 50s the main concern related to Black people became one of their sexuality and miscegenation predominantly (95). The evolution of the anxieties in the minds of the British has slowly shifted the way Black people are perceived but, as it is clear, Black people continue to have a bad image and to be blamed for many of the problems in British society.

As we can observe from the accounts of these interactions and how they helped construct the idea of Blackness we have in Western societies, "language can act as a vehicle of ideology that aids in ensuring the subordination of certain groups" (Pfeifer 528-529). What white European 'explorers' did by means of their accounts, descriptions and inventions was to establish "a hierarchical system of domination of less powerful groups in society, that is, of

justifying the ways of the powerful over the whole litany of threatening 'Others'" (528). In order to do this, they benefitted from the Eurocentric binary distinctions that position the white man on one side of the binary and mostly everybody else (women, people of colour, gender non-conforming people, etc.) on the other side. While the second group of the binary is, as is apparent, diverse and varied, the entirety of it is associated with the 'feminine' and "the values, characteristics, and ways of being that are associated with the 'feminine' side of the dualistic split are eschewed and dismissed as inherently inferior when counterpoised to the 'masculine' side of the fracture" (530). Black people are, of course, placed in this category and, as such, they are viewed as 'exotic Others' and this, together with the symbolism of the words 'black' and 'white' and what is associated with them contributes to Black people becoming, as Pfeifer explains,

> a sign of all human depravity, of all that is evil, vile, sinister, grisly, immoral, hidden, the betwixt and between, the occult, the forces of darkness, the macabre and the malevolent — the dark side, spiritual darkness, a dark black ominous cloud, forbidden desires, dark impulses of the human psyche, dark and ominous caves, black seething cauldrons, creatures that bay at the moon, dangers lurking in dark alleys, the dark passions of the human heart, a dark past replete with dark secrets, a dark mood of somber melancholy, and fear of the dark. In this context, black is juxtaposed against the apparent bright and shining wholesomeness, decency, and wide-eyed innocence of white. (534)

According to her, the conflict between 'black' and 'white' is, in fact, a conflict between good and evil where the colours only act as signifiers and symbols (539). White, thus, functions as a symbol of order whereas Blackness represents rebelliousness, disconformity with the system and chaos (543-544). Something that is worth emphasising at this point is that this view of the world is entirely Eurocentric and does not take into account that other cultures have different ideas of what is good and right and evil and wrong, which by extension means that technically all cultures can be alien to others. What is done when providing people and colours with meanings is sealing a culture "from what it cannot acknowledge as real or meaningful" (Santilli 175). This is what constitutes horror and, far from being absent from the culture that cannot come to terms with it, it lingers on the edges and it feels like a continual threat that haunts that culture and is always close enough to break the norms established by it (175-176).

The anti-establishment and rebelliousness associated with Blackness is sometimes seen as coolness nowadays. While this is a more positive example of stereotyping, it is, without any doubt, still stereotyping which is essentialist and reductive. The coolness and will to be transgressive that is often associated with Black people themselves can often be seen in fashion, when using black garments such as a black leather jacket to depict antiheroes or *femme fatales* (Pfeifer 541). This is a further example of how, anything that is not assimilated by the established norms of a certain society is considered evil in our societies (Santilli 174).

When it comes to Black women specifically, the 'angry Black woman' is one of the most damaging stereotypes that contribute to this process of demonisation of Black people. This is, as Odedra argues, an angry woman is "something current Western society cannot abide. Christianity and the Bible, intricately intertwined in Western culture, view anger as a flaw, a vengeful trait" (29).

All the kinds of representation of Black people mentioned above have been instrumental in the construction of Black people that white societies are most familiar with. These representations as Morrison explains, are "reflexive; an extraordinary meditation of the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing and terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work *not* to see this" (*Playing in the Dark* 17). While in white literature Black people have generally been demonised, portrayed as being on the wrong side of the law, morally deviant, a representation of an "alien evil that threatens the security of the white world" (Gunning 37) and, just an embodiment of anything that could potentially upset the establish order of white supremacy, Black authors have been working to construct representations of themselves that more accurately represent the full extent and range of Black humanity, a luxury white people have been afforded for centuries. These representations deconstruct stereotypes of Black people that have passed down through generations and generations of white people, in literature by white authors and other cultural works. The poems analysed next are written by Black British authors and while some of them challenge these stereotypes, others create villains that are fully fleshed out and vividly contrast with the preconceived ideas of Black people as dangerous or purely evil.

Chapter 7: Analysis of Contemporary Texts

7.1 "U.F.O. Woman (Pronounced OOFOE)"

7.1.1 Patience Agbabi: Life and Work

Patience Agbabi was born in London to Nigerian parents in 1965 but just one year later she was fostered by a white English family living in Sussex (Ramey. "Patience Agbabi" 3). Agbabi never lost contact with her biological parents, as she would still see them weekly and spent school holidays with them (3). It was her birth father, in fact, who installed a "sense of respect for the British literary tradition" (4) in her and through poetry she managed to escape into a private world in which she could stay away from the confusing intercultural circumstances that she experienced as a black child who lived in a predominantly white environment" (4).

An experience that had a great impact on Agbabi and her work was the trip she took to Nigeria in 1975. She was expecting to have an immediate feeling of acceptance and belonging as soon as she landed in her parents' country but she was faced with a completely different reality: the way she walked and talked was enough to have her labeled as 'English' (4). It was this experience that inspired the poem "U.F.O. Woman (Pronounced OOFOE)" that we will be analysing here.

A few years later, in 1978, she and her foster parents moved to Wales where she stayed until she went to Oxford for university (4-5). Between 1983 and 1986 she studied English Language at said university.

Ever since 1992 Patience Agbabi has worked conducting workshops, teaching creative writing and in projects run by organisations such as schools and prisons (6). Shortly after, she started performing her work around London as a member of the performance group Atomic Lip, a group that also worked with video performance (Evans-Bush. "Patience Agbabi" paragraph 3). She has also taken part in other performance work such as the piece entitled *FO(U)R WOMEN* which was performed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts and in which she collaborated with Adeola Agbebiyi and Dorothea Smartt (paragraph 7). Her work became well-known and has stayed with us, partly, due to the work she did at Afro-Style school, run by Kwame Dawes at Spread the Word (Ramey. "Patience Agbabi" 2).

Her first poetry collection, *R.A.W.* was published in 1995 and it gained her immediate recognition from authors such as Benjamin Zephaniah (6). After the success of *R.A.W.,* which meant that she was "now lauded as a blazing talent for having written poems of bold sexuality, stylistic finesse, and insight into the 'underbelly' of popular culture" (6), her poetry started to appear in periodicals and poetry collections bringing together the work of "black" British contemporary authors (6). Some of these anthologies were *Bittersweet: Contemporary Black Women's Poetry* and *The Fire People: A Collection of Contemporary Black British Poets*, both of which are essential collections in this area.

Her second collection *Transformatrix*, the one that contains "U.F.O. Woman (Pronounced OOFOE)", was published in 2000. This collection is divided into five sections: "High-Flying Femmes", "Devils in Red Roses", "Seven Sisters", "Labourers of Love", and "Mothers of Inversion" and in all of them she depicts "the psychological ramifications of sociological conditions at times prevailing in Britain" (Ramey. "Patience Agbabi" 7). When speaking of the reasons why she chose to give this title to the collection, Agbabi pointed out the fact that she wanted a word that would bring together the key elements of the collection, "women (of course); women going through change/metamorphosis; and travel" ("Interview with Patience Agbabi" 162-163). The central focus of this collection was different from of transformations that the female characters underwent, mainly mental/emotional transformations (162-163). Form is another important feature of this collection, which the author herself has spoken about. According to her own explanations, the entire collection is a "celebration of form" (162-163) and, in fact, she has managed to adapt traditional poetic forms, like the sonnet or the sestina, to the directness required of performance poetry and to the rhythms of hip-hop" (Burt 139).

Just a year after *Transformatrix* was published, in 2001, Agbabi was given a grant to study an M.A. in Creative Writing, the Arts, and Education at the University of Sussex, which she completed in 2002 (Ramey. "Patience Agbabi" 9).

In 2004, she was "selected as one of the Poetry Book Society's Next Generation Poets. This prestigious list names young poets who are likely to have the most profound impact on British poetry in the next decade" (3). After this, she published two more poetry collections: *Bloodshot Monochrome* in 2007 and *Telling Tales* in 2014. She has also written a children's book which was published in 2020 and is entitled *The Infinite*.

Agbabi acknowledged various different influences when it comes to her work, which go from Northern Soul to Chaucer (Ramey. "Patience Agbabi" 2). In fact, the influences she lists are "primarily white males, closer to the centre than the margins of culture, and more closely associated with confessionals and Neo-formalism than avant-gardism" (Ramey. "Situating" 94-95). Despite the fact that she has described herself as a "performance poet" a lot of her work draws from the "high art" tradition and the upper-class institutions where she was educated (Ramey. "Patience Agbabi" 2) which has contributed to the position to which she has often been relegated as producing work that is 'not Black enough' (Ramey. "Situating" 94-95). In addition to this, she recognises the great impact that hip-hop culture, the poetry slam, and the open-mic scene have had upon her work (Ramey. "Patience Agbabi" 2). The divide between performance poetry and poetry written for the page has already been touched on in previous sections of this dissertation, and Agbabi is, arguably, one of the best examples of authors who have managed to cross the lines and challenge the stereotypes that abound when it comes to both kinds of writing. In her opinion, "the best performance poetry 'reads well' as literature" (Ramey. "Patience Agbabi" 3). It is interesting to note that Agbabi is one of the few poets studied here who use traditional lyric forms such as the sonnet or the dramatic monologue (3) a style that contrasts with the freer forms ofter contemporary poets prefer. In fact, she has "embraced all of the influences that have been in her realm of experience" (13).

As well as writing, Agbabi has taught at the Cardiff University, the University of Greenwich (Ramey. "Patience Agbabi" 10) and she has made it her mission to teach creative writing from a very particular perspective: she aims to "enlarge the awareness of her audiences when she teaches poetry by drawing on an especially wide range of examples from the established cannon and from the African diaspora" (11).

All in all, Agbabi is a poet who "has defied stereotypes by continuously crossing boundaries of style, audience, and genre, she has repeatedly broken barriers based on narrow definitions of female sexuality, 'black poetry' and even Britishness" (3). It is fair to say that she has managed to successfully combine the features often associated with artists of the African diaspora with the established British literary position in a masterful way (3) and in so doing, "her work has made a noteworthy and meaningful contribution to contemporary British poetry by inviting its past to meet its future — a place where page and performance, freedom

and form, and tradition and innovation can be rejoined in poetry" (14). Her "reinvention of the poetic tradition is the signature of her individual talent" (Hena 530-531).

7.1.2 "U.F.O. Woman (Pronounced OOFOE)": Poem Analysis

Agbabi's "U.F.O. Woman (Pronounced OOFOE)" is a dramatic monologue that follows the narrator in her journey through London, Sussex, Lagos and, finally, Outer Space where she adopts a "planetary subject-position to elude territorial belonging" (Hena 530-531). In the poem we get to accompany a Nigerian woman whose travels between England and Lagos make her an alien in both Britain and Nigeria (530-531). The poem is divided into four sections, each of them relating the events that take place in one of these places. All four of the sections vary in length the first one being three stanzas long, the second one five stanzas long, the third one four and the last one only two. However, each of the fourteen stanzas are composed of six lines each. The choice of the dramatic monologue for the poem is affecting here because it allows the reader to learn about the thoughts and feelings of this character as she travels and experiences different realities.

We first encounter the speaker, U.F.O woman, landing at Heathrow airport in London. As well as her arrival in the capital, this is also her entrance into Earth as she states on the first line of the poem: "Mother Earth. Heath Row. Terminal 5" (Agbabi line 1). As soon as she lands she is almost expecting to be admired for her appearance as she wonders if those she has encountered think that she looks "hip in my space-hopper-green/ slingback, iridescent sky-blue-skin / pants and hologram haircut" (lines 2-3-4). As it can be observed in this description, her looks are quite unusual but at this stage she believes this can be a positive thing and, in fact, she prides herself in her outfit choice and styling. However, the situation she finds herself in is a more vulnerable and humiliating one than it might appear at first glance. In her next question, which follows the previous unanswered one about the fashionableness of her clothes, she asks "Can I have / my clothes back when you've finished with them, please?" (lines 4-5). This is how we learn that she is being searched upon arrival at London and that her appearance, which she considered cool is precisely what is marking her as an Other and causing for her to be subjected to this search. Her questions remain unanswered and she continues to try and get a response "Hello! I just got offa the space ship" (line 6).

168

This method does not work either and, thus, she continues to speak explaining that she has prepared herself for her journey to Earth, that she has done the work in order to be able to navigate this new environment like one of the locals: "I've learnt the language, read the VDU / and watched the video twice" (lines 7-8). As she learns at the airport, however, even all this preparation is insufficient and she remains invisible to those around her, which is evidenced in the complete silence that is the only answer she receives. Seeing this, she turns to Mother Earth and addresses her directly by asking "do *you read me*? Why then stamp my passport ALIEN at Heath Row? Did I come third / in the World Race?" (line 9-10). The U.F.O woman keeps interrogating the airport workers and the Mother Earth, her creator, about the situation she is placed in but there is no way to receive any answers. Eventually, she wonders if it is something to do with her, with the way she looks, that offends her 'mother': "Does my iridescent sky-blue-pink skin embarrass you, mother?" (lines 11-12).

U.F.O woman's first encounter with Earth and its inhabitants is marked by difference, by the fact that she does not look the same as the others. Skin colour is a key element in this differentiation that takes place and a key factor in her being marked as alien. Slowly, she becomes aware of the fact that her carefully chosen clothes and stylisation might even be a source of shame for 'Mother Earth'.

After her adventures at the airport, she finally arrives in the very centre: London. The streets of the city are populated by children who do not appreciate her presence in their space and turn her name into an attack: "Why don't U F O back to your own planet?" (lines 15-16). As we see here, even the youngest and supposedly most innocent members of British society point out to her lack of belonging and they actively reject her, they deny her right to exist in this place. However, this feeling towards her does not come only from the mouths of those she finds around the city, it is underlying in the very essence of the city, it is written on its walls and present at every step: "Streets paved with NF (no fun) graffiti / *Nefertiti go home* from the old days" (lines 17-18). The buildings of the city are witnesses to the unchanged attitudes towards the people of her kind and the hostility is immediate and present in the deepest corners of the streets of London.

Seeing as she is not welcome here, the U.F.O. woman makes a decision to leave London and she embarks in the second leg of her journey: "So I take the tram, tube, train, taxi trip" (line 19) and she ends up in Sussex, more precisely in a "crazy crazy cow pat" (Agbabi

line 21). This is the beginning of her outwards journey into the periphery and as she travels and arrives here she offers a few more details as to her appearance. In her own words, she is "hip-hugged, bell-bottomed and thin-lipped" (line 20). As well as this, a defining feature of her is her hair, which she wears in an afro "rich / as a child paints a tree in full foliage" (lines 22-23). When she is met by stares from "flying saucer eyes" (line 24) she attributes this behaviour to her hair, which might seem unusual to the inhabitants of the countryside: "Perhaps my antennae plaits in winter/ naked twigs cocooned in thread for bigger / better hair make them dare to ask to touch" (lines 25-27). These lines reveal not only the attitudes of the people of Sussex which are inappropriate and intrusive, but also the fact that her hair is not considered 'good' and she needs to add thread to her plaits in order to make it appear fuller. The people who display curiosity for her hair not always ask whether or not they can touch it, sometimes they simply do so unaware or unwilling to recognise how much of an invasion of her private space and person that is. Her hair, however, is not the only source of questions: her hands are another feature that makes her different from the rest of the inhabitants of this part of the world. She describes it in the following way: "my two-tone hand with its translucent palm" (line 29). And, once again, this prompts questions from the locals who enquire: ""*Why's it white on the inside / of your hand?" "Do you wash?" "Does it wash off?"*" (lines 31-32). The implications of these questions are clear and they carry centuries of racist attitudes that associated the colour of Black people's skin with dirt. This is followed by direct and hurtful name-calling "sticks-and-stones-may-break-my-bones-but names" (line 36). The skin colour of the speaker identifies her not only as non-British, but also as non-human making a point of the "dehumanising working of racial bias" (Novak 68).

In the face of this, the only thing the U.F.O. woman can think to do is to speak to the oracle and ask for help. The screen of the oracle presents her with two options "HISTORY" (Agbabi line 39) and "HERSTORY" (line 43). The first option only brings back images from times past, images of "*Slave-ship: space ship, racism: spacism*" (line 42) in the form of visuals. These historical images which recount the existence of people like her throughout history and since they only offer negativity, she decides to pick the second option instead, but she does so "resignedly" (line 43). As it turns out, this option is not that much better than the first one: "The screen displays a symmetrical tree/ which has identical roots and identical branches" (lines 44-45). This message shows that there is no change in sight the past is reflected, mirrored in the future and there is little hope to find a home or any feeling of belonging in England. This confrontation with reality is devastating for the U.F.O. woman

who says that "I can no longer reason, only feel/ not aloneness but oneness, I decide to physically process this data" (lines 46-47-48).

The physical processing of this experience comes in the form of the continuation of her journey, this time heading to the "Motherland" (line 50), which at the same time is a continuation of her journey towards the periphery. What the U.F.O. woman calls the Motherland is "the GO-SLOW quick-talking fast-living / finger-licking city known as LAGOS" (lines 51-52). As she arrives in Lagos she finds herself surrounded by colour, both in the way people present themselves and in the city itself:

> Streets paved with gold-threaded gold-extensioned
> women and silk-suited men; market-stalls
>
> of red, orange, yellow and indigo. (lines 53-55)

In this new destination, her skin is not a feature that outs her as a foreigner, as someone who does not belong and she finds that she can actually camouflage as far as appearance goes: "Perhaps it's not my bold skin colour,/ well camouflaged in this spectrum of life" (lines 56-57). In Lagos she looks more similar to the locals and for this reason they do not stare at her the way the people back in England did, but there is still something she is trying to hide, to camouflage. Where her appearance seems to help her go unnoticed, her behaviour has the opposite effect:

> but the way I wear my skin, too uptight,
> too did-I-wear-the-right-outfit-today,
> too I-just-got-off-the-last-London-flight; (lines 58-59)

What we see in these lines is that it is her attitude, the way she carries herself that betrays her camouflage and makes it evident that she does not fit in, despite her appearance. When she first arrived in London she made a point of explaining that she had learnt the language as a way of preparing for her settlement in this new place. Now, language is once again something that gives her away: "or my shy intergalactic lingo/ my moonspeak, my verbal vertigo" (lines 61-62). This reflection points at the importance of language when it comes to belonging, the way she speaks provides her listeners information about her education, social class, and the time she has spent in England, which determine her social position in Nigeria. At the same

time, it also allows us to learn that, despite being Nigerian, she has not spent much time in this country at all as there is no accent the locals recognise. Both the way she behaves and the way she sounds make her look like a foreigner in the eyes of the natives who, similarly to what happened in England, "stare with flying saucer eyes" (line 63). The oracle's prophecy, thus, comes to be true anther experiences in Nigeria mirror those she had in England.

Where in England the locals called her names, here they "call me Ufo woman, oyinbo" (lines 64). This encounter mirrors those she had in the UK but, at the same time, it adds another layer when she is called oyinbo, meaning white or not culturally African, "outsider, other" (line 66). When they call her white and they point out her position as an outsider they are referring purely to her behaviour, to her non-Nigerian way of being, to one that has been tainted by the time she has spent outside of the 'Motherland' as she calls it, in England. This kind of realisation, the one in which one becomes aware of the effects that living in the metropolis have had on them, is an experience that is often written about by Black British authors, especially those who have travelled to Africa or the Caribbean in search of roots and belonging. When speaking about this, Hirsch mentions that this arrival in the 'motherland' is precisely the beginning of the understanding of her own Britishness, despite being treated like an alien in Britain (Hirsch 4). This is precisely what the U.F.O. woman experiences, the time she has spent in England has marked her forever in ways that are obvious and impossible to deny. The only thing left to do in the face of so much rejection from everyone is to withdraw and reflect on what she has lived in the time she has been travelling around the world. She accepts her condition as an alien and she starts making her way outside of Earth. Ultimately, the perfect destination remains unfound, and "necessarily so: the fluid movements and local cadences of poetic language in the text mirror the ongoing processes of multi-ethnic self-creation in Britain's global now" (Hena 531).

When she arrives in Heath Row this time, in order to continue her journey, her words reveal her defeat and helplessness "No, Don't bother to strip, drug, bomb search me/ I'm not staying this time. Why press rewind?" (Agbabi lines 73-74). This time she has no desire to be seen, to be acknowledged and accepted, she has no intention to wait until humans "cease their retroactive spacism" (line 76). After travelling to all the places she has been to, her conclusion is that it is not worth trying to conform to the rules of humans, to their expectations in order to find her place. She has tried and she is tired and believes that "Their world may be a place worth fighting for/ I suggest in the next millenium" (lines 77-78). And in this way, with all

the features that make her unique she leaves with a final statement: "Call me. I'll be surfing the galaxy/ searching for the perfect destination" (lines 83-84).

The structure of the journey the poem narrates, a journey in search of belonging, is an outward journey where, from an Eurocentric perspective, the U.F.O. woman moves from the centre of, the metropolis London, progressively outwards into the margins, the periphery and ends up completely leaving planet Earth behind. With her outward movement comes an increasing alienness, which is projected onto her by the different people she encounters along the way. However, as her travels reveal, a place that offers the feeling of belonging, a home that has a "fixed and singular origin for anyone in a multicultural world is […] illusory" (Thompson 133). In exploring life, both in colonial (London) and postcolonial (Lagos) cities, Agbabi does not glorify either of them and offers a coherent criticism of the old structures and hierarchies that are very much present both in the metropolis and in a "place that extends the hierarchical structures of the old" (Nerlekar 198). The time the U.F.O. woman spends in Sussex is just as telling as the one she spends in the big cities: in this poem we see "the urban space extending to the postcolonial countryside" (200). Spending time among different groups of people, with cultures that differ from each other to different degrees allows the speaker of this poem to come to terms with the fact that, wherever she goes, there are social and cultural structures in place that will make her an alien which makes her conclude that the entirety of society is in need of reform. As Ramey has explained, "In "U.F.O. Woman (Pronounced OOFOE)," Agbabi moves from anger to pathos to disorientation, demonstrating her increasingly deft handling of the minute shades of isolation" (Ramey. "Patience Agbabi" 8). As Agbabi herself understands it, the poem is an account of her moving physically "to different places and each time I have different insights which build into who I become" ("Interview with Patience Agbabi" 162-163). This is, thus, a semi-autobiographical poem in which the author reflects about her own place in society through the character of the U.F.O. Woman (Novak 85). We can conclude, then, that Agbabi is contemplating her own experiences in Britain and in Nigeria, the two countries she felt affiliated with and from which she might have felt rejected just as the speaker in this poem.

Beauty and evil might not be as overtly explored in this poems as they are in some of the other ones that are considered in this thesis. However, they still play a significant part and are still worth considering. The speaker's looks are a determining factor in how she is perceived in the world: her appearance is unusual and it is the main reason why she is

categorised as an outsider, an alien. It is the feature responsible for her not being able to find her home, her place in the world. Her lack of an appearance that can be easily classified and what this means for her social positioning is a clear example of the ways in which conforming to the beauty standards of a certain society affect our daily lives. The U.F.O. woman is never "granted an opportunity for cultural assimilation. From the very beginning, Agbabi marks her heroine out as an alien through her clever use of richly associative imagery" (Novak 85). Despite the fact that she receives much attention from those around her, mostly because of the way she looks while she is in England, this is not a positive thing: it is just a reminder of the fact that she does not fit in. In Nigeria specifically, where her appearance is not as big of an issue, it is her behaviour that alienates her. As it has already been argued, much of beauty standards has to do with conforming to certain behaviours. In Nigeria, she is perceived as too uptight, too posh, both characteristics that are not valued in this country. Agbabi challenges conventional aesthetic norms by crafting a protagonist whose beauty is derived from her otherness and, when she places her in societies in which those ideals are central to the organisation of life and markers of belonging, the U.F.O. woman is inevitably alienated. Nevertheless, something that is worth noting here is that, as Tate argues, there is not one single beauty ideal or standard and the speaker of this poem experiences this reality first hand: the expectations related to her looks are vastly different in England and in Nigeria. While her appearance is shocking to the people of England, her looks do not make the people of Lagos look at her any more than any other person. The specific ways Agbabi describes her speaker turn the quite common appearance of a Black woman, with afro hair, plaits, two-coloured hands… into features that seem to be more typical of a creature that is not human, not from this planet. She describes her skin as "iridescent" and "translucent", features which are motivators for racism, and in this way she is "perhaps indicating the absurdity and arbitrariness of judgements based on skin colour" (Novak 85-86).

The U.F.O. woman is unable to find a way to belong in either of the places she visits but she is continually observed, analysed and stared at. The gaze of the locals of all three places she visits are othering and objectifying: she is regarded as a curiosity, an object of interest that can be inspected with minute detail and in front of which it is acceptable to express opinions, even those which might be offensive or harmful to her. All the locals she encounters feel like they have a right to ask questions, touch her hair without consent and even attack her and show their dislike of her. Her appearance is a defining element in her interactions with the world around her. But it is not her appearance in itself that is

problematic: it is the othering gaze of those she interacts with that negatively affects her experience. This is, precisely, the way evil is represented in this poem. The U.F.O. woman does not display any evil traits herself, her mission being simply to find a home, a place where she can feel like she belongs. However, her lack of a fixed, defined identity, the hybridity that is at the very centre of her being places her in a position that makes others feel threatened, that prompts exclusion and even violence. Evil is, therefore, represented by the different societies she spends time in, it is embedded in societal structures and attitudes. The speaker of the poem is made to suffer the edicts of prejudice and discrimination everywhere she goes. These are the manifestation of the evils that lie at the very core of our societies where racism is a reality that cannot be negated.

As this poem shows, therefore, appearance/beauty, belonging and evil are tightly connected. The interplay between these concepts is central to the U.F.O. Woman's navigation of the world and even her own identity. Her unique looks, the beauty that is such a source of pride for her is derived, precisely, from this uniqueness, her difference and otherness. However, it is also this that triggers the responses she gets in society and that causes for the evils of society to come to the surface. Nevertheless, as well as the pain this journey causes to the speaker, it is also what strengthens her empowerment and self-affirmation. Despite the racism and discrimination she is faced with, the U.F.O. Woman stays true to herself and does not question her value and remains resilient throughout.

7.2 Medusa Sequence

7.2.1 Dorothea Smartt: Life and Work

Dorothea Smartt, also known as the "Brit born Bajan International" ("Dorothea Smartt. *Poetry Archive* paragraph 1), is a poet and live artist based in the UK ("Dorothea Smartt" paagraph 2). As her nickname suggests, she was born and raised in London but is of Barbadian heritage (paragraph 2). Nowadays, she spends her time working in schools, running workshops and performing her poetry both in the UK and abroad while she works as a poetry editor for Sable, a magazine focusing on new Black writing (paragraph 5).

Smartt started her career as a writer in the "Black/feminist co-operatives of the Eighties" ("Dorothea Smartt. *Poetry Archive* paragraph 1). Ever since then, she has been a "prominent voice for black women poets" (Evans-Bush. "Dorothea Smartt." paragraph 2). The author has claimed to have two voices, one of them being her 'London-voice' and the other one her 'Bajan-voice'. The first of these voices is the one that speaks in Standard English and she understands the latter to be the "voice of her childhood and her dreams" (paragraph 10). The author herself has spoken about her use of Bajan English and the importance that this variety of English has both in her life and in her work. As she states, this way of speaking comes from her parents, from whom she learnt how to speak English, and which allows her to express herself in a different way from Standard English (paragraph 10).

The poetry written by Dorothea Smartt explores many issues that are relevant to the real life experiences people go through in our society, particularly black women's experiences. In fact, the poet is "acknowledged as tackling multilayered cultural myths and the real life experiences of Black women with honesty" ("Dorothea Smartt" paragraph 2). One of the key elements of this is Black women's hair, a theme she explores broadly delving into the stereotypes which surround it and which eventually leads her to identify with the mythical image of Medusa ("Dorothea Smartt. *Poetry Archive* paragraph 2). In so doing, Smartt manages to "explore a wide range of aspirations and wrong-headed assumptions, as well as creating a multi-faceted portrait of one particular woman; a more generalised idea of all Black women; and a wider mythical image" (paragraph 1).

Not only has this author managed to have a few collections of her poems published, but she has also seen her work published in many well-known anthologies and journals such as *Bittersweet* (published by Women's Press in 1998), *The Fire People* (published by Payback Press in 1998), *Mythic Women/Real Women* (published by Faber in 2000), *IC3: The Penguin Book of Black Writing in Britain* (published by Penguin in 2000), and *A Storm Between Fingers* (published by Flipped Eye in 2003) ("Dorothea Smartt" paragraph 4). As well as poetry she has also written a play entitled *fall out* which was performed in primary schools around London and has also worked in other collaborative performances (paragraph 3). She has done extensive work with women's co-operatives in Brixton and she was even named Poet in Residence at Brixton Market (Evans-Bush. "Dorothea Smartt." paragraph 2).

As it is clear by the previous paragraphs, Smartt's work is quite extensive but it is her solo work, "medusa" that concerns us here. This sequence of poems, which was originally conceived as a performance piece, has been acknowledged as an "Outstanding Black Example" (qtd. in "Dorothea Smartt" paragraph 3). It was published as part of the first collection *Connecting* Medium, published by Peepal Tree Press in 2001. As the author herself stated, she has a personal fascination with Medusa, which comes from her younger years, as she was called Medusa due to the locs-up she chose to style her hair in (Smartt). This name-calling made her reflect on the origin of Medusa as we know her, a monster that has inspired fear throughout history, and she came to think about the wider meanings of the myth. Being familiar with the fact that Medusa was of North African origin, a Libyan princess, in fact, Smartt read the myth as "a metaphor for two cultures clashing, and the culture of Perseus being that of the victors" (Smartt). This, together with the looks she would get when walking around London both from black and white people who were shocked by her hair lead the poet to wonder what Perseus's reaction would be were he to see her as she was: "If Perseus saw me with my nappy-headed dreadlocks self, what kind of horror or fear might I inspire? What tales would he tell to impress his mates, when he got home? And of course, you know, the version that Perseus put out there would be 'the facts'" ("Dorothea Smartt's Fascination"). This was the process that brought Smartt to see herself reflected in Medusa, to see herself and the monster as one: a "diasporic Caribbean woman-identified Blackwoman" ("Dorothea Smartt's Fascination").

Both in this sequence of poems and in the collection as a whole, Smartt deals with both "socio-political and personal issues in the intertwined themes of distant heritage, home and hair with a firm, often angry, hold on reality, as well as a sympathetic awareness of underlying recurrent hopes and dreams" ("Dorothea Smartt". *Poetry Archive* paragraph 2).

7.2.2 The Importance of Medusa

Despite Medusa being a well known character in our collective imaginary, it is worth spending some time going over some key data about the Greek myth, its origin and the evolution of the character of Medusa as portrayed by different authors and artists over the

years. This will enable us to better understand the significance and purpose of what Smartt does in the sequence of poems that will be analysed subsequently.

One of the earliest accounts we have of Medusa's story is the one in Hesiod's *Theogony* which dates back to the eighth–seventh century BCE. As Hesiod recounts in this text, Medusa was the daughter of Phorcys and Ceto, who were both pre-Olympian gods. In addition, she was a sibling of two other Gorgons, the Old Women who are associated with the Fates and known as *Graiai* (Zapkin 2). Gorgons were "terrible monsters who lived in the Western Ocean, conceived as the frontier of the inhabited world" (Karoglou 5). They were described as having large heads covered in dragon scales, boar's tusks, brazen hands, and golden wings" (5) and anyone who looked at their faces would be turned into stone (5). All of her siblings were immortal but, for reasons unknown, she was not. Medusa had sexual intercourse with the god Poseidon and, as a consequence, when her head was chopped, Chrysaor and Pegasus were born from her neck (Zapkin 2). A few centuries later, Apollodorus offers further information about Medusa in his *Library of Greek Mythology*, dating from first–second century CE. Among other things, the fact that Medusa and her Gorgon sisters were all "hideous monsters" (2) is confirmed. In Apollodorus's own words "the Gorgons had heads with scaly serpents coiled around them, and large tusks like those of swine, and hands of bronze, and wings of gold which gave them the power of flight; and they turned all who beheld them to stone" (qtd. in Zapkin 2). Apollodorus then goes on to talk about the rivalry between Medusa and the goddess Athena, Perseus's story and how he killed her while she was sleeping, using a shield to avoid looking directly at her and also how he continued to use her severed head to help defeat his enemies on other occasions, before he finally passed it on to Athena who placed it on her shield to use it with the same purpose (Zapkin 2). However, references to Medusa's beauty can be found as early as those to her monstrosity since the poet Pindar refers to her in the fifth-century B.C. as "beautiful-cheeked Medusa" (Karoglou 11).

Ovid's *The Metamorphoses,* written in 8 CE, presents the story with some key modifications. According to this text Medusa was the only one of the Gorgon sisters who had snakes for hair. The reason for this is that she was the most beautiful of them and she had hair that was praised by many (Karoglu 6), after being raped by Neptune in Minerva's temple, she

was punished by having her lovely hair turned into snakes by the goddess and this is also where the power to petrify the people who look at her comes from (Zapkin 3). This is a significant change from the narratives of Hesiod and Apollodorus, none of who stated that Medusa was raped but merely mentioned that she lay with him, an account that creates great ambiguity over the facts. Of course, these changes might have something to do with the nature of *The Metamorphoses* itself, a text that deals with transformations and, therefore, one that calls for Medusa to be converted from a stunning beauty to a monstrous creature (Zapkin 3). As well as this, Ovid's text provides the goddess Minerva with a justification as to why she hates Medusa: the "desecration of [her] virginal temple by sexual violence" (3). In reality, Medusa is the victim in this version of the myth, as she is the one who suffers rape, but still "her violation is portrayed as a desecration of sacred space that brings down the virgin goddess's wrath upon her" (Karoglou 6-7). In addition to showing us how Medusa's image evolved over time, the differences in the myths also let us know that different versions of the same story were widely accepted at the time when they were being written. In fact, "it is part of the inherent nature of myth to grow and change as societies grow and change" (Zapkin 3), and so evidence Smartt's poems too.

One thing that all the versions of the myth seem to have in common, however, is that in all of them Medusa "exists as an object" (Zapkin 3). Medusa has no real role in these stories other than having her head cut off by Perseus who then uses it to his own advantage as does Athena later. This is particularly true in Ovid's version as not only is Medusa punished and turned into a monster without being able to do anything to prevent it, but she is also raped (3). This shows how little agency Medusa has over her own life and choices.

However, even though these are the best-known accounts of Medusa's myth, it has been claimed, at least in Roman accounts (Nisco 144), that the story is actually connected to Africa where she was a Serpent-Goddess worshipped by the Lybian Amazons (144). In this depiction, Medusa would be a black woman and, in fact, "in many of her visual representations, her hair resembles dread locks in connection to her African origins" (144). One of the texts that tracks the myth back to Africa is the epic poem *Pharsalia* written by the Roman poet Lucan (144), who mentioned that "Medusa is said to have lived in the far west of

Africa, at the point where the Ocean laps against the hot earth, in a wide, untilled, treeless region which she had turned entirely to stone merely by gazing around her" (qtd. in Zapkin 11). The placing of Medusa in Africa is something that black women from different backgrounds have found interesting and have thus adapted and re-told the story, as the sequence of poems we will be considering in the following section evidences (Zapkin 11). As Zapkin argues "it is reasonable to read post-colonial reclamations of Medusa as participating in the Afro-Classicist project, wherein classics scholars have documented the African and Middle Eastern/Asian roots of Greek culture" (11). This creates a canonical counter-discourse, in which authors re-write canonical texts or change the perspective of the text to give voice to characters that have been relegated to marginal roles as a consequence of "structures such as imperialism and patriarchy" (Zapkin 1). In the specific case of Smartt, similarly to what we will see with Patience Agbabi, a post-colonial author is writing back to the colonial centre and modifying canonical imperial texts to include their experience (2).

The process by the means of which Medusa goes from being represented simply as a monster to a beautiful woman who is then turned into a monster is evidenced in the numerous artistic representations of the Gorgon's image. As Karoglu explains, from the fifth century B.C. Medusa has undergone "a visual transformation from grotesque to beautiful, becoming in the process increasingly anthropomorphic and feminine" (4). This corresponds with the transformations of other half-human mythical beings such as sphinxes or sirens and it happened "as a result of the idealizing humanism of Greek art of the Classical period (480-323 B.C.)" (Karoglu 4). Medusa and many other theriomorphic creatures (creatures that combine human and animal features in one same body) entered the Greek world in the late eight and seventh centuries B.C., originating from places such as Egypt and the Near East (4). At this point, these beings were thought to be protective and to have the ability to "turn away evil" (4). As such, they were often placed in sepulchral monuments and sacred architecture as well as on military equipment. Most of these beings were conceived as female creatures and their bodies combined the human female form with animal parts (4), that is, these monsters were hybrid creatures. As such, these creatures functioned as a representation of the alien, the "Other, and in ancient Greece were considered to be destructive. The fact that they were mostly women when it came to the human components of their bodies adds another layer of meaning to this: since the ancient Greek society was dominated by men, representing

monsters as women served to "demonize women" (Karoglu 5). It is worth mentioning, though, that these women who inhabit the Greek myths are often driven to rage by the actions of men, who repeatedly mistreat them and this is what leads to them being perceived as monsters (5).

These monsters evolved and the way in which they were conceived changed over time. One key change in their portrayal was the softening of their animalistic features as these creatures became more and more beautiful (5). This was in accordance to the standards of the time, a time "when ugliness was largely avoided" (5). Ancient Greeks understood the beautiful to be something that delighted the senses, dominated by "harmony and proportion among the constituent forms" (5) and also closely linked to the concept of *kalokagathia*, meaning that physical beauty and goodness of character are closely linked, whereas physical ugliness reveals immorality or some fault in one's character (5). Looking at different representations of Medusa in art along the centuries, archeologist Adolf Furtwängler observed that the evolution of the portrayal of Medusa can be divided into three stages: the first of these stages is the Archaic in which she was a monster, followed by the Middle stage (fifth century B.C.) in which she was in the process of becoming more beautiful but there were still some grotesque elements to her, and the Beautiful (7). The Classical Greek period, then, saw Medusa slowly be transformed into a young woman known for her beauty. However, she was both a victim and a perpetuator of violence as she had the power to destroy people and consequently she became "a tragic figure" (9). During this period the way in which Medusa was represented was affected by a general trend towards humanisation and feminisation that ran parallel to the comeback of the violence that was typical of the Archaic period (Karoglou 11).

Many centuries later, during the 18th century more specifically, representations of Medusa "attempted to provoke pity in the viewer for the monster's impending demise" (11). Here we see some sort of empathy towards the Gorgon who, despite having been a victim from the very beginning, had invariably been considered a monster up until then. In fact, it is worth noting that despite the fact that people were turned into stone upon looking at Medusa, nothing indicates that this was something Medusa willingly caused. Not only was Medusa

raped by Neptune and turned into a monster as penalty, she was also blamed for something she had no control over (Zapkin 3).

As this evidences, Medusa, and the connection of beauty and horror that she embodies, had an impact in the creation of art many centuries after its creation. Indeed, she became "the archetypal femme fatale: a conflation of femininity, erotic desire, violence, and death" (Karoglou 5). From very early on versions of the myth we see how beauty is perceived as fatal and it is invariably as enchanting as it is potentially dangerous, especially when embodied by a woman (5). Even though the concept *femme fatale* was not coined until the 20th century, Medusa is the living image of it. Born at a time when women's role in society was expanding and many were fighting for the equality (44-45), the notion of the *femme fatale* is, however, one that has been prevalent throughout the centuries, and one that we can find even in texts dating from Ancient Greek times. Monsters, of this and other kinds, have accompanied us throughout the history of humanity and they're both "a metaphor for nature's threatening forces" (4) and a representation of "innate human fears and anxieties, sexual aggression, and guilt" (4). When we look at Medusa in the context of our patriarchal society specifically, we can see that she stands for everything what has been understood as "monstrously female" (Nisco 143), that is she is considered a threat to the established social order. The trope of the *femme fatale* has been discussed extensively in previous sections of this paper, however, the words of art historian Reinhold Heller are worth dwelling on briefly. As he illustrates, *femme fatale*s are the combination of "the sensual charm of women with the intellectual capabilities of men into a sterile union capable only of generating death" (qtd. in Karoglou 44). Therefore, the *femme fatale* is a figure that brings together characteristics such as "beauty, lust, independence, and self-assurance, as she came to symbolize not only male desire but also male fears and anxieties about the educated, nonmaternal, sexually emancipated modern woman" (Karoglou 44). This combination of the monstrous and the beautiful, the constant overlapping of that what is alluring and attractive with that what is repulsive and anxiety inducing places female hybrids, such as Medusa in an indeterminate point (45). It is with this last idea in mind that we now turn to the analysis of the poems that constitute the sequence of poems on Medusa.

7.2.3 Medusa Sequence Poem Analysis

7.2.3.1 "ten paces"

"ten paces" is the first in a series of nine poems published in the collection *Connecting Medium*. This poem opens the sequence by creating a mystery: the reader is left wondering about the identity of the "I" that narrates the poem, the reason behind the statement that is made and wether or not we are in the presence of an evil speaker. All these questions prepare the reader for what they are about to encounter in the rest of the sequence, it subtly introduces the themes Smartt will be dealing with throughout the remaining seven poems.

The seven lines of this poem present us with an unidentified speaker who makes a statement about how she would use the powers attributed to Medusa if they were in their possession. Even though the speaker knows that this would probably not be the right thing to do, as evidenced by the first line: "I fear" (Smartt. "ten paces", line 1), the speaker believes they would indeed use their power to turn men into stone. Not only would they act on their power, they would intentionally never walk behind men's backs, ensuring that every single one of them is turned into stone "but never / behind them" (lines 6-7).

One of the things that make this poem noteworthy is that this is the only poem in the sequence that has a first person speaker. Considering the statement the narrator is making, their unknown identity becomes particularly interesting. Since the reader has not yet been introduced to Medusa as the central character in the series, they can't help but wonder if we are encountering Dorothea Smartt herself claiming that she would destroy all men on Earth, a particular woman who feels negatively towards men, some kind of collective "I" that speaks generally for (Black) women or the voice that later relates what Medusa went through.

As the speaker shows willingness to turn every single man into stone we could argue that their behaviour is evil. This statement shows that they have nothing against one specific man but rather, they would like all of them to be petrified. There seems to be no justification

or reason behind this, only the speaker's certainty that she would make sure all men look at her and, as a result, are turned into stone.

In short, this poem creates a mystery for the reader and, as such, it works perfectly as an introduction to the rest of the sequence in which themes of womanhood, evil and destruction will be explored in more detail.

7.2.3.2 "medusa? medusa black!"

After hinting at the powers of Medusa, the second poem in the sequence, "medusa? medusa black!", centres in the re-making of this Ancient Greek myth. The title of the poem already points in the direction the text will follow: Medusa was a black woman despite the fact that many representations throughout history have portrayed her as white. If we carefully read the myths that Medusa inhabits, we soon realise that she was most likely from somewhere in North Africa, probably Libyan princess. Before diving into the poem it is worth mentioning the meaning of the name Medusa which "derived from the Greek 'medein', meaning 'to protect, to rule over', Medusa's name denotes her as a queen of the ancient world, a great and powerful ruler" (Griggs 180). Medusa was the "patron of the cycles of nature, with the ability to create and annihilate life" (181) and in African mythology she was "the Lybian serpent goddess of female wisdom" (Sairsingh 154). The meaning of her name, however, has very little in common with the image of Medusa that is well-known to us through the Greek myths. Since her original image as the patron of the cycles of nature, someone who personified wisdom and female strength was not suited to patriarchal Greece her image was modified and went from being a positive one to one in which she was portrayed as a monster. This is the image of Medusa we are all familiar with nowadays (Griggs 181-182). Despite the fact that we have got to know Medusa mainly through Greek myths, this was already a reinvention of the original myth, prior to which she was known to be "a Libyan serpent goddess worshipped by the Amazons. As such, Medusa symbolized female wisdom, female mysteries, and the cycle of nature as life, death and rebirth. She was the Guardian of the Threshold, and the *mediatrix* between the realms of heaven, earth, and the underworld" (Sairsingh 155).

This second poem is a long succession of lines; there are no stanzas and the poem's structure reflects a somewhat agitated speech or outburst: the speaker tells the reader what she needs to tell them without pausing, as one would do if they were angry or had very strong feelings about what they were saying. This creates a fast pace that urges the reader to continue reading with the same violence and unrest the speaker is writing with. However, we do find the repetition of a few lines that emphasise how much of an impact British racial discourse has on the speaker of the poem. This repeating of lines feels like something that is constantly in the back of the narrator's head, something she can't get away from. Despite the fact that there is no visual division in the poem, there is a clear thematic and linguistic change that breaks the poem into three: the first seven lines of the poem are written in Barbadian English and in them we find a brief interaction between two speakers debating wether or not Medusa really had the ability to kill. After that, lines eight to fifteen speak about Medusa directly, narrating her thoughts and concerns while the following lines until the end of the poem deal with blackness and beauty in a more general way. What is said between lines sixteen and fifty-six does apply to Medusa still, but it also refers to any other black woman and addresses the social expectations imposed on them.

Like the majority of the poems in the sequence, "medusa? medusa black!" has a third person narrator who is unidentified. However, this strong and assertive voice is here to reclaim the space that belongs to black women in history as well as comment on the damaging "beauty treatments" that society imposes on them, which are in many cases damaging to their health.

It is also worth mentioning that, as has already been noted, some parts of the poem are written in Barbadian English, a feature that is common in Smartt's work as she "frequently deploys Bajan Creole rather than standard English, aligning the speaker of her poems with Barbadian folk culture" (Zapkin 11). The speaker alternates between standard English and Patois which creates a sense of breakage and discontinuity. The use of this specific variety of English comes from the author's own origin and life experience: Dorothea Smartt herself is of Barbadian descent. By using both varieties of English she is making a statement about

Britain's culture and society: both varieties of the language exist and are found in the same context, within the same conversation and, often, coming from the same person.

The opening of the poem makes a strong proclamation as the speaker reclaims Medusa's identity as a black woman. "Medusa was a Blackwoman, afrikan, dread" (Smartt . "medusa? medusa black!", lines 1-2). This is stated by one of the two Barbadian speakers we encounter in the first seven lines of the poem. In this conversation, the second speaker questions Medusa's power and evil qualities "She looks really kill?" (line 5), who has apparently turned her own self into stone after catching a quick glance at herself in a mirror: "cut she eye at a sista mirror / turn she same self t'stone" (lines 3-4). What the reader learns from this conversation is that Medusa is the only victim of her own power, she is the one who is turned into stone and, thus, the one who suffers the consequences of her own evil powers, if it is really the case that they are evil. This first section of the poem ends with one of these two speakers claiming that she experienced Medusa's evil powers in her own skin: "She terrible eyes leave me stone coal" (line7).

However, in the next few lines we find an image of Medusa that contrasts greatly with the portrait these two speakers were painting. As the poem goes on we find a woman who is yearning for love and affection: we learn that she was feeling lonely and isolated, if not physically, as it was the case with the cave she lived in in the myth, definitely in an emotional level: "Medusa lost /looking for love" (lines 8-9). As well as this we learn that Medusa had been running away from her own image, avoiding to look at herself in case she saw what others saw in her. This, according to the speaker, is the worst thing that could have happened to her: to see herself as the eyes of others do: "in case the worst thing happen / an' she see she self like them see she" (lines 14-15). Implied in these lines are the prejudices and judgements that society made towards the figure of Medusa: it was them that were responsible for keeping negative narratives about her alive and who helped build this image of her as an evil being, because that is how they saw her. The power of these stories that are told regarding Medusa and that contribute to the collective fear these lines show is so strong that even Medusa herself is scared of the possible consequences she might have to suffer. It is evident, therefore , that this second section of the poem provides us with the description of Medusa

which differs greatly from the image of a monster: she is lonely and aches for connection, she is scared and, rather than powerful or monstrous, she seems quite small. This image of Medusa that Smartt conjures in this poem is closer to the one we find in texts of Latin authors rather than to the original story told in Greek myths.

As we enter the third section of the poem in line sixteen, we move onto a different narrative voice who speaks about what was going on inside Medusa's head and the thoughts that haunted her. These following lines show the comments she received in society, which had been alluded to in the previous section and which are negative and discriminating. One of the things these comments make reference to her skin colour: "if you black, get back / if you brown stick around… / […] … And if you white comelong y'alright…" (lines 16-17; 22), words that are part of our common imagination and which take us right back to Jim Crow U.S. as well as to post-Windrush Britain. These comments show explicit rejection of black people and are meant to convey the most clear sense of not belonging. It is as a consequence of words like these that Medusa was lonely and looking for love because she was made to feel like she was an outsider by society. These lines are reminiscent of the insults and abuse Ababa's U.F.O. Woman had to endure in the previous poem and, similarly to those, they are an example of the overt racism that is possible and real in British societies.

However, the issue is bigger than one of colour. Not only is she discriminated against because she is not white but the narrator also talks about the things she had to do to fit in. These things have to do mainly with physical appearance and hair is, of course, one of the key elements of it:

> Is that okay? Being black your way,
> whitewashed an' dyed-back black,
> am I easier to hold in an acceptable role?". (lines 19-22)

As we see the narrative voice stands in Medusa's position in these lines and speaks in first person, a first person that comes to represent all Black women and the aesthetic violence they suffer, especially in Western societies. As a result of this, black women engage in many "beauty procedures" in order to change their hair and making it look more similar to what is

deemed acceptable in our society, being forced to accept the respectability politics that are at play. The speaker of the poem gives us a list of such treatments:

> Scrub it bleach it operate on it powder it
> straighten it fry it dye it perm it
> turn it back on itself". (Smartt lines 26-28)

This shows the need for Black women to do anything that will stop their hair from looking 'Black', removing its texture, volume and shape and even going through treatments that are potentially harmful to their health, such as bleaching their hair even if it will "desperately burn scalps" (line 36) as the speaker mentions just a few lines after. All this is done in order to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards and it "makes explicit how central hair is in the identification between the speaker and Medusa" (Zapkin 6). In so doing, these women who undergo the treatments leave behind their origins, which are worn in their hair and skin colour: "remembrances of Africa fast-fadin'" (Smartt. "medusa? medusa black!" line 41), their identity shrinks as they try to look less and less natural and the idea that their natural hair is not good enough becomes stronger in society: "My hair as it comes / is   just not good enough" (lines 46-47). These lines show what Goodman so expertly argued when she said that "Smartt shows how expectations about black women's appearance are connected to a sense of self-definition in relation to the cultural values of (white) women's appearance" and often found wanting" (qtd. in Zapkin 7). Hair, therefore, and as Agbabi's poem had already shown, plays a fundamental role in the process of developing feelings of belonging. Smartt's medusa is not able to find a place in (British) society and this is a theme that is present throughout this entire sequence of poems. The identification of Black women with Medusa, apart from the historical data provided above, is that "Smartt asserts a clear visual link between dreads, a natural hairstyle for many Black people, and the snaky hair of the mythic Gorgon" (6). As it has been mentioned in sections above, natural Black hair has historically been a marker of ugliness and it was although the work that Black people in Western societies have carried done for decades towards the reclaiming and acceptance of it has definitely had positive impacts in the way it is perceived, there is still much prejudice surrounding it.

Following the comments about hair, the speaker moves on to skin colour, another perceived issue Black women often have to confront. Similarly to what the speaker mentioned about hair, we now encounter skin bleaching, a dangerous and highly damaging procedure that women of colour often put themselves through. The aim of this 'treatment' is to lighten the skin in order to give it a shade that is more socially accepted or that will give the person undergoing it a look that is considered more beautiful. This is not to say that women who bleach their skin are aiming to look white, most often they just want to be a lighter shade of brown that more closely resembles the beauty ideal(s) they aspire to. In the speakers words we get a good impression of how barbaric and aggressive these treatments are:

> Scrub it, step smiling into baths of acid
> and bleach it red raw
> peel skin of life-sustaining melanin. (lines 30-32)

The aggressiveness of the words used to describe the 'beauty treatments' that are mentioned in the poem reflects the damaging nature and violence of these processes by the means of which women modify the look of their hair and skin. Women must put themselves through these horrific procedures in order to 'tame' their natural looks (Nisco 149-150). These words almost seem to parody the advice that Black women are given, not particularly by white people, but by other members of their communities who have been influenced by Eurocentric ideals of beauty or subscribe to the ideals of beauty within their communities, which often value the more light-skinned women as the most beautiful. By undergoing these treatments women rid their skin of melanin, which the speaker considers to be the very thing that gives them life, they are removing an essential part of themselves, one without which their existence cannot be the same. This shows the double discrimination black women suffer, both for their sex and their skin colour (Nico 148). "The injunction to 'Banish the snake-woman,"'in fact, tells readers to embrace the snake-woman, which we know because this line comes in a passage ironically parodying beauty advice for Black women to meet Euro-centric standards" (Zapkin 6). The speaker in Smartt's poem, therefore, calls for self-acceptance and deconstruction of the damaging beauty ideals, be them Eurocentric or otherwise, that dominate how we must present and how we are perceived in our societies.

These 'treatments' and 'beauty procedures' that Black women put themselves through are in order to change their appearance, which in society is given negative connotations. As we see in the following lines, it is her looks that make Medusa a snake-woman, the all-seeing-eye woman and therefore, since Medusa stands for all black women in this poem, it is Black women's looks that make them look like monsters in the eyes of society. Thus, beauty, or absence of it, is very closely linked with what is perceived as evil or dangerous. The fact that Dorothea Smartt identifies Black women with Medusa is a particularly telling one because "there is a long tradition of associating Medusa with negative attributes — of animalistic monstrosity, sexual temptation, foreignness/otherness, etc. Many of these same negative traits have been stereotypically linked to African and diasporic women in the service of white supremacy and patriarchal oppression/violence" (Zapkin 6).

Towards the end of the poem we encounter a sequence of lines that is repeated, as we already saw it earlier in the poem: "if you black get back / if you brown stick around / and if you white come long y'alright" (lines 49-51). These lines describe a continuum where we find the degrees of what is acceptable in society. While black people are not accepted at all, brown people can be tolerated and whiteness is the only colour that will grant a person full belonging. This goes hand in hand with the last two lines of the poem in which Medusa is clearly placed within the first category "Get back /Medusa! Black! [*Steups!*] Get back" (lines 56-57). The ending of the poem emphasises Medusa's Blackness, all Black women's Blackness, and states that they should "get back". That is, these women do not belong within society, they are not deemed acceptable and a big reason for that is their looks, particularly their hair and skin colour. This chant-like statement shows how "hundreds of years after slavery, black women continue to be victims of racial oppression in a society that still haunts them with an old rhyme about color" (Nisco 149-150).

This second poem in the sequence addresses beauty and evil in a similar way to the way in which Agbabi's "U.F.O. Woman" did. The societies in which these Black women, including Medusa live, have very well-defined and narrow beauty ideals and it is conforming to these that will grant them the 'privilege' of belonging. Certain textures of Black hair and darker skin complexions are not included within the rigid beauty standards and, therefore,

these women are excluded from society, relegated to the margins. The reason why this happens is that these looks have been demonised in society, perceived as monstrous and the collective imagination has managed to build myths, such as that of Medusa, which identity Black women with those monstrous figures. Ugly and potentially dangerous, they are something to be feared and for that reason, abuse towards them is justified.

As much as Medusa, and by extension all other Black women, is seen as the evil one who turns people into stone, the poem shows that she is a creature who is lonely and longs to be part of society, to feel accepted and not to suffer the consequences of the way she is perceived. However, she has internalised some of the discourse in society and she is even afraid she might turn herself into stone. This shows the detrimental effects that a constructed discourse might have on someone's perception of themselves and their ability to look at themselves in an objective way. True evil, therefore, is represented by society once again. It is in the ideas that are spread and the, in this case very explicit, racism that others so many Black women and turns them into monsters. The beauty of the speaker's natural Black features is constantly undermined by the 'evil' societal standards that privilege whiteness. This tension culminates in the speaker's efforts to transform herself, symbolising her internalisation of these oppressive standard, an approach that the speaker of the poem warns women against.

This poem shows how Smartt uses the centuries old figure of "Medusa to explore contemporary issues of racial representation, colonialism, and the exploitation of women. When Smartt addresses the painful self-erasure required for Black women to conform to white-created beauty standards in "medusa? medusa black!", this is clearly a contemporary concern" (Zapkin 9).

7.2.3.3 "medusa: cuts both ways"

Following this poem is "medusa: cuts both ways": the third poem in the series and one which follows a similar pattern to the second one. Just as we saw in "medusa? medusa black!" this poem also begins with a speaker who speaks Barbadian English and then moves on to

Standard British English. However, this poem does have a structure that is more visual, it is divided into seven stanzas of varying lengths.

In the first stanza a Barbadian speaker talks about Medusa's behaviour. Medusa who, as it has already been stated, was an 'Afrikanwoman' is described as being arrogant "full of sheself" (Smartt. "medusa: cuts both ways", line 2) and as someone who has "dutti-eye looks" (line 3) meaning that the looks she gives are dirty. However, her eyes are also beautiful as in the next line the speaker equates them to sapphires. As we see in these lines her behaviour is judged negatively and it contrasts with the beauty of her eyes, which despite the fact that they look like sapphires are used to give dirty looks. This speaker addresses the reader to ask them to believe what they are saying: that "she cult turn a man t'stone" (line 7). As in the previous poem, the powers of Medusa seem to be questioned here; not everyone appears to believe that she was in fact able to turn people into stone. However, our speaker tells us that she did turn a white man into stone who could potentially be Perseus and who is described in the following way:

> some whiteman
> nightmare riding
> he mind across the centuries
> in turn turning we mad. (lines 8-11)

As we see in these lines, this white man whose mind, that is whose ideas, have been passed down through the centuries is seen as a nightmare. This man who could, as has already been stated, be thought to be Perseus, has the power to turn people mad, particularly a "we" in which the speaker is included. Since the sequence makes use of the first person plural to refer to Black women in general, it can be argued that this "we" does, in fact, also refer to Black women in this instance. The 'whiteman', it follows, stands for the white men of history whose ideas and power have shaped the world and who also acts as a symbol of colonial powers and the white supremacy that has dominated much of world history. The fact that this man is still able to drive the speakers mad, that his power is still so present and influential, speaks of the ongoing psychological impact of this history of oppression on those who were on the other

192

side of history. In sum, these lines from Smartt's poem are a strong critique of the lasting psychological impact of colonialism and racial oppression. They highlight the enduring trauma that different groups have been subjected to because of these forms of systemic injustice.

Moving on from this introduction, and moving back to Standard English too, the speaker now uses a very similar tone to the one we found in the previous poem. In this stanza, however, we find a Medusa who is quite different: rather than feeling sad and lonely she is now angry: "dread anger / welling up in her stare" (lines 13-14). Her situation is therefore different even though the reasons for this change remain unclear to the reader. What we do learn, on the other hand, is that she is a "natural roots Blackwoman" (line 15) which makes another reference to her looks. As we see here she is not one of the women who undergoes all the previously mentioned 'beauty treatments' but someone who embraces her natural appearance. If we follow the reasoning in the previous poem this is the very reason why she is Medusa, the snake woman: she has "untamed" natural hair that resembles snakes and which is perceived as dangerous in society. She is someone who actively refuses to conform to society's norms and is therefore placed in the position of an outsider, an alien. It is this position as well as her looks that makes her dangerous and monster-like, a threat to the established social order.

Another interesting fact we learn in this stanza is that Medusa loves other black women: "loving Blackwomen" (line 16). It is never specified if this is meant in a romantic or platonic way but what we can conclude is that not only is she someone who embraces her original identity and her natural looks herself, but she supports other women who do the same thing. Following the aim of the voice in the first poem, this Medusa is also someone who spreads a positive message and environment for Black women, one where she urges them not to conform to beauty standards just because it is expected of them, but rather to embrace their natural looks or, at least, not to engage in harmful beauty practices. In doing so, she promotes a healthier relationship with these beauty treatments by allowing the freedom to engage in them to the extent that is desired by individuals without the pressures to conform to society's standards.

Nevertheless, she is explicitly considered evil as we see in stanza number three. This stanza returns to the Barbadian English speaker that we met at the beginning of the poem and continues to speak about the man that they already mentioned. This man, who is responsible for turning Black women mad, would be scared of Medusa, as would any other man: "yes, that is sum'ting / would frighten any man" (lines 23-24). What these lines imply is that it is not just the speaker's opinion that Medusa is a scary creature but that of society at large. Her evil is something the general public is aware of, something agreed upon by people as a whole. Even though the person she seems that she could have turned to stone is the man who is responsible for making all the Black women mad she is the one who is considered evil by everyone, but there is not judgement of his character at all, even when it is suggested that he represents centuries of colonial power that have been considerably more harmful to those same Black women.

The discourse that vilifies Medusa and that is so accepting of that white man is what the voice that speaks in Standard English addresses next:

> And still it goes on and on and on
> around us inside us
> their voices
> whistling against
> our thunder
> across an eternal sky. (lines 25-30)

In claiming this, this voice is bringing to the readers' attention the way discourses are constructed, operate and perdure in society, as well as the impact they have on individuals. As we see in these lines, this demonisation of Medusa is something that is repeated time and again, something that is said so many times that it is internalised by Black women themselves because it is the discourse they are surrounded with, damaging as it is and despite the ways in which it alters the representation of Black women. But, instead of accepting these ideas that are so common, the speaker tries to re-construct the figure of Medusa by comparing her to Black women who have shown their power, resistance and influence throughout history. In so doing, she reclaims a narrative that has been used to construct a negative representation of

Black women and turns it into a positive one. The first of the women who are mentioned in this long list is Nanny, an almost mythical figure in Jamaica who was also known as "queen-warrior Nanny of the Maroons, [and] who fought the British forces in the West Indies" (Sairsingh 156). Following her, she mentions Assata Shakur, and American political activist known for being a member of the Black Liberation Army (BLA). Her actions as a member of this collective saw Shakur arrested in 1977 and sentenced to life in prison. However, she managed to escape with the help of other members of the BLA and she has lived as a fugitive since then. She is currently in the FBI's list of most-wanted terrorists ("Assata Shakur"). After Shakur, Cherry Groce Dorothy is listed, a woman who was shot by the police, supposedly by accident, and was left paralysed as a consequence. This incident was what sparked the 1985 Brixton Riots (Jones, Seren paragraph 3). Next up is Eleanor Bumpers, an African-American senior citizen who had mental-health issues and who was shot and killed by the NYPD during a 1984 eviction (Feurer paragraphs 1-6). A name that is well-known to the reader of this dissertation comes next: Audre Lorde. She was a "self-described 'black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,' Audre Lorde dedicated both her life and her creative talent to confronting and addressing injustices of racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia" ("Audre Lorde" paragraph 1). Following Lorde there is another historical figure, Queen Nzinga, whose full name was Nzinga Mbande. She was "he monarch of the Mbundu people, was a resilient leader who fought against the Portuguese and their expanding slave trade in Central Africa" (Sairsingh 156). Another woman who also resisted the colonial forces in Africa was Sarraounia, or Sarraounia Mangou, "chief/priestess of the animist Azna subgroup of the Hausa, who fought French colonial troops of the Voulet–Chanoine Mission at the Battle of Lougou (in present-day Niger) in 1899" ("List of Women Warriors" paragraph 19). A few more general women follow these, starting with the 'QueenMother', followed by 'our mother 'and 'our mother's mother', these are figures that represent nurturing and protection, figures that look after the Black women the speaker is grouping together here and also the one responsible for their creation. By going back in history to her mother's mother she is also adding to the historical dimension that the presence of all of these women creates: it is all the Black women throughout history that she wants to conjure up here. To finish with the list, she mentions two deities. The first of these is Shango, who is an Orisha, a sort of Yoruba deity/ spirit. He is a man and he is portrayed as a warrior with an axe, which stands for his essential

attributes which are war and destroying his enemies but is generally associated with justice ("Shango" paragraphs 1-4). Lastly, Yemoja-Ocuti is mentioned, "A goddess in the Yoruba cosmology" (Sairsingh 156) who is commonly known in relation to witchcraft. Ultimately, Medusa represents a source of protection for the speaker, she carries in her body centuries of experiences with injustice and this is what enables her to guard Black women against the evils of society. As Taylor argues these are women "who in their own ways serve as examples of resistance to patriarchal order" (Taylor, Andrene 18).

Nisco has further stated that this list "recalls the sufferings and injustices experienced by black women in Western and patriarchal societies" (153). By associating Medusa with these real-life historical figures, Smartt connects myth and reality, breaking the divide between what is real and what is not. In so doing, she "produces a figure of Medusa with multiple faces and selves" (Nisco 152). In this process of putting Medusa at the same level as these women the poet manages to humanise a mythical figure, to bring human feeling to a creature that has been conceived as purely monstrous. As well as this, she creates a list that is composed of warriors and victims and the significance of this should not be underestimated. This list is a way of offering space to all of these women, not only those who have been championed and recognised for their work, but also those who suffered the darkest of consequences of a racist society. All of these women are, as Smartt makes evident here, part of a history of Black women and they still live in every one of them. Zapkin has explained the further implications of the placement of Medusa within this specific tradition

> These lines claim Medusa for African women, aligning her not only with individual African and diasporic women, as the previous lines had done, but symbolically identifying her as a collective ancestor. Smartt also almost adopts the position of Athena, claiming Medusa as the aegis, or divine shield of protection. However, she rejects the myth's Greek origin, renouncing "mythical aegeanpeople" in favor of locating Medusa within an African pantheon that includes the Yoruba thunder god Shango and water goddess Yemoja. (11)

The poem equates Medusa's name with black women who are relevant historical figures in many different ways, from victims of police violence to queens and rulers and political

activists, Medusa is in all of them. She is part of what they are and what they do, she is somewhat of an essence and in this poem Smartt is paying tribute to their unconquerable spirit in their resistance to discriminatory and exclusionary practices perpetrated against black women (Sairsingh 156). The confidence and self-worth that she shows in not surrendering to social rules is something that is in all of these women too, who were brave and fought their position in their own ways. Medusa is not something that is definite or concrete, she is more of a concept: she stands for resilience and strength and she gives the speaker a sense of protection "Medusa is my shield" (Smartt. "medusa: cuts both ways", line 40). As Griggs states "Smartt's message here is clear: Medusa stands for the pain, cruelty and injustices all women — our mothers, daughters, sisters — have suffered" (187).

Overall, in this poem we see that the narrative that surround Medusa and claim that she is evil and dangerous come mostly from the fact that she represents something that goes against society. She stands for all kinds of powerful women, all of them women who fought their own battles and strived to make things better for Black people in general and particularly for Black women. She is strong and influential and this is precisely the reason why she is seen as dangerous or evil. These evil characteristics are brought to life in her looks: she is the snake woman, someone who has an imposing and intimidating exterior because of the fact that she does not look like everyone else. Her looks emphasise the otherness created by her behaviour.

Smartt herself has spoken about the influence that the work of Audre Lorde has had on this poem. According to her, the inspiration for this piece came from reading Lorde's "Eye to Eye" essay. In that essay, she "wrote of those looks that we, as Black-women, reserve especially for each other, and the painfulness that cut-eye is. Growing up in London, with the racism and colonial British education, made me fearful of my own people, fearful of my own self" ("Dorothea Smartt's Fascination"). In said essay, Lorde speaks about the importance of looking at the shared experiences that might come from being Black women as a force that motivates union and community, a move away from the hatred that is all-too-present in society ("Eye to Eye" 143). In her opinion, having strong, powerful role models that help challenge that hatred is essential:

Do we re-enact these crucifixions upon each other, the avoidance, the cruelty, the judgements, because we have not been allowed Black goddesses, Black heroines; because we have not been allowed to see our mothers and our selves in their/our own magnificence until that magnificence became part of our blood and bone? One of the functions of hatred is certainly to mask and distort the beauty which is power in ourselves. (156)

7.2.3.4 "dream bed"

This short poem, composed by one stanza only, works as a transition piece between the first three poems of the sequence and "medusa dream". This poem is a connection between the poems that speak about Medusa in a more general way, the more introductory texts, and the ones that narrate specific episodes, stories sort of. From this poem onwards, the sequence focuses on episodes of the specific Medusa that Smartt reimagines.

Despite the more mystic feeling of this poem we still have references both to Medusa's hair and to snakes. Her hair grows and snakes hang from it but they are described as "glorious" (Smartt. "dream bed", line 5). For the first time this snaky hair has a positive connotation but this is precisely because, in this poem, we find Medusa in a private space, in the intimacy of the place where she sleeps. Here, there is no one else, no representatives of society that can judge her appearance and insult her because of the look of her hair.

The speaker of this poem urges the reader to do something that follows in line with what she has been asking throughout the sequence: she asks of the reader to ignore what has been said abut Medusa and find out the truth about her:

> "Reach in, under her back door,
> turn past pages.
> Reflect, research the truth
> down under covers" (lines 12-15).

Once this is done the speaker of the poem would like the reader to tell Medusa's stories ("Tell her stories" (line 16)), to spread her truth and potentially help change people's perception of

198

her. We should remember, at this point, that Medusa does in fact stand for all women in these poems and therefore the speaker aims to change the perception of Black women in society. Of course, the main thing that is to be changed is the stereotypes and prejudices that have such a great impact on their lives.

7.2.3.5 "medusa dream"

In "medusa dream" the opening stanza of the poem re-tells a part of Medusa's myth, specifically the moment in which Perseus, who has been sent in a mission to cut off and claim Medusa's head, arrives at her cave and kills her. As we see in this first stanza, Perseus is a man who is hoping to become a hero, "Full of intent/ to carve out a name for himself in blood" (Smartt. "medusa dream" lines 1-2), to build a reputation. However, the speaker of this poem brings to the attention of the reader what Perseus really is: a coward who must use tricks to carry out his mission because he is not strong or powerful enough to do it otherwise: "swindles her kind, never plays straight" (line 4). His deed is described as a "spectacle to dishonour" (line 10) as he does not actually fight the 'monster' but instead he uses a mirror and kills her in a way that is cowardly, pathetic, and which reveals his weakness and lack of heroism.

This first stanza is followed by a narrative section formed by two main paragraphs. The first of these two paragraphs further describes Perseus's actions and how he sneakily approached Medusa's cave in order to kill her. As the reader now learns, Perseus took advantage of the darkness of the night, ensuring in this way that Medusa would be unaware of his presence and would not notice him approaching, he had a chance to observe her and plan her movements and consequently he decided to approach her from behind, catching her by surprise and ensuring that he would win. This stanza confirms that Perseus was anything but heroic or brave and the fact that Medusa lay "restless, restless between trees" hints at a woman who is far from being a monster. Instead, we see that Medusa felt scared and uneasy and was nowhere near acting in any way that could have been threatening to Perseus. His actions, on the other hand, speak further to his cowardice and his willingness to take

advantage of someone who is in a clearly weaker position. This description of the events further challenges the commonly-held assumption that Perseus was a brave hero.

The next paragraph in this narrative section tells us about a dream that Medusa had that night, a dream that seems to function as a premonition of something that is about to happen, since when she woke up from it "it was then she sensed something. Something very wrong" (Smartt 63). The account of the dream relates a very disgusting incident in which Medusa accidentally defecates in the bed she and her mum share. Once she manages to remove it from the bed she disposes of it in the toilet where she finds her father in a very shameful state: also defecating and suffering from some sort of infection on his penis. This distressing dream makes her wake up with the feeling that something terrible is about to happen.

As the last stanza of the poem reveals, it is while this dream was taking place that Perseus got to Medusa's cave and succeeded in getting hold of her hair. Medusa, thus, wakes up to her hair being pulled: "Medusa could feel her hair, held up tight-fisted" (line 16). On looking around her to figure out what is going on, Medusa sees her body on the floor and realises that her head is no longer attached to it "her body without a head, trembled and shook" (line 19). This realisation brings us to the end of the poem in which Medusa screams and blood starts to flow out of her. This is also the moment, according to the myths, in which she is meant to give birth to the winged horse Pegasus and the giant Chrysaor. However, in Smartt's version, the violent act committed against Medusa is not productive at all, there is no positive outcome that follows the severing of her head, a result which reinforces the absurdity of the situation. The moment in which Medusa's head is chopped off is a key event in the myth as it represents the loss of power of the "monster" and the defeat of a threat to the male ordered. In cutting Medusa's head off "the power she possesses is symbolically seized and reappropriated by Perseus, the 'hero' of the myth" (Griggs 179).

As we see in this poem, even though Medusa has been portrayed as an evil monster throughout history she seems to have been more of a victim. This poem shows how she was attacked at the time when she was at her most vulnerable and defenceless: while she was

sleeping. Perseus, who has often been described as the hero who defeated one of the most terrifying monsters in history, is instead described as the coward he really was: a man who was only able to kill Medusa with the help of the Gods, as represented by the mirror, and while she was in a position in which she would never be able to fight back.

This poem, thus, rewrites the narrative that portrays Medusa as an evil monster that must be exterminated at all costs. Instead, evil is represented by Perseus, who kills Medusa for no other reason than the fact that he wants to be seen as a hero and benefit from the power the head gives him. As the previous poems have shown, Smartt's Medusa was is not known for having wanted to use her power against others: it was never her intention to turn other people into stone. Perseus, on the other hand plans to do so and use Medusa's head to continue to defeat other supposed enemies. Perseus, in this instance, is portrayed as a manipulative man whose actions represent the patriarchal forces that seek to control and exploit women. In beheading Medusa he seeks to claim her beauty as well as her power.

7.2.3.6 "medusaspeak"

ºThe next poem in the sequence picks up where the previous one left off. In the opening lines we find Medusa trying to save her own life while foam fills her mouth and she screams. In her desperate state, the speaker reports that Medusa screams for "you to hear her" (Smartt. "medusaspeak", line 5), most definitely asking for help. The "you" the speaker mentions refers to the reader of the poem who is thereby placed in a position where they need to make a difficult choice: allow Medusa, potentially monster and potentially victim, to die or to help her instead. Since the previous poems of the sequence have portrayed her more as a victim than a monster and that she stands for the entirety of Black women, we can deduce that the speaker is being compelled to place themselves in a situation in which a Black woman, often seen as an other by society, has been unfairly attacked and might need some sort of help. In these lines we once again see an image of Medusa that is far from the one we know from the Greek myth. Medusa is isolated and longs for human interaction. In addition, she is shocked at the terror everyone seems to feel in her presence, unable to understand the reason why people run away from her (Nisco 150-151).

The next stanza continues to describe Medusa's suffering in a stirring way: the reader is told about her lips crashing and about how her pleas for help receive no response:

> Her granite lips crash
> across teeth, sharper
> cries roar foaming,
> cross her meaning
> lost on the wind. (lines 6-10)

The desperation that is so evident in these lines reinforces Medusa's position as a helpless victim who has ben wronged by a man and who is unable to get help from anyone because, despite the strength of her screams, no one seems to be able to hear her.

Following this description of Medusa's anguish the "you" that appeared in the first stanza returns and we see that the imagined reader of the poem, who acts as a witness in this situation, has made a decision as to how they will react to Medusa's cries for help. Instead of helping her, the reader decides to flee the scene: "You turn / run afraid" (Smartt. "medusaspeak", lines 11-12). We find a reader, potentially ourselves, who is terrified of this woman who is desperately asking for help, we do not want to be in her presence and certainly not by ourselves. The result of this is that Medusa is left "standing, molten / tears across her rock face" (lines 16-17). In this situation, the speaker of the poem asks us a question: "How can she speak to you / gently of hard things" (lines 18-19). In asking this question the speaker is raising a few relevant issues. In the first place, we are taken back once again to the idea that Medusa stands for all Black women in this sequence and, thus, she has the knowledge and experience of women who have lived and struggled throughout history. It is this that she is trying to pass on to the reader of the poem, most likely intended to be a black woman, a warning based on her own experiences and the pain she has gone through. The other interesting thing that this question brings up is the fact that Medusa is speaking "gently of hard things" (line 19), that is, even though the content of her speech is negative, what she is saying comes from a place of care and affection. Medusa has nothing against the reader of the poem who ran away from her in fear. Rather, she is acting in a protective way, displaying no hints of evil behaviour or intent to hurt anyone. Finally, one more issue that is worth noting

here is that of turning one's back on someone who needs help. At this point, the reader can appreciate that Medusa is in a situation in which she has been left defenceless and that she requires help because her head has been chopped off. However, the poem suggests that the reader's reaction in the face of a situation like that one is to turn around and ignore it, because in our society we are not used to helping those who need the help. As the reader ignores Medusa and leaves her to continue to suffer, they join the evil forces that are at work in this poem.

Despite all of this, Medusa is still seen as a monster "Every monster has her place" (line 20). Two things are remarkable about this line that opens the following stanza: on the one hand, there is an association between monsters and womanhood as the line suggests that the majority, if not all, monsters are women as is evidenced by the use of the pronoun 'her' referring to the monsters. On the other hand, we also see that these monsters seem to have a function in society, they have their place. As creatures who stand in the edges of a society and tend to represent the anxieties in that particular society, monsters indubitably have a function. In this case, Medusa comes to tell "a simple truth" (line 21), a truth that comes from "the source, the god-send, the dark" (line 25). What we learn, therefore, is that this truth comes from a place deep inside, it is something that the "you", the reader of the poem, has had inside them all along, something that they knew but they are now confronted with. The truth the speaker of the poem came to reveal has to do with the identity of a "'she'" (line 27) who the reader of the poem. The speaker very gently and kindly offers the answer to the question:

> Who's 'she'?
> Honey,
> sweet honey,
> you are. (lines 27-30)

Here, thus, we come back to the idea that everyone is Medusa, every Black woman is Medusa and, in turning away from the screaming head, the reader is also turning away from herself. In this newly acquired position as Medusa, which the reader is directly confronted with for the first time here, she becomes both a monster and a victim and this is precisely Medusa's intention as we see in the following stanza.

After the great revelation that Medusa and the reader are one same collective self, Medusa's motive is plainly stated:

> standing ready
> to rip   to claw   to beat
> you to your monster self. (lines 33-34)

As we learn in these lines Medusa wants to reveal the reader's true self, urging her to leave societal expectations aside and live comfortably in her true identity. Part of this process of coming to terms with one's own real self has to do with hair, of course, and consequently the speaker urges the reader to "Let your hair grow long" (line 39) going against societal expectations. Although this is not evil behaviour per se, an attitude and behaviour that would likely that it would be perceived as such by society because challenges the expectations society has of women and encourages women to stop conforming to the established norm. Medusa's perceived evil then comes from urging Black women to be their true self despite what society thinks about it. It is a subversive message that can be considered disruptive as it destabilises the status quo and, although it would, in many cases, be considered to be evil, it cannot quite be said to be so.

7.2.3.7 "let her monsters write"

Even after her head and her body have been separated, Medusa still finds herself trying to fit into the tidily compartmentalised categories created by society, she is still trying to squeeze herself into boxes that are "difficult and too small" (Smartt. "let her monsters write", line 4) to fit her. As well as this, they are described as being "fortress-like" (line 3) which presents the reader with a very vivid image of the imprisonment in which she finds herself. However, together with her decapitated body she also carries the conscience of something bigger "an older I, her centre cave" (line 7). This almost mythical version of herself is what has already been explored in the lineage of Black women in which Smartt places Medusa. It is a collective being, an identity that goes beyond the self and which can be

204

a source of strength. This whole process of isolation, murder and reflection has led her to the realisations we have encountered in the previous couple of poems. With this comes a turn in history as we are told to "let her monsters write" (line 9). This experience that Medusa herself has gone through has resulted in the rest of 'monsters', i.e. Black women, those who live in the edges and have the ability to upturn society, finding a place where they can speak from, even if this place is still closely linked to monstrosity. As we see, this does not mean that these women that were considered monsters, alien creatures, now belong within the society that placed them in that position, but it means that they will start to speak their truth and their experiences "from all sides - ceiling walls floor" (line 10). As a consequence of the terrible events we have learned about not only will Medusa spread her message from the grave but other women will also speak up now. In this way, monstrosity is reclaimed and it no longer is a negative force: it has become a creative space, a place from which societal constraints can be re-thought in a way that can contribute to the improvement of social conditions for all. For this reason, the speaker appeals to the reader to

> Make a deep welcome
> for this singsong body
> lacy in the night. (lines 11-13)

7.2.3.8 "way to go"

Slowly approaching the end of the sequence, "way to go" does not focus on beauty and evil in the same way the previous poems have. Instead, it looks at the cyclical nature of life and death, and how memory, heritage, and wisdom are transmitted across generations. Highlighting the lessons that dealing with adversities in life has taught the older generations, the speaker of this poem emphasises the importance of generational wisdom, which is represented by the souls that, like faces "come back" (Smartt. "way to go", (line 11). More accurately, the speaker addresses the younger generations, in which she includes herself to claim that they are "mistrustful / hard-ears children / existing on our own" (lines 17-19). In the face of this attitude, the speaker asks for the young people to listen to those older voices who tell them to "speak with our light" (line 23), a message that could arguably have been

extracted from the lessons the reader has learnt throughout the sequence and which inevitably come back to the importance of being oneself and fighting for space in society. The voices of the older generations are referred to as "guardian voices" (line 25) which once again brings us back to the long list of warrior women who are embodied in all Black women and who offer protection.

7.2.3.9 "let me land…"

The last poem in this sequence is one that "aligns Medusa with immigration from the Caribbean to Britain, a journey Smartt's parents themselves underwent" (Zapkin 9). Despite beauty and evil not being the central themes of this poem, there are still some details that are worth considering.

The poem opens by recounting images of common life-experiences of black women in the diaspora, women who are far away but whose memories are "recurring / patterns snake" (Smartt. "let me land… lines 1-2). Following this evocation, the speaker urges the reader to

> Imagine yourself from outside, uniquely terrible,
> softly shimmering, swelling under a seascape,
> the Caribbean waters' first light,
> dark turquoise broken only by the breeze. (lines 4-8)

This stanza brings the sequence to an end by using the adjective 'terrible' in a positive light, stating that it is part of what makes the reader unique. The scenery that the speaker constructs in this stanza is terrible yet beautiful and peaceful, just like the 'yourself' it addresses, who seems to have finally found peace and is, as a result, shimmering in the beautiful Caribbean landscape.

From this description of utter beauty, emerge "Herself and Medusa" (line 11). This Herself to which the speaker refers here is, arguably, a collective way of referring to all the Black women that have been represented in the sequence, all he Black women in the World and, after going through everything they have gone through they are both "soft and violent" (line 13). As we find them here, these women are able to be their true, complete selves and they are no longer restricted by the small, fortress-like boxes of previous poems. As well as

this, their hair is no longer an issue as they have "darkly shimmering locks" (line 16) which is the first time in the sequence in which Black hair, and specifically natural Black hair, is described in purely positive terms: these women no longer feel the need to put their hair through damaging beauty procedures but, rather, they are now able to enjoy the beauty of their natural selves.

Following a series of images that hint at eruptions and changes deep within the Earth, it is from the stones in this natural setting that the Black women emerge and that we finally "hear their voices; mining seams / beyond the rockface" (lines 25-26). This is where they come from: they are ancient and united with nature and their "lithic jewel eyes" (line 26) hare filled with power. Medusa herself has now emerged as well and she is an icon, she is set in stone, and, therefore, she is unchangeable and permanent. This is Smartt's version of the "mythical emergence of the speaker from the deep core of the earth" (Sairsingh 156). In the final poem of the sequence, Medusa is seen in a positive light, she has become a goddess as a result of the transformative effects of the events described in the poems. With this she becomes "becomes a potent symbol of resistance – a type of catalyst through which women can reclaim their own powers" (qtd. in Sairsingh 156).

As we have seen throughout the nine poems that form this sequence, Smartt offers us texts in which the well-known and socially-accepted ideas that appear in the original Greek myth are challenged. We refer here to the perpetuation of the roles of 'angel' and 'monster' depending on whether or not a woman perpetuates the prescribed role of femininity (Griggs 179). In these poems, Smartt provides contemporary readers with a re-making of the myth in which she "creates a mirror image in which Medusa reflects us all, allowing us to identify with her ambiguity, her indefinability and project our own female image onto hers" (179-180). Although it is fair to say that the poems appeal to Black readers most directly, they speak to all women as we all have to deal with societal expectations regarding our appearance and behaviour. This is not to say that the experience of every woman in the planet is the same, there are, of course, differences in what society expects from women depending on their race,

class and country of residence, but there are some shared issues that are faced due to the fact that one is a woman.

Smartt's choice to re-tell a Greek myth is particularly well suited to the message she is trying to convey as these myths, which are part of the foundation of our culture are inherited from the patriarchal societies from which our society originated "conspire to perpetuate that woman must be either 'angel' or 'monster' and that those who deviate from the prescribed role of femininity must and will be demonised and ultimately punished" (Griggs 179). And nowhere is this more evident than in the myth of Medusa, the symbol of the female monster. However, in re-telling the myth from a different perspective, paying attention to small details that might have gone unnoticed until this point, Smartt, as a woman writer, succeeds in "subverting the cultural and literary authority of the ancient stories to give voice to their suppressed female selves" (179). Smartt herself claimed that Medusa's mythic image allows her to delve into "the politics of hair and beauty, seeing and not seeing, misinterpretation and reinterpretation" (qtd. in Griggs 182-183). In doing this, Smartt positions herself within a tradition that has evolved during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and which has seen many feminist poets use the figure of the gorgon and has allowed them to write "back to patriarchy" (Zapkin 7) by altering narratives that are traditionally patriarchal. This way of writing has been referred to as 'revisionist mythmaking" and it is "essentially an approach to adaption theory that balances awareness of the canonical authority of mythical texts with the transformative possibilities offered by rewriting" (7). These figures, which come alive in re-tellings of myth are often the ones that make social change possible.

Ultimately, "Dorothea Smartt's poetics reflects an innovative paradigm by which she challenges and reshapes concepts of national and gender identities. She explores old and new world inheritances, and skillfully traverses historical, cultural, temporal and spatial boundaries to arrive at a re-negotiated and reinvigorated identity" (Sairsingh 154). The poet brings together three different traditions (Caribbean, Black British and ancient Greek) and merges them in a way that proves that they are all share certain things and, in so, doing, she "re-connects old and new world inheritances, in a stratagem that empowers writers in both Black British and Caribbean literary traditions" (154). In uniting all three traditions, "Smartt's

poetics reveals a Caribbean aesthetic, a Black British sensibility, but also extents the matrices of identity to incorporate a reclaimed and recuperated Medusa" (155). In addition, the use of Patois adds an extra layer to this because "by discussing Greco-Roman mythology in Caribbean languages, these poems assert a cultural connection to ancient myth, assert that Caribbean culture is linked to antiquity in the same ways that colonial ideology would reserve for Europeans" (Zapkin 11).

As it the analysis of the texts has shown, the notions of beauty and evil are at the very core of this sequence of poems and Smartt presents them in a unique way. The image of Medusa, as represented by the Black woman in whose body Smartt places her, is perceived as monstrous by society. The natural features of a Black woman which are present in her body contribute to others perceiving her as ugly, as someone who refuses to mould her appearance to what society deems acceptable. She is seen as a scary creature with supernatural powers that might turn people into stone. However, the sequence of poems show that what lies behind all of this demonisation is the simple dislike of a woman who has been made the victim and Smartt brings some justice to her image in this sequence of poems. In it, she "is reclaiming the positive aspects of Medusa—independence, strength, self-reliance, creativity, etc" (Zapkin 6). The Medusa that Smartt creates is transgressive and revolutionary because it "brings together a collective history of Black women's oppression and resistance. At the same time, the poems evoke a sense of personal resistance and transformation" (Taylor, Andrene 21).

7.3 "The Contract. Femme Fatale. (The Second Nun's Tale)"

7.3.1 Patience Agbabi, *The Canterbury Tales* and *Telling Tales*

Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales*, in which "The Contract. Femme Fatale. (The Second Nun's Tale)" was published in 2014, has been referred to as a "Postcolonial revision of *The Canterbury Tales* (Schwonebeck 193). This collection of poems establishes a very clear and clever dialogue with one of the most valued texts of the English literary canon. Chaucer was greatly influential because, writing at a time that when English literature is thought to have reached maturity, he "was the first poet to turn away from the unrhymed accentual rhythms of Anglo-Saxon poetry. His writing assimilated Normal influences and created a new poetic

language that shaped the subsequent development of poetry in early Modern English" Patke 15-16). In *Telling Tales*, Agbabi uses a variety of fictional "poets" (whose short biographies can be found at the end of the collection) to bring Chaucer's text into the 21st century. All of the narrators in Agbabi's collection are Black British people and, if read side by side with the original text, the result is a very interesting dialogue between a quintessential text of English literature and its modern-day version (Lawson-Welsh 190).

When she set out to create this collection, Agbabi was aware of its European and cross-cultural roots. Her aim was to "create a contemporary book with a simultaneous medieval cultural footprint" (Stories in Stanza'd 1), a project she started working on when she was made Canterbury Laureate in 2009 (1). Even though *Telling Tales* is sort of a remix of Chaucer's text created for contemporary readers, there are some key differences between the two texts: the context of the story-telling competition is similar, as Agbabi tried to replicate a poetry slam and she removed any interactions amongst the characters in between poems; and the poets in her collection come from all the corners of the British Empire, reflecting "the demographics of contemporary Britain via Chaucer's poetics" (2). Rather than encountering our pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, in this case we find them on a Routmaster bus on its route around London. Not only does this emulate the journey of Chaucer' pilgrims, but it also wants "to enhance the concept of poetry in motion" (2).

To some extent, *Telling Tales* is part of a movement of women writers who, from the 1970s have shown a desire to participate in and intervene with the canon and it is one of those instances in which "multi-ethnic poets formally symbolyze migration and settlement by appropriating the canon" (Hena 521). Even though the work of these authors is not limited to revising the canon, or "approaching literary classics, genres and paradigms by revising their most problematic aspects" (Schwonebeck 185), their work in this area is still extremely relevant from a feminist, anti-racist point of view. In addition, revisions such as these are a natural response to any "areas of cultural production where the prestige of a canonised classic rests on questionable ideologies, mechanisms of exclusion, and imbalanced power relationships" (185). Following various social and critical theory movements from the 20th century, literary classics from previous eras get re-read to "dig up subtexts that had either been overlooked or conveniently forgotten as the text entered cultural memory, the school syllabus, or global fandom" (185), as the first half of this dissertation already showed. Revising texts in this light is part of the process of "writing back" of which many

contemporary authors are part. Patience Agbabi masterfully brings the speakers of *The Canterbury Tales* into the 21st century and creates voices which are funny at the same time as they offer commentary on the cultural context that created them.

7.3.2 "The Contract. Femme Fatale. (The Second Nun's Tale)": Poem Analysis

This poem is presented to the reader accompanied by some extra elements which are worth considering before looking at the text itself. In the first place, Agbabi's imagined author for this poem is someone named "Femme Fatale", whose biography is found at the end of the poetry collection and reads as follows:

> Femme Fatale**:** dark cabaret performer and per(form)ance poet. Owns Whitstable-based vintage clothes shop, *Second to None*, specialising in '40s and '50s era. A *film noir* aficionado with large private collection of DVDs and videos. Likes dead poets: W.H. Auden, Edna St Vincent Millay and Thom Gunn. Poetry must have strict constraints. (*Telling Tales* 116)

This is significant for two reasons: firstly, Agbabi creates a poet persona or a different authorial voice and attributes the composition of the poem to them. In doing so, she removes herself from the text and, instead, the reader is made to feel as though they were reading the words of a person different from Agbabi, someone who might or might not have some characteristics in common with Agabbi herself. As described in their bio, this poet is someone who enjoys the darker side of life. They are known as a *femme fatale* and, in accordance with that, they are into cabaret dancing, *film noir* and vintage clothing. As well as this, is must be noted that they are specifically a performance poet and, therefore, someone who is connected to popular culture and non-canonical poetry. Secondly, the dead poets this author has chosen as her favourites are also telling: all three of them were well-respected poets, well known for their work as well as for their political stances while they were alive. Both W. H. Auden and Edna St. Vinvent Millay were awarded the Pulitzer Prize which shows prestige and a recognition of their work from the established literary canon. Making Femme Fatale follow in

line with the tradition of these authors gives Agbabis's fictional author integrity and accounts for her re-imagining a major text in the history of British literature. As well as doing this, this selection of poets contrasts with the status of Femme Fatale as a performance poet whose work is far removed from that of these authors. The fact that it is them that they turn to from inspiration breaks the divide between poetry for the page and poetry from the stage and brings them together in the work of Femme Fatale.

The poem itself opens in the middle of a conversation the speaker, a hired assassin, is having with someone else. The choice of speaker here is an interesting one as it is at odds with the speaker in Chaucer's "The Second Nun's Tale", a woman who is a nun and is narrating the story of St. Cecilia. Instead of using a similar sort of narrator, Agbabi's "Second Nun's Tale" is told from the point of view of a man who kills people for a career. Of course, the poet uses a variety of different speakers, both men and women, replicating Chaucer's original text. However, the fact that she made the decision to make the speaker of this specific poem so different from the original is very striking as it flips the dynamics at play in the text.

This man, who is a hired assassin, is recounting the worst job he has had to complete and even though he seems somewhat surprised by the fact, he claims that it was a woman "Worst job I ever handled, bruv? A woman." ("The Contract" line 1). The tone of this line, together with the use of the word 'bruv' suggests that he is speaking to someone he is close to and who knows about what he does for a living, someone who is happy to listen to the anecdotes and seems particularly interested in the gruesome details. Instead of continuing to detail those horrific details straight away, however, the speaker turns to the appearance of the woman he is referring to to remark on her plainness: "So plain, you'd scan her face for flaws, and find none. Not a mark on her till the bullets spat" (lines 2-3). The woman who constitutes the most challenging killing he had to commit is not described from the beginning focusing on the particulars that made her such a difficult person to kill but, rather by her plainness. The description of her looks as 'plain', points at the fact that she is lacking in any distinguishing physical features that society commonly associates with attractiveness or uniqueness. While she is not ugly, there is nothing remarkable about her either and nothing stands out from her appearance until it has been modified by the bullets he fires.

As the speaker continues to narrate this killing, he reader then learns about the speaker's ongoing imprisonment, which, was not, as might be expected, the result of killing the woman he just mentioned. The reason why he was imprisoned was for killing someone known as Jupiter, who appears to be someone both the speaker and the person listening to him are familiar with. However, the prison he is in does not seem to be a traditional prison as he remarks: "Call this a prison! Finishing school" (lines 6-7). This statement points at the unfairness and unproductiveness of our prison system by putting the killer in the text back in education, rather than in common confinement a situation that is likely to reform him and help him return to society. Nevertheless, the speaker is not happy with his present circumstances and appears to be more inclined to be confined in a normal prison, one where he would probably not be expected to study.

The focus of the story he is telling then turns to Jupiter fully, who was "never *christened*" (line 6). This is the first time the theme of religion is introduced in Agbabi's text but it is, certainly a dominating component of Chaucer's text. In *The Canterbury Tales* and, more specifically, in Chaucer's "Second Nun's Tale" religion is at the very centre of the text as is evidenced both by the fact that the narrator of the story is a nun and that she is narrating how someone became a saint, commenting on the importance of converting people to Christianism. In contrast to St. Cecilia, Chaucer's main character, Jupiter focuses on enjoying his life and living for pleasure "Jupiter, but larged it, full of gas" (line 7). As we see in this line, Jupiter lives his life in an extravagant way, celebrating and showing off. As well as the differences in the construction of the characters, it is also worth remarking that the speech of this character also contrasts highly with Chaucer's writing. Out speaker frequently uses slang ("larged it" (line 7), "full of gas" (line 7), "bruv" (lines 1, 9) and the way he speaks carries features of Multicultural London English. Not only is Multicultural London English nothing like the language used by Chaucer or by that used by the majority of established poets writing in Britain nowadays, it is also the variety of English that is commonly associated with speakers of diverse ethnical backgrounds and, most often, working-class people, that is, someone like our speaker. What Agbabi does with language in this poem is quite remarkable: while she situates her work in the tradition of Chaucer, W.H. Auden and others, she does so

transgressing the rules of the established canon and the conventions usually associated with 'high' art, which gives the poem a hybrid feel.

The choice of the mafia-boss's name, Jupiter, serves as an intertextual reference with profound symbolic implications. Agbabi named her killer boss after the God with the highest position within Roman mythology: as the most powerful God, Jupiter was in charge of overseeing all aspects of life as well as protecting the Roman state. In naming the killer's boss after this specific God, a huge amount of power is assigned to him, showing just how the speaker almost "had to" work for him. Moreover, the allusion to Jupiter, the protector of the Roman state, introduces an ironic twist given the mafia boss's role in subverting the state's authority through illegal activities. This juxtaposition suggests a critique of power structures, both ancient and contemporary, and their potential for corruption and violence. In Chaucer's poem, the equivalent to Jupiters figure is the Roman Emperor who, even though he is not a member of a mafia, did in fact kill Christians as well as ordered for Cecilia and her husband to be killed for making people want to convert to Christianity. The Roman Emperor, like Jupiter, is a figure of absolute authority, whose actions, despite being violent and oppressive, are unquestioned. This comparison further emphasises the mafia boss's control over his subordinates and the fatal consequences of defying his orders.

As well as representing the highest from of authority known to the speaker, Jupiter, we was generous when paying for jobs: "He paid with interest, bruv" (line 9) and, as the speaker claims, in certain circumstances this is vital: "an when you got / a past, a job's a job" (lines 9-10). Given that the speaker seems to be someone who has previously engaged and had problems with illegal activities, Jupiter holds a great amount of power over him not just in terms of social reputation, but also economically speaking. The speaker does not go into detail as to what his past is, but he attempts to portray himself in a positive light by claiming that he is not lazy and thus showing that he is willing to work to pay for his living. This aspect adds a humanising element to the speaker, presenting him as a complex individual navigating a difficult socio-economic landscape. The addition of this statement means that, although he could have been considered to be an evil person until this point, he is now someone the reader almost empathises with and who could be seen as a victim of his circumstances.

After explaining his situation and motivations to take on the job that involved killing the plain woman, he begins to narrate how the events took place: "She was in the bath, / no bubbles, an so hot" (lines 11-12). The speaker's narration of the woman's murder is imbued with a sense of intimacy and vulnerability, which adds a deeply unsettling layer to the narrative. The fact that the woman in the tub adds a layer of sensuality to the narration but it also implies that she is found in a place where she is highly vulnerable and exposed. Her situation at the time the killer came into her bathroom, with no clothes or anything that can be used for self-defence means that she is defenceless and completely at her killer's mercy. This encounter made the speaker feel "overdressed in t-shirt and tattoos" (line 13), a feeling that accentuates the contrast between them, the vulnerability of one and the power of the other. The sensuality of the scene, juxtaposed with its inherent violence, creates a disturbing tension that further enriches the narrative's exploration of power, vulnerability, and violence.

"*He wanted me to top myself,* she goes, *but where's the fun in that?*" (lines 14-15), is the fist and one of the few iterations we get from the woman. From her words, the reader learns that Jupiter wanted this woman to kill herself, rather than send someone to kill her. However, although she seems to have made peace with the idea of dying, she has her own ideas about how she'd like it to happen. Defying Jupiter and his power, she turns her own death into a game-like situation, flipping, in so doing, the power dynamics between Jupiter and herself and demonstrating her agency in a scenario where it would seem all control has been taken from her. The atmosphere of the poem is made more eerie by the scent that surrounds the woman: "lilies, she smelt of, so strong it made me gag" (lines 15-16). Lilies are often used to symbolise femininity, fertility and purity, three very traditionally feminine characteristics and they reinforce the woman's perceived vulnerability. The smell that surrounds the lady goes hand in hand with her appearance: she looks pure, innocent and weak and she smells it too. However, the fact that this scent is so strong and overwhelming correlates more closely to her behaviour, which is assertive and defying, not at all traditionally feminine and points at her unseen strength. The smell of the lilies works to debilitate the killer, as it made him gag and therefore loose some of his physical strength. Another reason why lilies are relevant here is because they establish another link between this poem and

Chaucer's: in the original text, Cecilia and her husband are prized by angels with two crowns after she converts him to Christianity. The crowns they are given are not visible to people who are not believers, but their scent can still be perceived by everyone. The way these crowns work plays with the idea that faith is not something that is seen, but rather something that is perceived, felt. Similarly, the killer in this scene cannot see any flowers but he can perceive their smell reinforcing the idea that appearances can be deceiving, and perception often goes beyond what is visible.

The woman observes the killer attentively in "the way all virgins eagle me" (line 17). Once again, this line makes reference to the assumed purity and innocence of the woman, which is quickly challenged by the way she acts "but scanned / my lids too long" (line 17-18). What we see here is that the way she stares at him is in line with the strong behaviour she displayed in her words, she is challenging her killer, even though she knows she will die, she enjoys the exchange with the killer and the discomfort she puts him through. This deliberate and prolonged scrutiny indicates a form of psychological warfare where she tries to unsettle her killer in the final moments of her life, thus seizing some control in a situation where she is largely powerless. The killer then reveals that a few killings have already taken place between Jupiter's and this woman's family resulting in him losing his brother and her losing her husband. The killer assures he had nothing to tho with either of these incidents and even though she is acting as though he had, he reiterates that those killings were none of his business, emphasising the purely professional nature of this killlng.

The killer then elaborates on what he thinks is the reason why things between Jupiter and this woman went wrong: "You never get a babe like that to kiss / Jupiter's arse: she laughed, gave him what for" (lines 20-21). This comment suggests that the woman's appearance was above that of Jupiter and, even though his power and idea of himself granted him access to her in his mind, she has a different opinion. The woman's behaviour is, as it has been shown up until this point, marked by provocation and strong-mindedness, she is someone who has her own ideas and she will not 'kiss someone's ass' even if that someone is Jupiter. As she is not interested in Jupiter, she does not comply with his requests and disrespects him by laughing at him which reveals reveals her disdain for him, further

216

emphasising her autonomy and rejection of his power. This is interesting from a perspective of what gives power to each of the characters: while Jupiter's power is derived from him being some sort of scary and dangerous mafia-boss her power comes mainly from her looks. This perspective suggests a societal commentary on how beauty can confer a certain type of power, particularly in gender dynamics. The woman's beauty, in this case, grants her a perceived status that is above Jupiter's, allowing her to reject his advances and challenge his authority. However, it's important to note that the woman's power is not solely derived from her appearance. Her assertive behaviour, defiance, and psychological manipulation of the killer highlight her inner strength and resilience, suggesting that her power also comes from her character and actions.

As the killer continues to explain, however, we learn that it was not the woman that Jupiter wanted, but her attention: "Not that he wanted *her*, he wanted her / to want *him*" (lines 22-23). Jupiter's masculinity provides him with an ego that does not react well to being challenged or rejected. In his vision of the world he is someone to be admired and desired, someone not to be questioned and, when faced with rejection from the woman, his ego is hurt and he reacts with violence. The decisive element in the interactions between Jupiter and the woman was religion and the introduction of religious conflict into the narrative creates one more parallel with Chaucer's original text. She is a Christian and, as the speaker tells us, "If there's one thing that Jupiter hates, it's Christians. / He's killed more Christians than his wife's been headfucked" (lines 24-25). In Chaucer's poem, both Cecilia and her husband are killed by the Romans for the fact that they were working to convert people to Christianism. In this case, Jupiter, stands in the place of Chaucer's the Romans, hence his name, and he is responsible for killing the Christian, in this case, the woman.

The speaker of the poem shoots at the woman and as the bullet hits her an irreversible change takes place concerning her appearance: "Lily May's no longer perfect" (line 26). Once the bullet hits the woman, her looks are no longer pure and immaculate, she no longer resembles perfection, her beauty has been damaged. However, she does not react to the being hit by the bullet and, while she continues to smoke her cigarette, she asks the speaker of the poem: "*Do you believe in God?*" (line 28). The way the woman is unaltered and unaffected,

other than physically, by the bullet hitting her and she continues to be calm and collected, even able to speak, bestows her an eerie feel, a certain uncanniness. Disturbed by the question and visibly agitated by the lack of dying on the part of the woman, the killer shoots again: "I fire again, fuck the analysis" (line 29). And again, his shot is met with the same question and, against his will, he replies this time: "And yet, I'm answering. *No... I don't know.*" (line 31). Continuing to smoke, and in a tone that is close to a warning or a challenge, the woman states that she does believe in God. Although her blood is now spreading all over her surroundings, the woman continues to be unaltered by the shots she has received and, seeing this, the killer decides to leave her. The behaviour of the woman is quite unnatural as she does not feel pain or die when shot in her head like a normal person would. The description of her attempted murder points at the supernatural qualities that she possesses and the power this grants her.

We learn that it "Took her three days to die" (line 36) which obviously puts her humanity in doubt. Who and what is this woman? Why does she not die even when she is being shot in her head? After his dealings with the woman were over, the killer also killed Jupiter, the person who had sent him to kill the woman in the first place: "I shelled the boss and jacked it in" (line 37). A few lines later, the killer reflects on the events and comments: "*I do*, she said, like we were hitched. I breathed / red roses, blubbered like a girl: believed" (lines 41-42). These lines establish a connection between the woman's questions and the killing of Jupiter in the hands of the speaker. In fact, the killers last sentences suggest that, somehow, this woman managed to make him kill Jupiter as well as convert him into a believer, just like Cecilia in Chaucer's text. This is the action that could be qualified as evil in this poem, even though both of them have been killing people the other one loves and are responsible for each other's deaths. Another fact worth noticing is that by the end of the poem the scent of lilies has been replaced by that of red roses. The symbolism of this flower is vastly different from the previous one: rather than signifying purity and femininity, red roses are commonly associated with love and passion. When considering the text by Chaucer, this means that the killer had been converted: the second crown has been awarded to them as a result of the conversion. When focusing on this particular poem, it means that some sort of awakening has happened: the transition from lilies to roses signifies a movement from innocence to passion and it stands for a transformation in the woman. She has left the virginal appearance of purity

and, with her body being destroyed, she has been corrupted or liberated from that burden. As this has happened, the killer has also been converted into a believer, which is something that will make Jupiter hate him and will, most definitely, create conflict between them. It is this conversion, which the woman has prompted, that has moved him to kill Jupiter. The uncanny behaviour of the woman makes the reader think that she is perfectly aware of the consequences this conversation with the killer will have for Jupiter. The woman is thus presented as a *femme fatale*-like character who, instead of saving others, like the characters in Chaucer's text did, is able to control others and make them complete tasks that could be said to be morally questionable.

The poem hints at some sort of witchcraft or supernatural power and, although at first sight it might appear that the woman in the poem is a *femme fatale*, in reality the conflict this text deals with is something that goes deeper and runs in both directions. Both Jupiter and the woman have killed someone who was a loved person for the other one of them. The woman does use the killer as a tool to avenge her after she has died, but then so did Jupiter use the killer as a tool to kill the woman. The battle between them seems to be on quite equal grounding but, what is not equal, is the reasons that motivated the Jupiter and those that motivated the woman. Whereas Jupiter feels threatened by the woman's lack of willingness to submit to him and act according to his wishes, the woman seems to act purely out of a want for revenge, a need to assert herself. Her evil behaviour is something that is highly questionable because she has a real and reasonable motivation to act in the way she does. She almost puts a spell on the speaker which is what motivates the reading of her as a *femme fatale*: her calculated use of her beauty to present herself as harmless while secretly planning to manipulate the killer into assassinating Jupiter introduces an intriguing plot twist. This development further illustrates the woman's cunning and tactical intelligence, showing that she is not just a passive victim but an active player in the narrative. Her ability to leverage her appearance to deceive and manipulate others shows a different kind of power, one that's derived from strategic thinking and psychological manipulation rather than physical strength or social status. This tactic subverts traditional gender roles and expectations, presenting the woman as a strategic character capable of orchestrating high-stake schemes. There is no doubt

that woman has a dark and sinister side but this has been motivated into action by the disagreement she has with Jupiter.

This woman is markedly different from Chaucer's Cecilia, who is a saint and is eventually made a martyr. The woman in Agbabi's poem looks like someone who would be a saint or a martyr, her looks are defined by the sense of innocence and purity, she is beautiful but that beauty does not correspond with the way she behaves. Her behaviour subverts the traditional feminine roles and attitudes and this is proven by the fact that she is someone who is in conflict, almost fighting a war of kinds, against a contract killer and the mafia boss behind him. Despite her seemingly innocent looks, the woman remains completely calm and in control of the situation during the whole interaction between her and the killer and succeeds in her goal of having Jupiter killed, even if this has costed her own life.

The looks of the woman described in the poem are clearly impactful: they cause a deep impression both on Jupiter and the killer. However, striking as her looks are, a sense that is heightened by her theatrical way of acting, the majority of her power comes from her words. In this aspect, the woman in this poem is definitely similar to Cecilia: both their words push people to action. Equally, both of them take an entire three days to die and their final words have a power and effect that is almost magical.

Overall, the representation of beauty in this poem is a complex one and it operates in multiple levels. While we are first introduced to this woman as someone who looks 'plain' she is also someone whose appearance has no flaws. This description points at the fact that beauty is not necessarily found in striking physical features or the perfect resemblance to the beauty ideal but it can also be found in looks of simplicity. This preferred beauty represents a deviance from the current Western beauty ideal which calls for features that are much more marked and dramatic. However, the woman's beauty is not limited to the physical appearance: it can be seen in her defiance and resilience, qualities that the beauty ideal does not often praise but which make this woman particularly attractive to the male characters of this poem, even when it makes her quite uncanny in the process. This layered portrayal of beauty, which emphasises the roles that strength and ability to articulate one's thoughts play in the

perception of it, challenges the more commonly notions of feminine beauty as something that is defined by meekness and silence. Furthermore, in this poem beauty serves as a tool that aids the woman in manipulating her killer and affording her the opportunity to get her revenge. This tactical use of beauty showcases its potential as a form of power.

When it comes to evil, the primary embodiment of it in Agbabi's poem is Jupiter: a ruthless man dominated by his fragile ego. His desire for the woman's attention, rather than a genuine connection with her, indicates a warped sense of entitlement and control, elements often associated with toxic masculinity. As well as this, he has a deep hatred for Christians which hints at topics of religious discrimination. Oppressive power structures and the violence that can derive from them are thus personified in the character of Jupiter. The woman in the poem, however, could also be perceived as evil in the context of hegemonic culture as she threatens to destabilise the established gender-roles with her behaviour and actions.

Ultimately, what the poem shows is that beauty and evil can coexist and interacts in ways that are complex. In these characters we find intricate and layered portrayals of beauty and evil that make the reader reassess questions of power dynamics and moral ambiguity.

7.4 "A recipe for retaliation"

7.4.1 Vanessa Kisuule: Life and Work

Vanessa Kisuule is a Bristol-based British-Ugandan author and performer born in 1991. She has made her reputation mainly in the slam world, where she has been awarded over ten slam titles such as The Roundhouse Slam 2014 and the Hammer and Tonge National Slam 2014. As well as this, she has participated in a selection of radio shows and literary and music festivals. As part of this, she was named Glastonbury Festivals Resident Poet in 2019 ("Vanessa Kisuule"paragraph 1).

Kisuule has published two full poetry collections *Joyriding the Storm* (2014) and *A Recipe for Sorcery* (2017), both published by Burning Eye Books. She was the Bristol City Poet between the years 2018 and 2020 and during that time she wrote what is, perhaps, her

best-known piece of poetry: "Hollow", a poem written in the aftermath of the toppling of the state of Edward Colston. Her poetry has also appeared in other publications such as The Guardian, NME and Lonely Planet and has worked as a co-tutor for the first Poetry Collective created by the Southbank Centre (paragraph 2).

Kisuule's work is not limited to the realm of poetry, however. She has also worked in various theatre institutions and one of her shows, entitled "SEXY" toured England in 2017. As well as facilitating workshops in educational institutions, youth centres and prisons, she offers mentoring for other writers's creative project. She is also working on a collection of essays and her debut novel (paragraphs 2-3).

7.4.2 "A recipe for retaliation": Poem Analysis

"A recipe for retaliation" is a formally experimental poem that presents itself in the form of a recipe. Like most recipes, the poem is divided into two clear sections under the subtitles of "you will need" (Kisuule line 1) where the ingredients are listed, and "method" (line 24) where the instructions for elaboration of retaliation are explained to the reader. Embedded in the ingredients and the steps to be followed are themes of oppression and resistance where a metaphorical response to social injustice is provided.

In the first section of the poem, the one which list the necessary ingredients for this recipe, the speaker addresses the reader directly, referring to them as 'you' and creating, in so doing, a connection between the two in which the speaker acts as a guide of sorts. The fact that the imagined reader of this poem is using this recipe shows that they are in need of retaliation, just like the speaker, who has experienced the same need and has come up with a solution for it. The majority of the ingredients detailed by the speaker are quite unusual if compared to a regular recipe. However, there are a couple of them such as "citrus" (line 20) and "salt" (line 21) which could be found in ordinary recipes.

Moving onto the more unusual ingredients, the first thing that is required for the preparation of retaliation is "a single tongue swollen fat / from the constant muzzle of teeth" (lines 2-3). From the very first ingredient, the speaker of the poem is already pointing out that silencing, in this case of women, is one of the key elements that leads to needing retaliation. The tongue that is required here is one that has known suffering, one that has been fighting

against the teeth for the ability to talk but which has the visible effects of its defeat on it. This tongue is representative of the voice of the oppressed who remain despite their circumstances, resilient.

Another interesting ingredient that appears in the list is "the grin of a golliwog" (line 10). Making a reference to the dolls that were popular during the 19th century, which were later considered a racist caricature of Black people, the golliwog's aim was to portray Black people as ridiculous. This ingredient carries with it the historical and ongoing racial discrimination that is so present in British society.

"Apple cores, banana peels, desiccated toast crumbs" (line 12) will also bee needed in the process of bringing this recipe to life. These are significant because in the same way that the "several cups of instant coffee left to cool / a liquid seethe" (lines 5-6) that are mentioned in previous lines, they represent the things that are discarded, no longer wanted. Much like the experiences of marginalised peoples, these are things that are often overlooked or which society prefers to turn a blind eye on because their very existence has the power to make people uncomfortable.

> Three ingredients that are presented together and all point at self-defence are
>
> one furled umbrella
>
> a generous dash of a pepper spray
>
> a rusted knuckle duster. (Kisuule lines 16-18)

This specific part of the list alludes to self-defence techniques women often have to employ in a society in which they are frequently subjected to violence and harassment. These ingredients speak to the reality many face, living in fear and constant need of being able to protect oneself.

Finally the recipe calls for "anything to make old wounds / scream afresh" (lines 22-23). This last component of the recipe ensures that injustices will not be forgotten and they will serve as a productive force that moves the reader(s) of the poem to action.

After enumerating all the necessary ingredients, the speaker of the poem moves on to the method and, similarly to what they did at the beginning of the poem, they speak to the

reader in the second person, addressing them directly: "they have drowned women like you before and still do / burned them at stakes and locked them in asylums" (lines 25-26). These lines refer to the ways in which women have been killed historically, alluding to witchcraft and behaviours that were deemed unacceptable or disrupting in the eyes of society and making the reader remember the persecution of women throughout history. The speaker knows that the person in need of this recipe will be one of those women who does not conform to society's construct of femininity, and that is why they equate those historical figures to the reader. The reasons why these women have suffered the fate they have is are listed in the following lines: "for daring to speak / for not sanitising their screams / for plunging their hand below their waistbands and mining for / answers" (lines 26-29). The speaker identifies the reason why the women mentioned above were killed: the fact that they refused to stay quiet, which is the suggested expected behaviour, causing the patriarchal society they are a part of the great discomfort that is common when it is faced with women who assert their independence and challenge traditional gender roles. Instead of toning down their words, their reactions and their expressions, the women the speaker refers to stayed true to themselves and spoke loudly. This way of being, of carrying themselves, which is so far from the expected silence and meekness, is condemned by society and results in women being murdered or locked up in institutions. The reader of this poem, who is one of the women who refuses to accept the rules imposed by society, might initially think that these are purely historical facts but the speaker makes it clear that they "still do" (25) pointing at the contemporary nature of this kind of occurrences. In the face of this, the speaker advises the reader to remain unchanged, to continue challenging the societal expectations of quietness and smallness and, to instead "do as you have done, bide your time, nurse the bloodlust" (line 30). This last line suggests a desire for retaliation and justice, one that brings with it self affirmation and resistance.

The speaker is aware of the seemingly polite ways society has to communicate these messages to women, messages that warn them against themselves, against the possible consequences of being themselves among others. An example of this is a comment that the speaker knows the reader receives

they tap you on the shoulder, lean in and whisper

i'm sorry dear, i'm not sure you're aware but

there appears to be a fully loaded expletive between your legs". (lines 31-33)

In these words we see the condescending and infantilising tone that society uses to address women in many situations, as well as the approach to women's reproductive organs and sexuality as something that is rude, offensive or distasteful. The figure that thats their shoulder is worth considering here: it represents society's control and policing of women and the role this plays in perpetuating patriarchal societal norms. The use of the word 'expletive' is also telling because it points at the societal stigmatisation and demonisation of female sexuality, which is something that has been seen as a threat to the established social order for centuries, something that must be controlled and regulated because society has an uncomfortable relationship with it.

Society seems to regard women in a suspicious way, making the rest of humans "whisper about you, stroke at your skin / as if they's like to exhibit it on a magnolia wall" (lines 34-36). What these lines refer to is the constant comments, speculations and unwanted opinions many women face in their day to day lives, where a constant stream of strangers's thoughts are presented to them. These discussions and opinions, which are the embodiment of invasive curiosity and entitlement towards women's bodies, are objectifying and they strip women of their individuality and personhood. The mention of women's skin being hung up on magnolia walls further emphasises the dehumanisation that underlies these comments and attitudes as it brings attention that exhibiting their skin will turn it into a spectacles commodity the sole purpose of which is to be observed, reenforcing the idea that women are often treated as objects of public consumption.

The aim of these comments, similarly to the way society speaks to women, is a moralising one: "all kinds of ways will be found to remind you that stillness was meant to be / your default" (lines 37-38). These two lines are particularly telling because they call attention at the essentialising nature of these rules that are meant to govern women's lives. As we can see here, the speaker of the poem is well aware of the fact that society demands and expects a very specific behaviour from women, and this behaviour is marked by silence and tranquility, which creates a feeling of women needing to be like ghosts, there but not really there. Allowed to exist as long as they do not disturb men or speak up. The speaker continues with this theme in the following lines where they say the following: "your anger is ugly and will not put on its flirty party dress / won't sit with its legs crossed and laugh at all the right moments" (lines 39-40). Anger is an emotion that has historically been condemned when it

comes from women, it is deemed disagreeable and 'bad behaviour' because it is often frequent in situations in which women do not behave in ways that are pleasing to others and react to them. As the previous sections of this dissertation have shown, this is particularly true when it refers to Black women who, in the event of showing anger, tend to be quickly accused of being an 'angry Black woman' with no sense of humour or regard for others. This stereotype is a racially charged manifestation of gendered expectations which seek to silence and delegitimise the valid expressions of anger, frustration and dissatisfaction of black women. All the negative responses towards women's anger and refusal to perform an agreeable persona are simply the expression of an uncomfortable feeling that men feel when women refuse to please them and act on their own will instead. This is a definition that, as Kendall explains, has been passed down over the years and is still very much present in our contemporary society: "good girls were dainty and quiet and never got their clothes dirty, while bad girls yelled, fought, and could make someone regret hurting them even if they couldn't always stop it" (xiv). These expectations for girls and women to behave in the most quiet, 'peaceful' way possible is often damaging to one's well-being (Kendall xiv).

When speaking of anger, Audre Lorde explained that this emotion can indeed be a "potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought anger into being" ("Uses of Anger" 110-111). Following this line of thought, she explained that anger can often be productive in the sense that it can be a motivator for radical change and progress, if used correctly, it can become the tool to change the oppressions that underlie in our lives. Viewed in this way, anger becomes a source of strength and liberation (111).

Once again, the speaker addresses the reader directly saying: "you've been trained to be your own leash" (Kisuule line 41). In this statement, the speaker of the poem addresses the education and training that women receive, the behavioural instructions that teach us to please others above everything else, to be careful never to contradict a man's opinions, to bite our tongues in the name of peace. As a consequence, "the truest bits of yourself make you uncomfortable / make you hunt your own flesh with blunt teeth" (lines 42-43). The constant policing of women's behaviour leads them to restrain themselves, to dislike the natural parts of their beings that are not appreciated by society. If a behaviour different to this highly constricted one is displayed, society responds by saying things such as "*calm down*" (line 44), "*shhh*" (Kisuule line 45) or "*it's all gone a bit far, hasn't it?*" (line 46). As it has been evidenced by the previous interactions between women and society and further emphasised in

these lines, society is patronising towards women when they choose to speak up or challenge any of the imposed rules.

However, in the speaker's opinion, no other response apart from anger is to be expected in a world that treats women the way our one does:

> "it's as if they've never listened to nina simone at 4am
>
> and felt the fangs of apocalypse either side of their head.
>
> like they've never watched a seven-year-old suck in her stomach.
>
> like they've never switched on the news to a bus in delhi.
>
> like they've never watched grown men
> in dark suits write blind dogma inside our wombs." (lines 47-52)

In these lines, the speaker of the poem makes reference to many issues that women face in their everyday lives, including body-image issues, sexual abuse, and lack of reproductive rights. The fact that women face prolonged systematic unfairness and violence on a regular basis and are expected not to feel anger, not to react to these circumstances is what makes the speaker of the text think that the expectations are not only unrealistic but highly damaging. This pressure on women to suppress their anger is a form of emotional manipulation that serves to maintain the status quo, and the dismissal of anger as exaggerated is a strategy to distract attention from what causes it in the first place. Slowly, women stop being able or willing to accept all of these unwritten rules and expectations and explode in ways that society does not like:

> first it simmers
>
> hen it boils
>
> and then it

spills over". (lines 54-57)

The anger that carries this process forward is "an appropriate reaction" ("Uses of Anger" 113) as well as a catalyst for change.

As it has been shown throughout the analysis of this poem, the main concern of the text is the behavioural rules that society imposes on women. Beauty or beauty standards are not addressed explicitly in this poem, other than for a brief mention to the issues with body image these rules can create on women and even young girls. However, this dissertation has argued that beauty ideals are as much about the physical appearance of a person as they are about their behaviour and their attitude and the societal expectations imposed on women, as discussed in the poem, can be considered under the umbrella of 'beauty'. This poem is a perfect example how women who do not conform to the femininity/ womanhood expectations of society are demonised, often seen as evil and generally strongly disliked by society at large because they are seen as threats: they have the power to destabilise the established order within a certain society. Here, thus, beauty goes beyond mere physical attractiveness. It encompasses a host of behaviours and attitudes that women are expected to embody — silence, passivity, compliance, and the suppression of 'unacceptable' emotions like anger. These expectations are often deemed as 'beautiful' or 'desirable' in a woman by societal standards. The speaker of this poem, as well as the imagined reader, are most likely women who belong in the category of 'unacceptable and rebellious women' and the speaker's aim is to help the reader break free from those constrains to which they are subjected as a consequence of the ideas of femininity that predominate in society. This shows that both womanhood and femininity are defined very narrowly and as soon as someone refuses to conform to these definitions (either physically or in terms of behaviour) they quickly become othered. The forces that cause women to become othered, are, however, the more realistic evil, even when they are not always perceived to be so. These forces, the societal expectations are, as has been shown, highly damaging for women and they also have the capacity to affect their material conditions as, if they do not abide by them, they will become othered and thus they will see their chances of professional success and progression, for example, reduced.

Neither beauty or evil in this poem are inherent qualities: beauty, in the eyes of society, is seen as the complete acceptance of and submission to established ideas of femininity. When looked at from the speaker of the poem's perspective, however, beauty is quite a different concept: it is demonstrated in the refusal to submit, in the will to speak up

and work towards social change. A similar thing happens with evil: whereas society perceives evil to be embodied by the women who do not conform to said rules, the speaker of the poem sees evil in these rules themselves, because of the physical and psychological effects they have on women. Beauty and evil are, therefore, not fixed stable concepts, but ideas whose meaning change depending on the perspective they are approached from and which can have many different faces.

Refusing to accept these definitions imposed by society is "one of the most significant forms of power held by the weak" (hooks 92), a category in which women are often placed since they are considered powerless. However, when one stops believing in the definitions provided by society, "one will be led toward doubting prescribed codes of behavior, and as one begins to act in ways that can deviate from the norm in any degree, it becomes clear that in fact there is not just one right way to handle or understand events" (qtd. in hooks 92).

7.5 "The Warner"

7.5.1 Omikemi Natacha Bryan: Life and Work

Omikemi Natacha Bryan was born in London in 1981 where she grew up raised by her Jamaican grandparents ("TCW3" paragraph 3). She is a poet as well as a writer and an "emerging performance maker" (paragraph 3). Her work has been published in magazines such as *Ambit* and *Radio* and collected in anthologies such as *Ten: poets of the New Generation* (Durant paragraph 7). Her debut pamphlet, published in 2016 by Gatehouse press, won the 2014 Pighog and Poetry School pamphlet competition ("TCW3" paragraph 3) and was shortlisted for the 2017 Michel Marks Award (Durant paragraph 7). As well as writing poetry, Bryan has also worked in a selection of experimental performance pieces.

7.5.2 "The Warner": Poem Analysis

The opening of "The Warner" is highly reminiscent Bannerman's "The Dark Ladie" where, similarly to this poem, a strange-looking figure appears and causes disruption to the rest of the characters in the text. In the case of Bryan's poem, the figure who seems to just materialise in

front of our narrator is the one that gives the poem its title: the Warner. Before diving into the analysis of the poem, it is necessary to understand who this figure is as her role in the poem is of great importance.

As Olive Senior explains in her *Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage*, in Jamaican folklore, the Warner is a figure that is believed to "be in communication with the spirit world from which he or she receives direct messages" (508). This figure can be either a man or a woman and it is known to appear suddenly in various different places, such as "along roads, in towns, or on city streets, to loudly warn the inhabitants of impending doom" (Senior 508). These Warners travel long distances in order to spread their message and to warn the masses to "repent from sin and mend their ways" (508). Warners are figures of doom and authority since there are many recorded examples of them correctly anticipating tragedies such as earthquakes (508). They are usually portrayed as being dressed in robes and head-wrap like a Revivalist (508).

Following the way traditional belief describes their behaviour, at the beginning of the poem the Warner materialises in front of the speaker, from whom we get a description of her looks, which are odd and make her seem almost inhuman. In the first stanza of the poem, we learn that, unlike in traditional accounts, this woman has appeared naked in nothing but the skin all of us were born in" (Bryan lines 1-2), that is, in a position of extreme vulnerability. Despite the fact that the Warner is wearing no clothes, she has a hat on, a hat which holds eggs and she is carrying a mattress strapped to her back which as the speaker points is dirty ("dirt cracks" (line 6)). In addition, the Warner has a "mattress strapped to her back" (line 5) which suggests that she might be carrying her home with herself, hinting, thus, at a nomadic lifestyle that enables her mission to be completed: she travels around to spread her warnings. The way this figure is described does not make the reader think of the Warner as a powerful figure of authority. In fact, her description provokes just the opposite reaction: she seems to be someone that no one would really listen to. Nevertheless, there is something intensely captivating about this figure and, in fact, she has a "mouth of hooks and mesh" (line 3) that makes the reader wonder if her words are meant to be traps for those who listen.

As the first stanza has shown, then, at first glance, the way this woman looks is shocking and somewhat disturbing especially, when perceived from the point of view of the speaker of the poem who, as is revealed shortly after, is a very young girl. Even though she is telling us the story from the perspective of her grown self, the speaker of the poem was "age of school, height of the Golden Stool" (line 7) when this figure appeared in her life. The Golden Stool she refers to is the one that belongs to the Asante tradition, one that was brought down from Heaven and which was used to enthrone all of the kings. This stool is, therefore, a symbol of power and authority and it sets a cultural framework for the poem: one that originated in Ghana and travelled to the Caribbean in slave ships.

As these figures are commonly known to do, the Warner in the poem appears "to preach inside the market place" (line 10), that is, she presents herself to our speaker in a public space where everyday activities take place. In addition, her way of communicating with her listeners is preaching, which places her in a similar position to a priest or spiritual guide, potentially a prophetess as it is her aim to caution her audiences. The closeness to either of these roles bestow the Warner with a high status and a position of importance for the community. It is worth noting here, however, that the speech the Warner delivers is "unlike Parson's three-hour sermon" (line 15) which urges people to "repent and flee the *Everlasting Punishment*" (line 16). This is a telling juxtaposition as it implies that although the social position of the Warner and that of a parson might be similar, there are fundamental differences in their speeches and, since the Warner does not call for repentance and salvation like he does, there is probably a darker layer to her words, which seem more impactful. The speaker also recalls the way the woman's skin looked: "Her skin glowed like the night we had arrived / sequins flitting on the cloak of night" (lines 11-12). The speaker establishes a personal connection with the Warner's skin, making reference to the night her and other people had arrived in the place where they currently are. It is worth noting here that the words used to describe the woman's skin are positive and contrast greatly with her initial description. The comparison to the night makes reference to the darkness of her skin and the words "glowed" (line 11) and the fact that it is linked to sequins (line 12) signal elegance and beauty. Despite her grotesque appearance and questionable looks the one feature the speaker describes in a positive light is the Warner's skin, characterised by its glow and darkness.

When the Warner first speaks, she warns her audience of men. As she explains, men are intentionally deceitful and their only aim is to capture and entrap women and, for this reason, she describes them as having lips "swollen by prayers and wishes" (line 17) while their hands are "crocheted from nets" (line 18). As these lines evidence, the Warner believes that men use their words in order to trick women into trusting them and then use the nets that form their hands to restrict them. She then goes on to compare men to sharks who are "out fishing" (line 19) and as we can infer from the previous lines working on finding women they can make their preys. As she claims, the predatory nature of men is something that must be kept in mind and in order for women not to be caught by the sharks that men are. The speaker of the poem describes the voice of the Warner as a "muscular swell of wind" (line 20) which emphasises the strength and power of her voice. In fact, this voice and her presence are so compelling that everyone is almost forced to stop what they are doing and listen to her preaching "Even the cows stood still like monuments / and stopped chewing their tongues to listen" (lines 23-24). Once again, this specific event is reminiscent of Bannerman's Dark Ladie, in which presence everyone is paralysed and forced to listen to her message.

Changing the course of her discourse significantly, she subsequently tells her audience the way in which they should recount this encounter in the future:

> *When they ask what manner of woman is this?*
> *Tell them I am a mast in the midst of a tempest*
> *a flame as a fountain, a sail on a lantern*
> *the dark artery in the hearts of men.* (lines 25-28)

This stanza is particularly telling because it adds to the already existing idea of the Warner being a strong and powerful person. By comparing herself and her being to the objects she compares it to, she presents herself as someone who has a central role in life, someone whose existence is key for the life of others, she is something that remains in the face of adversity. In presenting herself in this specific way, she is also building onto the importance she claims for herself: this is the discourse she is creating for herself, the way she is choosing to be remembered and thus she gets to define her own personhood. However, ultimately, the

remembering of her in this carefully constructed way is highly dependent on others, on her audience, as they are the ones that will decide whether or not they pass on the idea of her that she would like them to spread. What this means is that, although the Warner is a figure that is powerful enough to construct herself in principle, the opinions of others and the way in which they perceive her will also play a part in the concept of her that lives on in time.

Despite the Warner's powerful message, the speaker's attention returns to the physical appearance of this woman, which seems to become increasingly gruesome as the poem progresses. In fact, the Warner's eyes are no longer on her face: "Her eyes looked as though she took a blade / scooped out the flesh to make two caves" (lines 29-30). The way the lack of eyes is portrayed in this stanza gives it a monstrous character which together with the words that she has delivered has a powerful impact on the people who are watching her. The Combination of her appearance and the presentation of herself in her discourse causes her audience to be both surprised ("The people's mouths hung like udders" (line 31) and scared ("Older brothers held onto their mothers" (line 32). As we see in these two stanzas, the Warner is certainly a powerful person, someone whose influence goes beyond the world her audience inhabits. However, she still relies heavily on those she comes to warn to continue the narrative of who and what she is. She comes both to warn them and to ensure that she is represented in a way she agrees with in the oral narrative of this place.

Continuing her speech, the Warner leaves behind the instructions concerning her representation and returns to the actual message she was delivering. In this stanza, she advises her listeners to be "humble as dust swept up by the wind" (line 33) and seems to warn her speakers about the members of society that represent authority

However, the Warner's discourse is abruptly interrupted when the speaker of the poem moves and the Warner lies eyes on her, at which point the she addresses our young speaker directly to enquire about her father. What follows next, is an exchange in which the speaker of the poem repeatedly mentions that she is not familiar with her father's identity or his whereabouts and, further, she is not interested in finding out any of this: "*Don't you want to know him?* / I never thought it" (lines 45-46). Upon hearing this, the Warner offers to show

the little girl to where her father is: "*If you want to know follow, I will lead you to him*" (line 43). The preoccupation with the little girls father comes as a surprise to the reader of the poem, especially as it distracts the Warner from her original task and makes her forget about her message and the rest of her audience to focus of reuniting the girl and her unknown father. The little girl, on the other hand, is very much unaffected by the powers of the Warner and stays focused on the reason that brought her to the market: "I only came to get flour" (line 49). As well as this, the is aware of the fact that it is getting late and she has to return home.

The Warner is not satisfied with the little girl's answer and she states that "*for a little girl your tongue is sour*" (line 50). This line shows the disapproval of the girl's behaviour on the part of the Warner. As we can infer from her words, she was not expecting to be challenged or contradicted after presenting herself in the way she did. In line with this, she ignores the little girl's objections and decides to provide her with the instructions necessary to ensure that her father will come to her:

> *Let me wet your hands with rum,*
> *wash them, then give me your tongue*
> *to drip honey on but don't swallow it*
> *just wait for his spirit to come collect it.*
> (lines 51-54)

Despite the girl's objections, the Warner continues to try to lure her into doing something that she knows she is not meant to do against her will. It is in this action that her seemingly positive goal of warning the inhabitants of this particular place turns into something that can be considered evil. The little girl then returns, once again, to the Warner's appearance which grows in horridness as we get closer to the poem. In this instance, the girl notices "red running down her thighs, / slow and sticky till the sap drew in flies" (lines 55-56). The description of the Warner's period and the flies that come to it is definitely meant to disgust the audience, both the one that is present during her speech and the reader of the poem.

The little girl, nevertheless, stays firm in her decision not to get herself involved in the tricks of the Warner and displays excellent behaviour: "*No miss, mother said I mustn't drink, /*

it's time to go, the bell already milk" (lines 59-60). The girl decides to listen to what her mother had said and continues to reject the Warner's offer, a fact which the Warner cannot comprehend still as she asks the little girl one more time how she is to know her father if she does not allow her to connect them. The little girl responds that "I is not looking for him" (line 62), a statement that seems to finish the Warners patience and precipitates a significant change both in the Warner's appearance and her behaviour: "It was then bats flew from her tomb-like eyes, / she tilted her head and cast a net in the sky" (lines 63-64). The presence of bats is interesting as it recalls creatures such as vampires and emphasises the potential evil nature of the Warner, which up until this point, could only be inferred. These last two lines give rise to a variety of questions: does the Warner leave the marketplace in rage because she failed in her attempt to get the speaker of the poem to act as she was hoping to? Is the function of the net that has been cast to capture and trap the girl? What is the Warner's end goal? Why does she have such a strong interest in the speaker's father? As these questions are left unanswered the reader of the poem is left wondering what the aim of the Warner was when she came to this marketplace and what would have happened had the speaker accepted to be reunited with her father.

Focusing now on the main points of our concern, in this poem beauty is portrayed as something that is simultaneously appealing and unsettling. There is no doubt that the looks of the Warner are strange: while she is depicted as a striking figure whose skin is described to emphasise its beauty, her eyes, mouth and the general sense of dirt and untidiness that surrounds her suggests a blend of allure and danger. Rather than admiration, the reaction this figure prompts is one of awe which is the direct result of her imposing presence.

Evil, on the other hand, is hinted at at different points throughout the poem: men are described as evil because of their desire to contain women and their activities; powerful and authoritative figures in society are also presented as evil as they are not humble and should not be trusted. More significantly, the Warner herself could be said to be potentially evil, even though she is a complex and nuance figure. Despite her task to warn people of impending danger and the seemingly helpful motivations behind her preaching, upon noticing the presence of the speaker of the poem her behaviour quickly becomes coercive and

manipulative. She attempts to convince the girl to participate in a mysterious ritual involving rum and honey, which the girl clearly feels uncomfortable with and refuses. The Warner's insistence, along with her disregard for the girl's reluctance, could be seen as a misuse of her authority and influence. This combined with the presence of bats and her supernatural appearance could be read as signifiers of evil.

The interaction between beauty and evil in the poem is intriguing. The Warner embodies both — she is a charismatic figure who attracts attention and commands respect, but there's also something ominous about her. The beauty in the poem often has a dark edge to it, and the elements of danger or evil are wrapped in captivating imagery. This interplay could represent the complexities of life, the ambiguity of human nature, or the paradoxes inherent in societal norms and expectations. In the context of the poem, beauty and evil may not be polar opposites but intertwined aspects of the same reality. The poem seems to suggest that what is perceived as beautiful can also carry elements of danger or harm, and what is feared or considered evil might have its own compelling allure. This nuanced portrayal challenges conventional notions of beauty and evil, inviting readers to consider the complexity and ambiguity of these concepts.

7.6 "Mum's Snake"

7.6.1 Rachel Long: Life and Work

Rachel Long is a poet as well as the founder and leader of the Octavia Poetry Collective for Womxn of Color, a collective based at Southbank Centre which works to change the "lack if inclusivity and representation in literature and the academy" ("Rachel Long" paragraph 1). Along this, Long is "a co-tutor on the Barbican Young Poets programme and Poetry Fellow of University of Hertfordshire" (paragraph 1). *My Darling From the Lions* is her debut collection and it was published in 2020 by Picador Books. The success of this collection is evidenced by the many prizes it was long- and short-listed for, which include: the Rathbones Folio Prize, the Costa Poetry Award, the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and the Jahlak Prize. As well as this, the Guardian selected this book as the best Poetry Book (paragraph 1).

My Darling from the Lions is divided into three sections and, although they are all closely connected to each other, they vary slightly thematically. The first section of the collection, entitled "Open", contains mostly poems that concern girls at young ages. In these, Long tackles issues to do with coming of age, religion and the church, sexual abuse (often connected to the institution of the church) and love. The second section, "A Lineage of Wigs", has hair as one of its central themes. This is explored in relation to motherhood and relationships with other older women in the speakers' communities and traditional beliefs. Lastly, "Dolls" explores motherhood and violence against (Black) women.

The poem that concerns us here, "Mum's Snake" is part of the middle section of the book and it contemplates two of the topics that section focuses on: hair and beauty, and motherhood and power. The figure of the mother is a key element of this section of the collection and it is constructed as a strong and empowered, as the poem under analysis will evidence. As is the case in a few of the poems in this collection, "Mum's Snake" combines some realistic elements with some others that are magical or fantastical, it presents our real world the world of the supernatural as being parts of something bigger, but both equally important and real. This spiritual or supernatural dimension is essential to the composition of the world(s) the poems display and it gives the poems an almost dream-like atmosphere. By means of these, the middle section of this collection introduces the reader to Rachel Long's lineage, to the women in her family, and allows us to witness various episodes from her family life.

Overall, Long's debut collection explores the way in which identity is constructed and moulded by the people and traditions around us. She tackles themes of innocence and violence, of coming-of-age and of the role older women play in the lives of younger girls as they grow up.

7.6.2 "Mum's Snake": Poem Analysis

The opening lines of "Mum's Snake" introduce us to the two speakers of the poem: firstly, we encounter the main speaker, the daughter of the woman the title refers to; secondly, the mother, the woman that is mentioned in the title and whose speech is marked in italics. From this, the reader gathers that the poem will deal with an event that belongs to the family's

history, something that has been spoken about and has become part of their collectiveness. We see this both in the fact that the speaker is aware that her mum would not like it for her to refer to the snake as her own ("*It wasn't my snake! It was the snake she put on me!*" (Long line 2), and also by the utterance that follows this, which suggests that the mother's comment is one that is often repeated, something that the mother needs to ensure is clear when this episode is discussed: "Every tine Mum tells it" (line 3) . Although it is not clear at this point what snake our speakers refer to, the mother briefly mentions that the snake is something another woman put on her. Some sort of sorcery or witchcraft which has the feeling of a spell or a curse, therefore, is hinted at from the ver beginning of the poem and remains present throughout the text.

In the second stanza, we learn that this story is in fact something the mother repeats often, and that there is specific body language that accompanies the narration of the events. Rubbing the back of her hand and making her anxiety visible in so doing, the mother states that "*I had to cut it down to this - not a hair* […] *for years*" (lines 5-6). As it has already been discussed in previous chapters of this dissertation, hair is of utter importance when it comes to beauty politics and, even more so, when it concerns Black women. The person that attacked the mother by putting a snake on her and, consequently, making her have to remove all of it targeted a part of her being that is extremely personal and connected to her identity, causing harm and trauma that has stayed with her ever since.

Following this, the daughter comments on the value and significance of: "Hair is a crowning glory. / A source not only of beauty but power" (lines 7-8). As an example of this, the speaker alludes to the story of Samson, whose power came precisely from his uncut hair. However, after being tricked into telling his lover, Delilah, what the source of his strength was, she had it cut and prompted his downfall. If we take into account the strong Biblical allusions throughout this poetry collection and we look at the symbolism of the snake in that text we can draw out some interesting conclusions. The figure of the snake has been attributed a variety of negative meanings in religions ranging from ancient Greece to Christianity. Among these, serpents have been used as a metaphor for evil and power. Portrayed as creatures from the Underworld and often associated with Satan, the symbology of snakes is

mainly one charged with negative connotations and, therefore, it can be stated that the person who put the snake on the mother of the speaker was trying to cause her trouble. However, the implications of this reference to Samson are larger: as the speaker continues to talk, we learn that the loss of one's hair can indeed upturn their life. Once hair is taken away, the speaker claims, everything in a person's life is destroyed, just as it happened in Samson's story: the achievements and love one was destined for vanish with the hair:

> Everything you came into this world with,
> all you were to achieve,
> the love you were meant for,
> Trodden, rotting under the earth. (lines 12-15)

Naturally, a warning follows these statements. The three final lines of this stanza are uttered by the mother, who warns her daughter not to let any of her aunts touch her hair in a very urgent tone: "Don't let any of your aunties touch your hair at the party. / If one of them even reaches out for you, run, / come and find me" (lines 16-18). The tone of alarm and seriousness the mother uses in these lines shows how scared she is at the thought that someone might rob her daughter of her beauty and power, just as it happened to her.

After this warning, we find a one-line stanza which refers back to the title of the collection. This line takes the form of a prayer in which the speaker asks God for protection. Even though these words are not cited literally, the similarity between line 19 and line 17 from the Psalms 35 is remarkable. Where the Psalms say "Lord, how long wilt thou look on? rescue my soul from their destructions, my darling from the lions" (*Holy Bible*, Psalms, 35.17-18), our speaker rephrases it to "Lord deliver me. My enemies wage war against me" (Long line 19). As well as working as a direct reference to the title of the book, which gives it a sense of circularity, the line also shows the extent of the issue the mother is dealing with. The speaker perceives someone touching her hair as someone plotting to hurt her, comparing it to something as violent as war. In the face of this, she turns to God for protection, as it is God that can defeat evil and, if we understand the snake as an embodiment of Satan, the devil, it will also be God that can save her. The evil the speaker seeks protection from, however, is

very different from what David needed to be protected against in this verse. In the case of the speaker of this poem, the speaker needs to be protected from a grown woman who might be attempting to harm her as an extension of what she has done to her mother. Furthermore, the person who seems likely to do this is one of her aunts, a person who in theory is meant to protect and guide her but who, in this case, is seen as a threat.

The next stanza finally recounts the events that took place in relation to the snake. As the mother tells a story she has told many times, the reader discovers that it was her sister that put a snake on top of her hair. The mother prefaces the account of the events by stating that it is not easy to believe what happened, and, in fact, she would understand if the reader did not do so: "You don't have to believe me. It will take an incredible / leap of faith" (lines 20-21). Having stated the rarity of the events that she is about to reveal, the mother tells the reader that the snake her sister put on her head was as big as an anaconda or a python but more dangerous than either of these as it belonged to a realm outside of this world: "but worse because it didn't belong / to this realm wasn't of the physical, you see" (lines 23-24). This description of the snake hits at something magical and evil, something that is more powerful than humans and dips into dark powers. It is worth mentioning that, traditionally, the symbolism of the snake has not been consistently negative. In fact, snakes have been interpreted as symbols of wisdom, rebirth, transformation and healing. However, this specific snake is used by the speaker's aunt as a tool to hurt her sister and rob her of her beauty and power, both of which she perceives as central to her identity.

This snake that was put on her gave the mother of the speaker unbearable migraines and, as she struggled with its presence and its weight, she found that she could not get rid of it: " I could feel it / moving. The migraines, my God, they were cosmic. /I couldn't stand the weight of it. I had to get it off" (lines 25-27). Initially, she attempted to free herself from the snake and its powers by using what we could refer to as European methods: praying against it at church, "I was back and forth from the church, / sometimes three times a day" (lines 28-29) and listening to older members of her community. Since the snake belonged to an otherworldly realm and, as it has been mentioned, it is often associated with the devil, one would think that these methods would work. However, the mother mentions that, despite

those frequent trips to the church, nothing seemed to work to make the snake go away. Everything was tried and nothing managed to rid the mother of her suffering: "The elders tried everything. / The things I had to do, I cannot say" (lines 30-31).

The daughter interrupts the narration to shortly comment on it in the next stanza. Two things are significant about these three lines: firstly, the fact that her mother's sister's name cannot be mentioned in their house: "the one whose name / will not be said in our house, the betrayal to great" (lines 32-33). The speaker's aunt is treated pretty much like the devil, the evil she is capable of, the pain she has put her sister in is too bad to even mention its perpetrator. Secondly, we learn about the sister's euphoric state despite her sister's suffering: "ecstatic. Dancing on the stage ecstatic" (line 34). Not only does the sister continue with her life unaffected by her actions, she seems to be celebrating the success of her mission, that is, her sister's ruin is motive for her to go out dancing.

Going back to the mother's narration now, the reader is told about how the mother managed to defeat the snake in the end. After trying and failing to remove it by means of religion, she followed the advice of a Nigerian prophet who had witnessed a similar occurrence in the past. The advice the prophet gave was the following: "take clippers, / the snake is using your hair as grass, / cut the grass, he will be exposed" (lines 38-40). As we can observe in these lines, the solution to the curse that is the snake comes from a more traditional, ancestral kind of knowledge. The prophet is a man who seems to know and understand this specific kind of evil and, consequently, he is able to fight it. Another very telling detail in this stanza is that the snake that represents evil is male as we learn from the prophet's words. Santilli's remarks about such beliefs in societies that have systems of belief different to our own are pertinent at this point:

> Premodern and non-Western societies embrace within their symbolic imaginaries, often as part of their religion, fantastic figures, hybrids of humans and animals, demons, and other unnatural or supernatural creatures. Such beings are not strictly speaking what I would call horror entities. The reason for this is that the mythologies and imaginative terrains of these cultures have named such beings and have located them within their symbolic system. If the borders are open to a liberal exchange between the living and

241

the dead, gods and mortals, or beasts and men, then what they may look to us like monstrous manifestations are not, in fact, truly monstrous or horrific because they are constituted within a particular cultural matrix itself, being named and understood as such. (186)

This quote opens our eyes to a different reading of the text, one in which we can come closer to the position of the prophet than to that of the Western doctors or the mother's husband. In doing so, we might come to understand that, strange as it seems to us, the presence of the snake this woman relates is real and, as such, it has concrete consequences in her life. The existence of creatures such as this is an integral part of the systems of belief of many countries outside the West and they often do manifest themselves in people's lives.

The mother knows that, had she gone to the doctor's to try and deal with the snake, they would have thought her to be a mad woman and put her in some sort of psychiatric hospital, taking her away from her daughter

> Had I gone to the doctors
> of course they would've said I was crazy!
> Can you imagine — *Excuse me, Doctor Mangwana,*
> *I can feel a snake on my head. A heavy snake*
> *unless I shave my head.*
> *Ha! You would have spent your childhood*
> *visiting me in the Maudsley.*. (Long lines 41-47)

This expected reaction on the part of the doctors shows that Western cultures, which do not believe in this kind of evil or the way to remedy it, would have dismissed her and thought that there was something wrong with her rather than paying her the attention she desperately needed. Therefore, the mother followed the prophet's advice and had her hair cut off. The person who performed this task for her was her cousin, as she knew that her husband would not understand: "my husband won't understand, not being from our land" (Long line 49). This line shows that the husband, most likely a white man who is not familiar with traditional African beliefs and customs, would probably act in a similar way to the doctors and dismiss her, rather than cutting her hair off to help alleviate her pain.

242

However, the cousin does help her and all of her hair is removed from her head: "Mum's orb of a 'fro lays on the red & gold carpet" (line 51). As previous lines have suggested, hair is the source of both beauty and power and, thus, in cutting it off both of these are taken away from the mother. Hair is of vital importance to this woman and without it she now feels powerless and ugly. It is worth noting how close the connection between beauty and power is in this poem: they both have the same source and they are both something that causes the mother's sister to be jealous and motivates her to hurt her own sister.

The stanza that follows the cutting off of the hair mirrors the sixth stanza of the poem, where we learnt how much of a taboo subject this aunt has become in the speaker's house. Nevertheless, the aunt finds herself in a very different state now: "-enraged. Screaming into the mirror enraged" (line 56). Her victorious joy and excitement that prompted her to dance has been replaced with pure anger that makes her scream instead. Since the mother has been able to find a way to rid herself of the curse the aunt put on her, her mood has drastically changed. She has been defeated and her anger is further proof that it was her that was responsible for the appearance of the snake in the first place.

Although the mum has succeeded as far as freeing herself from the snake, the final stanza to the poem reveals that there is a lot that has changed and that she is still unable to grow her hair back. Instead, her room now resembles a hair shop: "It's a wig shop!" (line 59). In her new reality, the mother spends the day praying surrounded by all kinds of different wigs, an image of Jesus hanging on the wall. She has been sentenced to baldness by her sister, and she tries to protect herself by praying "till her knees and elbows are sore" (line 69). Loosing her hair is a deeply traumatic event for this woman and it drives her to completely change her behaviour and way of living.

The poem does not explore the reasons and motivation behind the speaker's aunt's actions. However, a woman attacking another woman's beauty is something that is often fuelled by jealousy. Hair is considered an element of women's femininity, which plays a huge role as to whether or not they are considered beautiful. In the case of Black women, this takes particular significance as there are so many debates concerning "good" and "bad" hair and,

thus, the sister targeting the mother's hair takes a deeper meaning. As the sections above have explored in depth, hair is both personal and political for everyone but it is a topic that is particularly charged with meaning in Black communities as, historically, it has had a great impact on the way they were viewed in society and, by extension, their positions within said society. Arguably, as well as affecting her personal life and making her have to wear wigs, the lack of natural hair will also affect the way others look at her and it will, no doubt, motivate remarks and questions about the newly-incorporated wigs.

As this analysis has shown, the notion of beauty in this poem is very closely connected to hair, which is both a source of physical beauty and power. The importance Long places on her is representative of the ways in which many cultures understand hair, cultures in which the lack of 'good' hair often means that someone's looks will be devaluated. Because of this, beauty is a prized possession, and the value of it is evidenced by the tragic consequences that losing it entail.

Evil is as clear a power as beauty is in this poem. Embodied both in the actions of the sister who attacks the mum and the snake that brings this curse to life, it takes the form of betrayal and physical harm. This evil force is a parasitical body that seems to feed off the mum's beauty and causes her both physical and spiritual turmoil and the only way to cure it is to essentially give up her beauty and her power, signified by her hair.

7.7 "Ode to South London Gyaldem"

7.7.1 Caleb Femi: Life and Work

Caleb Femi is a writer, director and photographer and, despite his young age, he already accumulates many successes. He was born in Kano, Nigeria in 1990 and later moved to London at seven years old, where he settled in an estate in Peckham (McConnell paragraph 1). He studied English literature at university and subsequently worked as a secondary school teacher (paragraph 4). As a poet, his main goal has been to make poetry accessible to the wide population, focusing specifically on young people from backgrounds similar to his own (paragraph 4).

Described as "one of the UK's most prestigious new poetic voices" ("Caleb Femi. " *BIFA*), he was the first Black man to receive the title of Young People's Laureate for London from 2016 to 2018, a time during which he "worked to connect and engage with marginalised, disenfranchised young people through the medium of poetry, encouraging them to voice their experiences through a dedicated platform" ("Caleb Femi. " *KODE* paragraph 1). His influence and impact in our culture has been acknowledged in places such as *The Guardian*, *The Dazed 100 list* of next-generation culture shapers, and an article published by Vogue that dealt with new generation Black British filmmakers ("Caleb Femi. " *BIFA*). He has been commissioned both by the BBC and Channel 4 to write and direct short films and he has even been commissioned to write poems by well-established institutions such as the Tate Modern, The Royal Society for Literature and St Paul's Cathedral among others ("Caleb Femi. " *BIFA*). As well as this, Femi has worked with some worldly-acclaimed fashion brands, such as Mulberry, Bottega Veneta and Louis Vuitton, for whom he directed their fall/winter 2022 collection film ("Caleb Femi. " *KODE* paragraph 3). He is currently working on "two shows of his own creation" (paragraph 4).

Caleb Femi's debut poetry collection, entitled *Poor*, was published by Penguin Press in 2020 although some of the poems in the book had already been put out into the world previously in the form of recordings. In this collection Femi writes about South London, Peckham more specifically, and the state where he grew up. The whole collection is a hymn to the community that saw him grow and shaped him in a fundamental way. In order to create a full image of this place, the collection combines both poems and some of the poet's original pieces of photography, which are just as integral to the collection as the poems. In fact, it is fair to say that one could not exist without the other and both of them complement each other to create a wonderful way of storytelling. By the means of these two media, the collection "explores the trials, tribulations, dreams and joys of young Black boys in twenty-first century Peckham" ("Caleb Femi. " *BIFA*).

This deeply touching poetry collection has London's young black boys as its focal subject. Its main intention is to give these boys a voice, to expose them as they genuinely are and not as the media portrays them. In so doing, Caleb humanises these members of society by giving visibility to the reality of the community he belongs to and challenges both the invisibility and hyper-visibility these men struggle with in their daily lives and how this affects their mental health. As we see them in the poems that compose the collection, these

men are simply that: young men trying to figure life out, young boys who have passions and dreams as much as they have fears, insecurities and anxieties. The theme of masculinities that underpins the whole collection might seem to be somewhat at odds with the topic that concerns this dissertation. In fact, women are far from being the central topic of Femi's collection and for the most part female characters are mentioned rather than explored. However, even though they are placed in the periphery of the poems, they are very much present and the way in which the reader perceives them, through the lenses of the narrating subjects, is of great interest here.

When thinking about the poets that have influenced his work, Femi mentions the Romantic poets. The poet finds the idea of the sublime as something to be achieved through nature fascinating and works to figure out how this relates to our present time and location: does the fact that we live in environments mostly built in concrete, which are opposite to the landscapes the Romantics admired, mean that we cannot access the experience of the sublime? (Femi paragraph 31). However, as his work, and particularly the poem we will look at below, shows these two things need not be conceived as opposites, but as different ways of experiencing one same feeling (paragraph 32). In Femi's own words: Much of what I'm capturing in the book is my answer to the question of the sublime that the Romantic poets were obsessed with. How innocence works and what the loss of innocence does; how those two things are also divided. In that way, I was trying to contribute to the work of the Romantics. The sublime in this community exists. The terrain is very different; it is man-made" (paragraph 32). Despite the differences in the environment that surrounds Femi, he indubitably manages to evoke the sublime in his work, as we see in his poem "Ode to South London Gyaldem".

7.7.2 "Ode to South London Gyaldem": Poem Analysis

This short, one stanza poem is completely different from the ones that have been studied until this point and the main reason for this is that, as opposed to the rest of the poems, "Ode to South Ldn Gyaldem" does not have women as its main subject. Instead, the woman in this poem is somewhat of a necessary complement to the narrators experience, a presence whose function it is to work as the source of certain emotions, to complete a fantasy that the speaker gains comfort from.

The poem starts by beautifully setting the scene in autumn time: "October is a strange month./ The sun dies & leaves behind fire petals" ("Ode to South Ldn Gyaldem" lines 1-2). This opening is reminiscent of Keats's poem "La Belle Dame sans Merci" where the decaying surroundings of the knight set the tone for the poem, placing the knight in an environment that is slowly dying away and which reflects his sorry condition. In this case, however, the general atmosphere of the poem is considerably more positive: instead of a suffering knight we have a narrator who is able to appreciate the beauty of the moment, the "fire petals" (line 1) despite the fact that the sun is dying and the world is going into its hibernation mode. This, the reader slowly realises, is the speaker's safe space, a source of comfort rather than a reflection of his sadness.

Out of this magnificent image the object of interest emerges: "& you/ emerge in the slickest finger waves (lines 2-3). The appearance of this woman, who the narrator refers to in the second person, has a mystical feeling, the reader imagines her as a vision, something not of this world. Although very little information about this woman is offered, both in terms of personality or looks, the narrator pauses to comment on her hair which is styled in "the slickest finger waves" (line 3). Once again, we can notice the importance of hair in black communities and how central it is to the way in which a person is perceived. In this particular case, the hairstyle she is wearing is the only specific description of the woman's appearance that the poem offers. Finger waves are a fairly elaborate hair-style and one that conveys the message that the person wearing it has spent significant time styling their hair. Therefore, the woman in the poem is someone who pays great attention to her appearance and is, as a consequence, perceived as beautiful.

The narrator is almost enthralled by this woman and reflects on how much he would like to spend every night dreaming about her: "What I would give to see you every night/ in my dreams" (lines 4-5). These two lines emphasise the idea that this woman is otherworldly, something that can only be accessed in one's dreams, and she has managed to take hold of the narrators thoughts almost completely. The way the woman moves is compared to that of "stems slicking around slips of rays" (lines 6) thus equating the movement of her body to

nature and this movement has such an impact in what is around her that it is capable of "stopping traffic — traffic stopping" (line 7). The choice of words to describe the woman is to be noted here as her being described as 'traffic-stopping' suggests that she is someone whose looks are considered outstanding in society, someone who manages to capture the attention of everyone around her without necessarily intending to.

Since the narrator would like to experience this every night, he attempts to describe what he is thinking of to the night, who is the "architect who builds my dreams" ("Ode to line 9) and this, precisely is what we are presented with until the very end of the poem. The image he constructs is one that centres mostly in personality traits and behaviour, rather than looks as we have seen up to this point:

> "I say you are *unafraid,*
> *a roof*: one made of mosaics,
> covering a palace somewhere". (lines 13-15)

These lines provide the reader, as well as the night, with some more details as to the characteristics of this woman. She is 'unafraid' a word that carries connotations of courage, bravery, confidence, and resolve. This suggests she is not only fearless in the face of adversity but also possesses an inner strength and independence, personality traits, as we have seen, that are not often appreciated or praised when displayed by women. These features, however, are combined with some others that are much more in line with the traditional construction of femininity. The woman the speaker is conjuring up is also a 'roof' and this statement carries with it notions of comfort, homeliness and protection. For the speaker of this poem, this woman signifies refuge, a space in which he can rest from the pressures of the outside world and show his true self, to be open and vulnerable. Altogether, these lines paint a picture of a woman who is a harmonious blend of strength and comfort. She is a sanctuary that allows vulnerability while also embodying resilience and courage. This complex portrayal disrupts conventional gender norms and constructs a unique representation of femininity, one which nevertheless is still idealised.

As it continues, the description appeals to the senses and brings up comforting memories which further emphasise the ideas of domestic safety observed in the previous lines: "I play my favourite natural sound/ *[sliced plantain stuttering in oil]* (lines 16-17). These lines paint a picture of comfort, cosiness and familiarity that are so key to home life, a picture that feels and smells like a haven for the speaker of this poem. The very mundane nature of these images is a central dimension to the construction of the dreamy woman the narrator is describing as she is the very embodiment of these feelings.

Despite the fact that he is able to describe the setting of the dream he would like to have every night "*[October sunset as burning bruise]*" (line 10), when it comes to the ideas from which this woman is to be recreated he is only able to mention some more vague concept such as "*memory & bronze*" (line 11). The lack of physical detail provided to the night, who is meant to be in charge of replicating these dreams every night, makes evident the little importance that it is given to the appearance of this woman after stating that it is exceptionally attractive.

Overall, what the speaker of the poem is able to tell the night architect is not very detailed, as he is very aware himself:

> I say, *That's it, that's everything I have,*
> *build me a looping dream of*
> *October's quenching tongue, & you —*". (lines 18-20)

However, the closing lines of this poem further emphasise the impressiveness of this woman "*y*ou, who can't be made again / in the best work of the night" (lines 21-22). Despite the power the night has to recreate the speaker's desired dreams, the woman he wants to inhabit those dreams is so perfect that even the night itself will not be able to recreate her, despite its best efforts.

As we see from this analysis, in this poem beauty manifests itself through evocative descriptions of the 'you' the speaker is part-remembering and part-dreaming up. The description of the woman that 'you' refers to is not as detailed as others we have seen in the

analyses of previous poems, and neither does the speaker reflect on physical aspects as much as previously mentioned authors have. However, the idea of the woman in this poem is still one that is defined by her good looks as much as it is defined by specific behaviour and personality traits. When it comes to her physical appearance, it is described in terms that evoke natural beauty and elegance. At the same time, the way in which the narrator constructs this dream-woman relies on a certain idea of femininity which goes hand in hand with one of the roles that black women often take in their communities: that of the carer, a refuge for men. This position that women are often expected to take still relies on stereotypes of women as nurturers and protectors, the ones who are in charge of creating peaceful environments for the men in their lives. Beauty is not simply aesthetic here, although that dimension of it is important. It is multifaceted and it encompasses resilience, cultural identity and the sublime in everyday life as well as physical beauty.

Complementing the description of the woman is that of the environment, the setting of the poem, which is also filled with beauty. Although the setting of this poem speaks of an indoor space, even a kitchen, which is not one that is commonly thought of as particularly beautiful, the speaker finds beauty in these spaces and actions of everyday life. The poem is, fundamentally, a celebration of the quotidian and, therefore, these thing are seen as a source of pleasure and beauty. Once again, these home spaces are traditionally known as 'women's spaces', the domestic realm that they look after and make into a safe and comfortable space for others.

When it comes to evil, it is clear enough that the almost ideal woman that the reader is presented in this poem could not be any further from having any kind of malicious intentions. In fact, she stands for exactly the opposite. Here, the woman is idealised, she is compared to a "roof", someone who is above everyone else and who guards them against the elements, metaphorically speaking, of the negative aspects of life.

But not only is this poem interesting when we look at the female character, equally, if not more, interesting is what we learn about the narrator. What we have here is a black man in a very tender and intimate moment, sharing his yearning for this perfect domestic haven.

Since black men are mostly villainised by the media, turned into monsters that have no feelings, this image of a black man who is sensitive and appreciative of the small details, the beauty of the moment, highly contrasts with the mainstream understanding of what a black man is. This villanisation comes from the images we consume in the news and other forms of media and the extreme criminalisation of Black men that is still a reality in Britain. The images that accompany the poems in the book aim to break with this generally accepted image of black men as evil, they are trying to present a new narrative, to show these young black men as the people they are and not as the monsters the media shows them to be. The socially-constructed idea of black masculinity is challenged, both in the poem and in the photography that is so central to the understanding of *Poor*.

While we learn very little about this specific man's circumstances, evil remains very much hidden in the edges of this poem. The entire description the speaker provides is idyllic: he builds an image of perfect calm and safety that comes to life with in the space itself and the woman who inhabits it. However, hints of a far less perfect reality find their way in through the crevices and are carried by words such as "burning bruise" (line 10), which let the reader feel the hurt and suffering that exist outside of this haven. As well as this, the speaker mentions "the tax of waking" (line 12), which similarly shows that returning to the real world is not a happy occurrence. In fact, reality, seems to think the speaker, is a burden which can only be escaped by entering this dream world. Finally, there is also a sense of melancholy that is present throughout the poem but best perceived in its closing lines: "you, who can't be made again / in the best work of night" (lines 21-22). As real as this woman has been feeling for the entire the poem, it is clear by this point that she is someone who is irrevocably lost to the speaker and who can never be approximated, even in dreams. Overall, reality, for the speaker, feels like a harmful place where systematic racism and socio-economic injustices are a daily struggle from which he can only find refuge in this dream world. And, even then, not really.

The poem paints a beautiful image which combines what is dream-like and otherworldly with the most ordinary and simple everyday life. Despite the fact that the woman in this poem is by no means evil, she is still very close to an ideal, someone who is to be

praised due to the perfection that the combination of her looks and her character represent. She stands for support and protection, and her presence is as comforting as it is exciting. With this idealisation of the female character, the narrator is inevitably turning her into a stereotype. However, if we broaden our scope and look at the collection as a whole, *Poor*'s task is most definitely hymnal, it constitutes a deep praise to the Black communities of South London and it can be read as a love letter to its members. Often, these communities struggle with issues of misogyny which puts them in a position in which they need to be constantly negotiating historical trauma. By addressing a topic such as the one in this poem, Caleb Femi is starting a conversation from the point of view of a man, praising and showing admiration for the work that Black women do as the main nurturers in their community, a point of view which is at odds with the preconceived ideas that our society has of romantic relationships between Black people.

Conclusions

As this dissertation has shown throughout, poetry is much more than a simple play of words which searches for rhyme and aesthetic value over substance. The poems considered in this dissertation are a clear example of the deeper and more meaningful nature of poetry which allows those who dabble in it to "learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes" ("Poetry is not a Luxury" 8). Poetry, as these poems evidence, is a gateway into the depths of human experience, as varied as it is, as well as a source of strength and a catalyst for potential change. This function of poetry is, precisely, what defines the literary tradition in which all the authors considered in this dissertation write: "is to raise individual consciousness in order to create social and political change" (Taylor 17).

Similarly, it has been shown that the poetry written by contemporary Black British authors is not only part of the British literary tradition, but its logical continuation. As the influences claimed by some of the authors above have shown, such as Chaucer and the Romantics themselves, these poems are in direct conversation with those written centuries ago in this country. The reasons for this are clear: literary tradition has little to do with one's skin colour. The Black British poets writing nowadays have been educated in a system that praises those voices from the past and, as such, have learnt to appreciate and value them. As Taylor states, Black British writing is "created within a framework of multiple relationships. The tensions among the relationships of race, identity, culture, and history converge and create a series of thematic and structural continuities and discontinuities that work within and against a tradition of revolutionary poetics" (17). While these contemporary authors are often considered to be more experimental formally, it has been shown that there are many themes that find continuity in the poems that are being written nowadays. It is for this reason that the comparison of texts from these two periods has been fruitful and has contributed to the process of re-thinking the value and position of Black British poetry within the British literary tradition.

Moving on to the specific notions of beauty and evil and in the light of what has been discussed throughout the dissertation, we can claim that making definite and categorical statements about the evil or goodness of the characters that feature in these poems is, indeed, quite complex if possible at all. As some of the poems under consideration show, the line that

separates these two qualities is more of a continuum than an actual black-and-white opposition. Nevertheless, some conclusions might be extracted from the analyses of the poems and the ways in which these two concepts are portrayed speak about society at large.

Coleridge's poem is probably the most complex one and the one that has the least clear message. His two heroines, Christabel and Geraldine, are extremely beautiful women who judging by their appearance of delicacy and loveliness, at least at first sight, would unquestionably accept to embody the ideal of womanhood that their fathers expect for them to personify. However, both of them transgress the rules, and both of them willingly engage in an act of sexual intercourse. The first part of the poem clearly shows that neither evil nor innocence and virtue are inherent to any of the characters. Instead, both of them are produced (Ulmer 383) and they, therefore, depend on the environment and the other characters that surround Christabel and Geraldine. As a consequence, we can claim that during the first part of the poem, in which the two female characters are by themselves in a space that can be considered their own and which is, thus, disconnected from Sir Leoline's patriarchal rules, none of them feels the need to be evil. However, the behaviour of both characters changes radically in the second part of the poem, and the polarisation of good and evil becomes clear: while Christabel wants to be pure and good in the presence of her father, Geraldine could, in fact, be said to behave in an evil way during this second part. Nevertheless, we can claim that this evil behaviour, which leads her to completely disregard Christabel and leave her alone, is a direct result of the environment in which she finds herself, an environment dominated by Sir Leoline's rules, and, as a consequence, it seems evident that she is not innately and inherently evil, but rather she is triggered to be this way by the circumstances in which she finds herself. It is patriarchy, then, that forces women to compete for men's attention and prompts destructive attitudes in women and feeds them the lie that replicating the behaviour of men is a route to gain power similar to the one they enjoy. As Ulmer states, thus, "what we have of the text insists on the complex entanglement of good and evil" (388).

Regarding "The Dark Ladie", we could probably label the main character of the poem as aggressive and violent and, as a mater of fact, "for Bannerman, any hope of transcendence requires violence, for it is the only agency powerful enough to confront the pervasive and culturally sanctioned ideologies that imprison women" (Heilman xii). However, the Dark

254

Ladie cannot be considered to be an evil character since she is trying to make justice. If we look at the lady as a victim of Sir Guyon, we get to understand the very important role that men play in the creation of 'evil' women, that is, men mistreat and abuse women and they expect them not to react, they do not expect their actions to have consequences. This kind of "cruelty and exploitation are repeatedly perpetrated against the disadvantaged in Bannerman's poetry" (xlii) and, in this particular case, she uses it to "highlight the imbalance of power between privileged men and disadvantaged women" (c). As in the case of Geraldine, therefore, the Dark Ladie is not evil by nature, but rather she is forced to be violent because it is her only way to attempt to try the knights's behaviour. It is also important to mention that Bannerman's lady is the only female character who is not beautiful: her appearance is purely monstrous and there is nothing that will conceal it. Since, as we have seen, beauty is ultimately about the behaviour considered appropriate for women and this lady breaks all the rules willingly and with apparent lack of remorse she cannot be beautiful: her appearance is just as monstrous as her actions would have been considered to be. A particularity that must be kept in mind when thinking about this poem is the foreignness of the lady, who presents herself in a way that is probably usual in the place from which she originates but which adds an extra layer to her othering and, therefore, her perception as an evil creature.

When it comes to "La Belle Dame sans Merci", once again, we find that despite the conscious efforts the poem makes to portray the lady as evil, she is far from being so. Keats tries to create a female character that is innately evil, a cruel and merciless woman who uses her beauty to seduce the knight and deliberately cause him pain. The knight's perception of the woman as evil stems from his inability to understand the fairy, a problem that has its source in the knight's own attitude, which leads him to "desire to decode and place the women in conventional value systems that protect male power" (Shankar Narayan 126).

Concerning "A Legend of Tintagel Caslte", and since the poem was written specifically to be published in an annual and such publications left "no place for the demon lover or the evil enchantress" (*The Quest for Knowledge* 220), the nymph in this poem is, of course, not an evil character. Landon is not interested in portraying female characters that subvert the established social rules by means of their violent or evil personality. Instead, she prefers to demonstrate the consequences of submitting to the nineteenth-century ideal of

woman by presenting her readers with a character that resembles them, one with which they will be able to empathise. The nymph is certainly the embodiment of the idea of beauty that was linked to this kind of behaviour: she is delicate, fragile and passive. Therefore, beauty's function in this poem is just to reinforce the ideas conveyed by the nymph's behaviour. Using the beautiful as a moral force by representing it so closely related to goodness, allows Landon to comment on the " culturally-determined concepts of the inherited distinctions between the love of men and of women" (*The Woman behind L.E.L.* 80).

More generally speaking, a common trait we can find in the two poems written by the male Romantic poets is that both of them use the beauty of their female characters to hide their supposed evil side. Both Geraldine and the Belle Dame use their beauty to trick men into liking them or into forcing them to act in the way they would like them to. These texts definitely reflect men's anxieties about the position of women in society and in the literary world and, at the same time, particularly in Keats's poem, they reflect the threat that this kind of woman represented to their masculinity and the masculinity of their characters. The poems written by women, on the other hand, have a very different attitude towards beauty: while Landon's nymph's beauty proves to be ineffective for anything other than getting Sir Lancelot's attention in the first place, an attention that does not last for long, Bannerman's lady is just a horrible monster created by Sir Guyon's actions. The complete lack of beauty with which this character is portrayed speaks of the relationship between not acting in a way that feels agreeable to the patriarchy and being perceived as evil.

As we have been able to see, all these women are others just because of their very sex. Nevertheless, Geraldine, the Dark Ladie, and La Belle Dame are also abjects. They are not fully human and, as a consequence, they are are excluded from society and are considered to be monstrous. Since this is the position they are allotted, their position as objects is reinforced. All the women in the poems are clearly objects in a discourse that only allows men to be subjects and thoroughly ensures that women will not be able to act according to their own and will, instead, be acted upon. The women that refuse to accept this position are excluded from the real world and labelled as monstrous, a label that denies their humanity and turns them into beings such as fairies and serpentine creatures.

Concerning the reasons behind these differences, the different positions that male and female authors held in their society is probably the factor that played the most important role. While, as we have seen, during Romanticism women were determined to find their own space both within the literary world and in society without necessarily confining themselves to the genres and types of themes that men considered appropriate for them, male authors felt considerably threatened by the increasing presence and importance of women in the literary market of the time. These threats surfaced in their writing and were embodied by the *femme fatale*-like characters that inhabit the poems that have been considered here.

These female characters, however monstrous they might be, force the readers to question the way we understand the reality we live in and to reconsider what it is that we consider unacceptable and why consider it should be so. Moreover, they force us to think about the things that we exclude because they do not conform to the ideas we have created about what being "normal" and "proper" is (Cohen 20). The monsters the first half of this paper has analysed, in particular, pose interesting questions concerning the constructions of gender that, even nowadays, operate in our society and, at the same time, they make evident that human beings have been trying to unsettle these received notions for centuries.

Moving on to the texts of the present, and starting with "U.F.O. Woman" a clear shift can be seen in the representation and embodiment of evil. The U.F.O. woman's appearance, marked by iridescence and translucence, becomes a focal point for discrimination and racism, illustrating the absurdity of judgments based on physical characteristics. Agbabi flips the script on conventional beauty norms, emphasising the protagonist's alien beauty as a source of strength rather than shame. However, it is this very difference that subjects her to objectification and exclusion, revealing society's evils through acts of prejudice and discrimination. Through the U.F.O. woman's odyssey, Agbabi critiques the enduring colonial structures within both Western and non-Western contexts, demonstrating that neither London nor Lagos offers a sanctuary from societal hierarchies. The protagonist's experiences in Sussex further underline the extension of urban prejudices into the postcolonial countryside, suggesting that cultural and social stratification is ubiquitous. In this poem evil is not gendered as it was in the ones previously analysed: in fact, it is the masses, society at large, that while almost portraying the U.F.O. Woman as evil are perpetuating it. While the

behaviours the U.F.O. Woman falls victim to are aggravated because of her identity as a woman, the racist structures which operate in all the locations she visits would remain similar towards a Black man.

The sequence of poems that has Medusa as its main character follows a similar argument and also touches on the importance of conforming to the beauty ideal that predominates in a certain society. While Medusa is repeatedly told that she is ugly and she is treated as someone who does not belong within the society in which she lives, this narrative is complemented with rumours of her evil nature. Smartt focuses specifically on the role that hair plays in the belonging or non-belonging of Black women, a topic that is central to much of the literature written by Black women both in the present and historically. Medusa is certainly othered and treated like a monster in these poems but what we learn about her as the sequence progresses is that, rather than being a monster, she is someone who is suffering the consequences of living in a patriarchal, racist society. As much as this poem focuses on the negatives, however, its ultimate message is one of hope and strength as Smartt urges Black women to stay true to themselves despite the evils of society, a society that constructs them as monsters while being a monster itself.

The second poem by Agbabi, "The Contract. Femme Fatale. (The Second Nun's Tale)", is one that is in direct conversation with other texts of the British literary tradition as it engages with Chaucer's work. In this poem, the character of the woman is first presented as a *femme fatale* of sorts, and, as such, she is a representative of the anxieties of other characters, as well as those of society, regarding the role and behaviour of women. This woman is both someone who possesses great beauty and someone who is considered plain and her character is strategic and resilient. Despite her not representing traditionally feminine values and despite the transgressiveness she embodies, men seem to be attracted to her and it is these same qualities they are attracted to that make them feel threatened by her independence and unwillingness to submit. The question of her evil nature, however, is to be doubted as she is looking for revenge for the wrongs that have been done to her. Evil in this poem, therefore, is signified in the values of the patriarchal society that creates men with fragile masculinities who resort to violence when their desires are not satisfied. As in previous instances, the woman in this poem is capable of violence and manipulation, but she is not evil in nature.

"a recipe for retaliation" is another poem that addresses the narratives that are constructed in society when women refuse to submit to the roles they are meant to fulfil. This poem very overtly explores the idea that beauty is not only a physical feature but a notion that is closely associated with behaviour and attitude. Only women who embody the feminine ideal that is defined by weakness, silence and obedience are thought beautiful while the rest are placed in a category that more closely resembles monstrosity. These are, in fact, the women that, once again, embody an alternative model of femininity and who are seen as a threat to the established social order. Kisuule's message, however, is clear: trying to conform to the ideal of femininity that society constructs is not only insincere to oneself, but deeply harmful. It is for this reason that she urges women to break free from the constraints of society and focus on building their own true selves. Evil, thus, is once again represented by the values that a patriarchal society perpetuates, a society which in turn is determined to spread the belief that women are the evil creatures who refuse to follow the rules.

The character of the Warner personifies the connection between beauty and evil which is so central to Bryan's poem. In this instance, beauty is depicted as a dual force, capable of drawing both allure and disquiet. The Warner's appearance is notably unconventional, her striking features and the dirt and untidiness that accompany her create an image that is at once captivating and unnerving. Her presence elicits a reaction more akin to awe than simple admiration, indicating a powerful figure that commands attention but also suggests an undercurrent of danger. Evil is subtly woven throughout the poem, reflected in the desires of men to control women, and in the authoritative figures whose lack of humility casts them in a malevolent light. The Warner herself, while initially appearing as a benign entity warning of danger, reveals a potentially sinister side. Her coercive behaviour towards the poem's speaker, pressuring the girl into an unwanted ritual, highlights a manipulative use of her influence, and elements like bats and her supernatural aura signify a darker aspect. In her, charisma and command are underscored by an ominous undertone, suggesting that beauty can possess a dark side and that evil may be enticing. This is, perhaps, the first character in the poems by Black British authors that can be claimed to be evil, especially because her motivations to convince the speaker of the poem to do something she is not meant to are not evident and seem not to go further than the Warner's own desires. While the section in which she tries to convince the girl to participate in her ritual are reminiscent of the scene in "Christabel" in which the spell takes place, the difference here is clear: the Warner's intentions are obscure.

When it comes to "Mum's Snake", we have another example of a poem that places its emphasis on the importance of hair in the construction of beauty in Black cultures. The act of a woman sabotaging another woman's hair, particularly when considering the cultural and political implications of hair in Black communities, suggests an undercurrent of jealousy, one that is emphasised when the violence is perpetrated by the victim's own sister. Hair, a symbol of femininity and beauty, becomes a battleground for societal standards and personal identity, especially when discussing the nuanced concepts of 'good' and 'bad' hair within these communities. In this context, the assault on the mother's hair by her sister holds significant weight. It is an act that resonates with historical oppression and the struggle for acceptance that Black people have faced, where hair is not merely a personal attribute but something that carries further political meaning. The consequences of the attack extend beyond the personal realm, affecting the mother's public perception and potentially causing her image in society to be exposed to judgement and unprompted questions. As the analysis illustrates, hair in this poem is tantamount to beauty itself—a tangible representation of allure and social capital. The cultural valuation of hair, wherein the absence of 'good' hair can lead to a depreciation of one's appearance, underscores the idea that beauty is a coveted asset which carries with it privilege and social status. Evil, therefore, is embodied by the aunt who, similarly to Geraldine in "Christabel" makes use of the tools of a patriarchal society to debilitate another woman and potentially gain some of her power, even if it is only by comparison.

Lastly, Caleb Femi's poem is the only contemporary Black British piece of poetry written by a man. This poem speaks of the evils of a racist society but it does so in a different light: he focuses on the effects a society like this one has for men in their lives and their identities. It is society, thus, that sets a standard of masculinity for men, just as it sets a standard of femininity for women, and this ideal masculinity is just as damaging. In circumstances such as these, the voice of the poem builds an ideal woman who serves him as a refuge from the evils of society: she is a representation of a space in which he can express his true self and let the guard down. Beauty, softness and warmth converge in this ideal woman who, rather than a monstrous creature, is the speaker's protector. While this poem has clear similarities to "La Belle Dame sans Merci", it stays clear from a *femme fatale*-like portrayal of the ideal woman and, instead, she remains idealised throughout the text, the spell never broken. As positive as the image of the woman that this speaker creates is, it still relies

very heavily on stereotypical ideas about womanhood and creates a woman that, rather than being a fully-fleshed, complex individual, is someone who only serves the purpose of creating comfort for the speaker.

As the analysis of these poems has shown, beauty and evil are themes that remain very present in the poetry that is written in Britain nowadays. Poets from both periods engage with notions of beauty and the importance of the ideal in their respective societies. All the authors considered in this dissertation show concern with the ways in which societies inflict control on women, whether it is to express their anxieties emerging from potential subversion and change, as is the case of Coleridge and Keats, or to actively speak up and challenge the constraints that are still affecting the lives of women in general and Black women in particular nowadays, as Kisuule and Agbabi do. Although our society has evolved significantly, the impact of beauty ideals which are as much about behaviour as they are about appearance are still a central concern for contemporary poets and, particularly for women poets. The texts analysed in the latter half of this dissertation prove that the society in which these authors are writing is still very much concerned with its stability and with conserving the systems that are in place, a situation that is not all that different from that of the Romantic period. These systems, which are built on sexist and racist ideas, still feel anything that could unbalance their order as a threat that must be cancelled and is as a result Othered, turned into a monster which cannot fully exist within their society. This is the reason why women and people of colour, be it Black or any other ethnicities, are still forced to exist in the borders of British society despite having exited in this country for centuries.

The poems of this period, however, portray women in ways that differ considerably from those of the Romantic time. While the poems written by Coleridge and Keats seemed to make an active effort to portray women as evil, the poems written more recently show clear awareness of the role that society plays in constructing women as monsters. The authors of poems such as "U.F.O. Woman", the "medusa sequence", and "a recipe for retaliation" are aware of the intricate ways that the beauty ideal, Western or otherwise, works to control women and entrap them in a role that benefits the status quo. However, they do not contribute to this narrative and, instead, they embrace this transgressiveness that places them in outsider positions. Women, therefore, continue to be othered in our times, but they engage with these

restrictive constructs in ways which are more direct and explicit and, in so doing, they reclaim that very monstrosity that makes them others and use it as a force for change.

Ethnicity adds another layer to this Otherness or monstrosity, as the women who are represented in these poems are all Black. Therefore, not only do they embody anxieties that have to do with women rebelling against the established constructs of femininity and womanhood, but also concerns about people form other cultures creating their own identities in a British environment, an anxiety that can be tracked back all the way to Bannerman's poem. Racist beauty ideals contribute to the women in these poems being cast as ugly Others who are not able to find a true home in Britain. It is their skin colour and their hair, as well as their behaviour as customs, that makes their Otherness visible and which alienates them in this setting. As we have seen, the beauty ideas that are challenged are not always Western and the ideas explored in these poems deal with a more global problem, that of restrictive and reductive cultural norms that do not allow for difference and diversity.

Overall, as the analysis show, these poems engage with each other and with society in similar ways despite the difference in the time when they were written and the differences among their authors. They show that, despite the fact that over two hundred years have passed, the society of the present times still has too much in common with that of the Romantic times both in terms of issues of race, which was a concern at the time as shown by "The Dark Ladie" and of women's position, as shown by the entire corpus of this dissertation. It is, however, true that contemporary Black British poets who are men and manage to get their work published do not seem to have as much of an interest in writing about women and their beauty and evil. This could be due to the fact that they genuinely have no real reason to write about this or, conversely, due to the fact that as it was mentioned above, for Black authors to be published their work needs to fit within a concept of what Black British poetry is and women's representation of this kind is not something that fits in the box. Nevertheless, the work of these authors still concerns itself with the position of Black people in British society, a society in which Western beauty ideals and structural racism prevail.

Works Cited

Adebayo, Diran. "'Pretty is the New Black': New Directions in Black British Aesthetics". *"Black" British Aesthetics Today*, Edited by R. Victoria Arana, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, pp. 170-173.

Agbabi, Patience. "The Contract. Femme Fatale. (The second nun's tale)". *Telling Talles*, Edinbrugh, Canongate Books, 2014, pp. 97-98.

—. "An Interview with Patience Agbabi." Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature, edited by Kadija Sesay, Hansib Publications Limited, 2005, pp. 144-164.

—. "Stories in Stanza'd English: A cross-cultural *Canterbury Tales*". *Literature Compass,* Vol. 5, no. 6, 2018, pp. 1-8, https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12455, Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.

—. *Telling Talles*, Edinbrugh, Canongate Books, 2014.

—. "UFO Woman (Pronounced OOFOE)". *Transformatrix*, Edinbrugh, Canongate Books, 2000, pp. 15-17.

Akala. *Natives: Race & Class in the Ruins of the Empire*. London, Two Roads, 2019.

Allen, Alysha. "The Advent of the Masculinized Woman in Romantic Literature". *The National Conference of Undergraduate Research (NUCR) 2014 Kentucky.*

Amos, Valerie, and Pratibha Parmar. "Challenging Imperial Feminism". *Feminist Review,* no. 17, 1984, pp. 3-19, https://doi.org/10.2307/1395006 , Accessed 13 of January 2022.

Amstrong, Isobel. "The Gush of the Feminine: How Can We Read Women's Poetry of the Romantic Period?". *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, edited by

Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley, University Press of New England, 1995, pp. 13-32.

Anderson, Lesley C. M. "The Femme Fatale: A Recurrent Manifestation of Patriarchal Fears". 1995, https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/831/items/ 1.0086754, Accessed 31 Jan. 2019.

Arana, Victoria R. "The 1980s: Rethorising and Refashioning British Identity." *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature,* edited by Kadija Sesay, Hansib Publications Limited, 2005, pp. 230-240.

—. "Sea Change: Historicizing the Scholarly Study of Black British Writing". *Black British Writing,* Edited by Victoria R. Arana and Lauri Ramey, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 19-45.

Arana, R. Victoria, and Lauri Ramey. Introduction. *Black British Writing,* Edited by R. Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 1-7.

Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Empire Writes Back Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Routledge, 2002.

Ashton, Rosemary. "England and Germany". *A Companion to Romanticism,* Edited by Duncan Wu, Blackwell Publishing, 1999, pp. 535-544.

—. *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

"Assata Olugbala Shakur is best known for her work in Civil Rights activism". *B: M2023*, https://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/history-of-politics/4332/, Accessed 8th of March, 2023.

"Audre Lorde". *Poetry Foundation*, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/audre-lorde , Accessed 8th of March 2023.

Baker, Brian. "Gothic Masculinities". *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, Edited by Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, Routledge, 2009, pp. 164-173.

Balogun, Oluwakemi M. and Gracia Dodds. "Transnational Feminism Approaches to Beauty". *The Routledge Companion to Beauty Politics*, Oxon and New York, Routledge, 2021, pp. 29- 36.

Bannerman, Anne. "The Dark Ladie". The Complete Poems of Anne Bannerman, edited by Matthew Heilman, Duquesne, 2017, pp. 116-125 https://dsc.duq.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1217&context=etd, Accessed 21 March 2019.

Beard, Mary. Women and Power: A Manifesto. London, Profile Books, 2017.

Bhabha, Homi. "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha". *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, pp. 207-221.

Behrendt, Stephen C. British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 2009.

—. "The Gap That Is Not a Gap: British Poetry by Women, 1802-1812". *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception,* edited by Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen C. Behrendt, The University Press of Kentucky, 1999, pp. 25-45.

—. "The Romantic Reader". *A Companion to Romanticism,* Edited by Duncan Wu, Blackwell Publishing, 1999, pp. 99-108.

Bordo, Susan. "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity". *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, The University of California Press, 1993.

Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities,* Routledge, 1996.

Broome Saunders, Clare. Introduction. *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 1-10.

Bryan, Omikemi Natacha. "The Warner". *Ten: Poets of the New Generation*, Edited by Karen McCarthy Woolf, Bloodaxe Books, 2017, pp. 30-32

Bryant, Susan L. "The Beauty Ideal: The Effects of European Standards of Beauty on Black Women". *Columbia Social Work Review*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2013, pp. 80-91, https://doi.org/ 10.7916/cswr.v11i1.1933, Accessed 14th April 2021.

Burt, Stephen. "Postcolonial Poetry and Form". *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry,* by Ramazani, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 139-152.

"Caleb Femi." *BIFA · British Independent Film Awards*, 15 Nov. 2021, https://www.bifa.film/ people/caleb-femi/.

"Caleb Femi." *KODE*, https://kodemedia.com/directors/caleb-femi.

Carby, Hazel V. "White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood". *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, Routledge, 2005, pp. 211-234.

Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa". *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1976, pp. 875-893, http:// l i n k s . j s t o r . o r g / s i c i ? sici=0097-9740%28197622%291%3A4%3C875%3ATLOTM%3E2.0.CO%3B2- V , Accessed 13 June 2019.

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. "Monster Culture (Seven Theses). *Monster Theory,* Edited by Cohen, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 3-25.

Coleridge, S.T. "Christabel". 1816, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43971/ christabel , Accessed 12 Oct. 2018.

Craciun, Adriana. *Fatal Women of Romanticism*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

—. "Romantic spinsrelsy: Anne Bannerman and the Sexual Politics of the Ballad". *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, by Duncan et al., Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 204-224.

—. "The Subject of Violence: Mary Lamb, Femme Fatale". *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception,* edited by Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen C. Behrendt, The University Press of Kentucky, 1999, pp. 46-70.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color". *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241-1299, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1229039, Accessed 19 March 2021

Crisafulli, Lilla Maria. "Within or Without? Problems of Perspective in Charlotte Smith, Anna Letitia Barbauld and Dorothy Wordsworth". *Romantic Women Poets: Genre and Gender*, by Crisafulli and Pietrpoli, Editions Rodopoi, 2007, pp. 35-62.

Cronin, Richard. "Felicia Hermans, Letitia Landon, and "Lady's Rule"". *Romantic Women Poets: Genre and Gender*, by Crisafulli and Pietrpoli, Editions Rodopoi, 2007, pp. 209-239.

Curran, Stuart. "Romantic Poetry: The I Altered". *Romanticism and Feminism*, Edited by Anne Mellor, Indiana University Press, 1988, pp. 185-207.

D'Aguiar, Fred. "Have you been here long? Black Poetry in Britain". *New British Poetries: The Scope of the Possible*, edited by Robert Hampson and Peter Barry, Manchester University Press, 1995, pp. 51-71.

Dawes, Kwame. "Negotiating the Ship on the Head: Black British Fiction." *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature*, edited by Kadija Sesay, Hansib Publications Limited, 2005, pp. 255-281.

De Lauretis, Theresa. "The Technology of Gender". *Technologies of Gender*, Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 1-30.

"Dorothea Smartt." *Dorothea Smartt | Peepal Tree Press*, 1 Jan. 1963, https://www.peepaltreepress.com/authors/dorothea-smartt.

"Dorothea Smartt." *Poetry Archive*, 28 Feb. 2020, https://poetryarchive.org/poet/dorothea-smartt/.

"Dorothea Smartt's Fascination with Medusa is Personal", https://www.pressreader.com/jamaica/daily-observer-jamaica/20210523/282033330101062, Accessed 7th of February 2023.

Duff, David. "From Revolution to Romanticism: The Historical Context to 1800". *A Companion to Romanticism,* Edited by Duncan Wu, Blackwell Publishing, 1999, pp. 25-38.

Durant, Imogen. "Celebrating Poetry Pamphlets". *British Library*, https://blogs.bl.uk/english-and-drama/2018/11/celebrating-poetry-pamphlets.html#:~:text=Omikemi Natacha Bryan is a,the 2017 Michael Marks Award. , Accessed 19th of June 2023.

Dyer, Richard. "The Matter of Whiteness." *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, edited by Paula Rothenberg, Worth Publishers, 2005, pp. 9-14.

Eagleton, Mary, "Locating the Subject". *Feminist Literary Criticism*, 2011, Malden, Mass. : Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Elfenbein, Andrew. Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role, Columbia University Press, 1999.

Evans-Bush, Katy. "Dorothea Smartt." *United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland - Poetry International*, https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/ poets/poet/102-22847_Smartt.

—. "Patience Agbabi". *Poetry International*, https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poets/poet/102-23548_Agbabi.

Fäcks, Jessica-Nathalie. "The Dark Ladie and The Monk: Gothic Ballads by Anne Bannerman and M. G. Lewis", 2014.

Fay, Elizabeth. "Cultivating Medievalism: Feeling History". Romantic Medievalism: History and the Romantic Literary Ideal, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 28-63.

—. "Romantic Medievalism: The Ideal of History". *Romantic Medievalism: History and the Romantic Literary Ideal*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 1-27.

Femi, Caleb. Femi, Caleb. "Interview: Caleb Femi on Poor, 'Bartering' Poetry and the Mythos of the South London Estate ." *The London Magazine*, 19 Mar. 2021, https:// www.thelondonmagazine.org/interview-caleb-femi-on-poor-bartering-poetry-and-the-mythos-of-the-south-london-estate/.

—. "Ode to South Ldn Gyaldem". *Poor*, London, Penguin Random House, 2020, pp. 54.

Feuer, Alan. "Fatal Police Shooting in Bronx Echoes One from 32 Years Ago". *The New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/20/nyregion/fatal-police-shooting-in-bronx-echoes-one-from-32-years-ago.html, Accessed 8th of March 2023.

Fryer, Peter. *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*, London, Pluto Press, 2018.

Fulford, Tim. Romanticism and Masculinity: Gender, Politics and Poetics in the Writings of Burke, Coleridge, Corbett, Wordsworth, De Quincey and Hazlitt. London, Macmillan Press, 1999.

Gal, Ana G. "Performative Femininity and Female Invalidism in John Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and S. T. Coleridge's *Christabel*". *Gender in the Vampire* Narrative, edited by Amanda Hobson and Melissa Anyiwo, Sense Publishers, 2016, pp. 161-171.

Ganguly, Santanu. "Coleridge's Representation of Sexuality: A Re-interpretation of *Christabel*". *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2013, pp. 1-6.

Garner, Katie Louise. Avalon Recovered: The Arthurian Legend in British Women's Writing, 1775-1845, 2012.

—. Romantic Women Writers and Arthurian Legend: The Quest for Knowledge. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

"Gender". *World Health Organization,* https://www.who.int/gender-equity-rights/ understanding/gender-definition/en/ , Accessed 19 July 2019.

Germina, Gretchen. *Black England*, London, John Murray, 2022.

Getachew, Mahlte-Tsigé. "Marginalia: Black Literature and the Problem of Recognition." *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature*, edited by Kadija Sesay, Hansib Publications Limited, 2005, pp. 323-345.

Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination. New Haven, CT and London: Yale UP, 1979.

Gill, Rosalind. "Neoliberal Beauty". *The Routledge Companion to Beauty Politics*, Oxon and New York, Routledge, 2021, pp. 9-18.

Gilroy, Paul. "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity". *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness,* Verso Books, 1993, pp. 1-40.

—. *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, Routledge, 2002.

Gopal, Priyamvada. "The Limits of Hybridity: Language and Innovation in Anglophone Postcolonial Poetry". *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, edited by Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale, Routledge, 2012, pp. 182-198.

Grajko, Calin Thomas.*"Christabel" and the Politics of Fragmentation*, 2013.

Griggs, Laura. "Medusa? Medusa Black! Revisionist Mythology in the Poetry of Dorothea Smartt." *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature*, edited by Kadija Sesay, Hansib Publications Limited, 2005, pp. 179-292.

Gunning, Dave. *Race and Antiracism in Black British and British Asian Literature*, Liverpool University Press, 2010.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, pp. 222- 237.

—. "Cultural Studies and the Politics of Internationalization: An Interview with Stuart Hall by Kuan-Hsing Chen". *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Edited by David Morley *and Kuan-Hsing Chen*, Routledge, 1996, pp. 393-409.

—. *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*. Penguin Random House UK, 2018.

—. *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, Harvard University Press, 2021.

—. "For Allon White: Metaphors of Transformation". *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Edited by David Morley *and Kuan-Hsing Chen*, Routledge, 1996, pp. 286-305.

—. "New Ethnicities". *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Edited by David Morley *and Kuan-Hsing Chen*, Routledge, 1996, pp. 442-478.

—. "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities". *Culture, Globalization and the World-Ssystem: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 41-68.

—. "What is this 'black' in black popular culture?". *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Edited by David Morley *and Kuan-Hsing Chen*, Routledge, 1996, pp. 468-478.

—. "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media." *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*, edited by Gail Denis and Jean McMahon Humez, Sage Publications, 2014, pp. 89-93.

Heilman, Matthew J. The Complete Poems of Anne Bannerman, 2017.

Hena, Omaar. "Multi-Ethnic British Poetries". *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, Edited by Peter Robinson, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 517-537.

Hirsch, Afua. Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging, Vintage Penguin Random House, London, 2018.

Hoeveler, Diane. "Gendering the Scottish Ballad: The Case of Anne Bannerman's *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry*". *The Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 31, 2000, pp. 97-101.

Hogan, Patrick Colm. Introduction: Decolonizing Literary Identity. *Empire and Poetic Voice*, Edited by Emmanuel C. Eye and Arif Dirlik, State University of New York Press, 2004, pp. 1-29.

Hollway, Wendy. "Gender Difference and the Production of Subjectivity". *Changing the Subject*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, pp. 223-261.

Holy Bible. Authorized King James Version, OM Literature.

hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center*, Pluto Press, London, 2000.

Hurley, Kelly. "The Abhuman". The Gothic Body. Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 3-20.

Innes, Lyn. "Gender and Sexuality in Postcolonial Poetry". *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry,* by Ramazani, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 222-236.

Jackson, Rosemary. Fantasy: *The Literature of Subversion*, Routledge, 1981.

Jones, Gabriel H. "Nymph Definition". *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, https://www.ancient.eu/nymph/ , Accessed 28 June 2019.

Jones, Seren. "Cherry Groce: Mum's police shooting 'robbed me of my childhood'". *BBC*, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/53233573 , Accessed 8th of March, 2023.

Kapetanović, Jasenka. "The Analysis of Sexual Imagery in Coleridge's *Christabel"*.

Sarajevo Faculty of Philosophy Student Journal, no. 2, 2014, pp. 62-68.

Keats, John. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". *Bright Star: The Complete Poems &*

Selected Letters of John Keats, London, Vintage, 2009, pp. 353-354.

—. *Selected Letters of John Keats,* Edited Grant F. Scott, Harvard University Press, 2015.

Kelleher, Fatimah. "Concrete Vistas and Dreamtime Peoplescapes: The Rise of the Black Urban Novel in 1990s Britain." *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature*, edited by Kadija Sesay, Hansib Publications Limited, 2005, pp. 241-254

Kelly, Ann. "Narrating the Africanist Presence in the Early Modern Survey of English Literature". *Black British Writing,* Edited by R. Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 9-18.

Kendall, Mikki. *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women the White Feminists Forgot,* Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020

Kitson. Peter J. "Beyond the Enlightenment: The Philosophical, Scientific and Religious Inheritance". *A Companion to Romanticism,* Edited by Duncan Wu, Blackwell Publishing, 1999, pp. 39-52.

Kramer Linkin, Harriet, and Stephen C.Behrendt. Introduction. *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception,* Kentucky, The University Press of Kentucky, 1999, pp. 1-11.

Karoglou, Kiki. "Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art". *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 75, no. 3, 2018, pp. 4-47, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48569258 , Accessed 9 February 2023.

Kelleher, Fatimah. "Concrete Vistas and Dreamtime Peoplescapes: The Rise of the Black Urban Novel in 1990s Britain." *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature*, edited by Kadija Sesay, Hansib Publications Limited, 2005, pp. 241-254.

Kristeva, Julia. Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, Columbia University Press, 1982.

Kundu, Pritha. "Christabel and Intertextual Imagination: From Coleridge to Keats". *Middle Flight: SSM Journal of English Literature and Culture*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2016, pp. 13-18.

Landon, Letitia Elizabeth. "A Legend of Tintagel Castle". *Letitia Elizabeth Landon: Selected Writings,* Edited by Jerome McGann and Daniel Riess, Broadview Literary Texts, 1997, pp. 211-213.

Lawrence, Errol. "Just plain common sense: the 'roots' of racism". *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, Routledge, 2005, pp. 45-91.

Lawson Welsh, Sarah. "Black British Poetry". *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945-2010*, by Edward Larrissy, Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 178-196.

Ledent, Bénédicte. "'Other' Voices and the British Literary Canon". *The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Writing*, 1945-2010, Edited by Deidre Osborne, Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 241-255.

Leeds Craig, Maxime. *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race,* Oxford University Press, 2002.

Lima, Maria Helena. "'Pivoting the Centre': The Fiction of Andrea Levy." Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature, edited by Kadija Sesay, Hansib Publications Limited, 2005, pp. 56-85.

Lindsey, Kayla Marie. ""The Pull of the Dark Depths": Female Monsters in Nineteenth-Century Gothic Literature", 2011.

"List of Women Warriors in Folklore". *Scholarly Community Encyclopaedia*, https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/32556, Accessed 8th of March 2023.

Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." *Sister Outisder: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press, 1984, pp. 114-123.

—. "A Conversation between Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich." *Your Silence Will Not Protect You,* edited by Silver Press, Silver Press, 2017, pp. 55-88.

—, Audre. "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger". *Your Silence Will Not Protect You,* edited by Silver Press, Silver Press, 2017, pp. 133-169.

—. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." *Your Silence Will Not Protect You,* edited by Silver Press, Silver Press, 2017, pp. 89-93.

—. "An Open Letter to Mary Daly." *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, edited by Silver Press, Silver Press, 2017, pp. 38-44.

—, Audre. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." *Your Silence Will Not Protect You,* edited by Silver Press, Silver Press, 2017, pp. 1-6.

—. "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," *Your Silence Will Not Protect You,* edited by Silver Press, Silver Press, 2017, pp. 107-118.

—. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." *Your Silence Will Not Protect You,* edited by Silver Press, Silver Press, 2017, pp. 22-30.

Low, Gail. "'Shaping Connections': From West Indian to Black British". *A Black British Canon?*, Edited by Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 168-188.

Low, Gail, and Marion Wynne-Davies. Introduction. *A Black British Canon?*, Edited by Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 1-12.

McConnell, Justine. "Caleb Femi." *Writers Make Words*, 4 Apr. 2022, https://writersmakeworlds.com/caleb-femi/.

McLeod, John. "Fantasy Relationships: Black British Canons in a Transnational World". *A Black British Canon?*, Edited by Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 93-104.

—. "Postcolonial Writing in Britain". *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, vol. 1, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 571-603.

Mellor. Anne K. Introduction, On Romanticism and Feminism. *Romanticism and Feminism*, by Mellor, Indiana University Press, 1988, pp. 3-9.

—. "Keats and the Complexities of Gender". *The Cambridge Companion to John Keats,* Edited by Susan Wolfson, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

—. *Romanticism & Gender.* New York, Routledge, 1993.

—. "The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women's Poetry, 1780-1830". *Women's Poetry in the Enlightenment: The Making of a Canon, 1730-1820*, by Isobel Amstrong and Virginia Blin, Palgrave Macmillan, 1999, pp. 81-98.

Mercer, Kobena. "Black hair/style politics". *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader*, edited by Kwesi Owusu, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, pp. 117-128

Miall, David S. "Gothic Fiction". A Companion to Romanticism, Edited by Duncan Wu, Blackwell Publishing, 1999, pp. 373-382.

Miller, Ashley. "Obscurity and Affect in Anne Bannerman's "The Dark Ladie"". *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, issue 3.2, 2007, *http://www.ncgsjournal.com/ issue32/ miller.htm* , Accessed 1 March 2019.

Miller, Lucasta. *L.E.L. The Lost Life and Mysterious Death of the 'Female Byron'*, London, Vintage 2020.

Minh-ha, Trinh T. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Indiana University Press, 1989.

Moi, Toril. "Feminist, Female, Feminine". *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, edited by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp. 117-132.

Monaghan, Patricia. The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore, Facts On File Inc, 2004.

Montefiore, Jan. *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing*, by Claire Buck, Pandora Press, 2004.

Morley, David, and Kuan-Hsing Chen. Introduction. *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Edited by David Morley *and Kuan-Hsing Chen*, Routledge, 1996, pp. 1-22.

Morrison, Lucy. "Letitia Elizabeth Landon (L.E.L) (1802-1838)". Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook, Edited by Abigail Burnham Bloom, Greenwood Press, 2000, pp. 245-248.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Vintage Books Editions, 1993.

Nasta, Susheila. "Beyond the Millennium: Black Women's Writing". *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol. 11, no. 1/2, 2000, pp. 71-76.

Neigh, Janet. "Orality, Creoles, and Postcolonial Poetry in Performance". *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry,* by Ramazani, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 167-179.

Nerlekar, Anjali. "The City, Place, and Postcolonial Poetry". *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry,* by Ramazani, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 195-208.

Nisco, Maria Cristina. "The Languages of the Black Medusa: Dorothea Smartt and Ingrid Mwangi". *From Word to Canvas: Appropriations of Myth in Women's Aesthetic Production*, Edited by Julie Rajan and Sanja Bahun-Radunović, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, pp. 141-164.

Novak, Julia. "Transformatrix: Confused Cultural Identities in the Performance Poetry of Patience Agbabi". *Restless Travellers: Quests for Identity across European and American Time and Space*, Edited by Antonio José Miralles Pérez, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011, pp. 83-90.

"Nymph". *Cambridge Dictionary*. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/ nymph , Accessed 9th of July 2019.

Odedra, Kajal. *Hair/Power: Essays on Control and Freedom*, London, 404 Ink Limited, 2023.

Olufemi, Lola. *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power*, London, Pluto Press, 2020.

Olusoga, David. *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, London, Pan Macmillan, 2017.

Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formations in the United States*, New York, Routledge 2015.

Owusu, Kwesi. Introduction. *Black British Culture and Society: A Text Reader*, edited by Kwesi Owusu, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, pp. 1-20.

Parmar, Pratibha. "Black Feminism: The Politics of Articulation". *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, pp. 101-126.

Patke, Rajeev S. Introduction. *Postcolonial Poetry in English*, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 3-51.

Perrojo Arronte, Ma Eugenia. "Coleridge y la creación de la *femme fatale* en la poesía del siglo XIX". 2002, pp. 101-108.

Perry, Seamus. "Romanticism: The Brief History of a concept". *A Companion to Romanticism,* Edited by Duncan Wu, Blackwell Publishing, 1999, pp. 3-12.

Pfeifer, Theresa H. "Deconstructing Cartesian Dualisms of Western Racialized Systems: A Study in the Colors Black and White". *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 528-547, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40282581 , Accessed 9 February 2023.

Phillips, Mike. "Foreword: Migration, Modernity and English Writing — Reflections from Migrant Identity and Canon Formation". *A Black British Canon?*, Edited by Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 13-31.

—. *London Crossings: A Biography of Black London*, Continuum, 2001.

"Rachel Long." *Poetry Archive*, 5 Mar. 2022, poetryarchive.org/poet/rachel-long/.

Ramazani, Jahan. Introduction. *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry,* by Ramazani, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 1- 15.

—. "Poetry and Postcolonialsim". The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature, vol. 2, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 938-981.

Ramey, Lauri. "Contemporary Black British Poetry". *Black British Writing,* Edited by R. Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 109-136.

—. "Patience Agbabi." *Dictionary of Literary Biography 21st Century "Black" British Writers*, Vol. 347, Gale Cengage, 2009, pp. 1-14, https://www.academia.edu/6160649/ Dictionary_of_Literary_Biography_Patience_Agbabi_pre_print_ , Accessed 18 May 2022.

—. "Situating a 'Black' British Poetic Avant-Garde". *"Black" British Aesthetics Today*, Edited by R. Victoria Arana, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, pp. 79-100.

Riess, Daniel. "Laetitia Landon and the Dawn of English Post-Romanticism". *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 36, no. 4, 1996, pp. 807-827, https:// www.jstor.org/ stable/450977 , Accessed 27 May 2019.

Robinson, Gemma. "Postcolonial Poetry of Great Britain". *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry,* by Ramazani, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 110- 123.

Ruppert, Timothy. "Romantic Vision and Gothic Balladry: Anne Bannerman's *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry*". *Literature Compass*, no. 10, 2013, pp. 783-796.

Ryan, Michael. "Gender and Sexuality", Cultural Studies: A Practical Introduction, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 26-39.

—. "Gender and Imagination in "Lamia" and "La Belle Dame sans Merci": John Keats". *Real and Imagined Women in British Romanticism*, Peter Lang Publishing, 2010, pp. 125-158.

Sairsingh, Marie. "Transcending conventional identity structures: Dorothea Smartt's re-negotiated self-projections". *Journal of English and Literature*, vol. 3, 2012, pp. 154-157, http://www.academicjournals.org/IJEL , Accessed 3rd December 2022.

Sanghera, Sathnam. *Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain*, Penguin Random House, 2021.

Santilli, Paul. "Culture, Evil, and Horror". *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2007, pp. 173-197, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27739626 , Accessed 7 February 2023.

Schwanebeck, Wieland. "Feminist Revisions of the Sonnet in the Works of Patience Agbabi and Sophie Hannah". *Anglistik,* vol. 31, no. 1, 2020, pp. 183-196, http://resolver.sub.uni-goettingen.de/purl?fidaac-11858/712 , Accessed 11 Feb. 2020.

Senior, Olive. "Warner". *Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage*, Twin Guinep Publishers Ltd, 2003, pp. 508

Sesay, Kadija. Introduction. *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature*, edited by Kadija Sesay, Hansib Publications Limited, 2005, pp. 15-19.

"Shango, Orisha of Justice and Protection". *Original Botanica*, https://originalbotanica.com/blog/chango-shango-orisha-santeria , Accessed, 8th of March 2023.

Shankar Narayan, Gaura. Real and Imagined Women in British Romanticism, Peter Lang Publishing, 2010.

Shaw, Peter. "Britain at War: The Historical Context". *A Companion to Romanticism,* Edited by Duncan Wu, Blackwell Publishing, 1999, pp. 53-66.

Sheppard, Sarah. Characteristics of the Genius and Writings of L.E.L., 1841.

Shukra, Kalbir. *The Changing Pattern of Black Politics in Britain*, Pluto Press, 1998.

Smartt, Dorothea. "Dorothea Smartt's Fascination with Medusa is Personal." *PressReader.com - Digital Newspaper & Magazine Subscriptions*, https://www.pressreader.com/jamaica/daily-observer-jamaica/20210523/28203333010106.

—. "dream bed". *connecting medium*, Leeds, Peepal Tree Press, 2001, pp. 61.

—. "let her monsters write". *connecting medium*, Leeds, Peepal Tree Press, 2001, pp. 66.

—. "let me land". *connecting medium*, Leeds, Peepal Tree Press, 2001, pp. 68-69.

—. "Medusa: cuts both ways". *connecting medium*, Leeds, Peepal Tree Press, 2001, pp. 59-60.

—. "medusa dream". *connecting medium*, Leeds, Peepal Tree Press, 2001, pp. 62-63.

—. "medusa? medusa black!". *connecting medium*, Leeds, Peepal Tree Press, 2001, pp. 57-58.

—. "medusaspeak". *connecting medium*, Leeds, Peepal Tree Press, 2001, pp. 64-65.

—. "way to go". *connecting medium*, Leeds, Peepal Tree Press, 2001, pp. 67.

Spatz, Jonas. "The Mystery of Eros: Sexual Initiation in Coleridge's "Christabel"". *PMLA*, vol. 90, no. 1, 1975, pp. 107-116, https://www.jstor.org/stable/461353 , Accessed 18 May 2019.

Stephenson, Glennis. "Letitia Landon and the Victorian Improvisatrice: The Construction of L.E.L.". *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 1-17, https:// www.jstor.org/stable/ 40001981 , Accessed 13 June 2019.

—. *Letitia Landon: The Woman behind L.E.L,* Manchester University Press, 1995. Stuart, Esther M. "Femme Fatales and the Shifting Gender Norms of the 19th Century". 2017, https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi? referer=https:// www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=2689&context=etd.

Sulaiman Alshatti, Aishah. "Gothic Ballad: Anne Bannerman's *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* and the Deformed Body". *Appropriations of the Gothic by Romantic-era Women Writers*, 2008.

Swanepoel, Aletta Catharina. Otherworldly Spaces in Selected Poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Keats, 2006.

Swann, Karen. ""Christabel": The Wandering Mother and the Enigma of Form". *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1984, pp. 533-553, https://www.jstor.org/stable/ 25600515 , Accessed 16 May 2019.

—. "Harassing the Muse". *Romanticism and Feminism*, by Mellor, Indiana University Press, 1988, pp. 81- 92.

—. "Literary Gentlemen and Lovely Ladies: The Debate on the Character of Christabel". *EHL*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1985, pp. 397-418, https://www.jstor.org/stable/ 2872843 , Accessed 20 May 2019.

Tate, Shitley Anne. *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*, Routledge, 2009

—. "Not all the Women Want to be White: Decolonizing Beauty Studies". *Decolonizing European Sociology: Transdisciplinary Approaches*, edited by Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodriguez et al., Ashgate, 2010, pp. 195-210

Taylor, Andrene M. "Black British Writing: "Hitting Up Against" A Tradition of Revolutionary Poetics". *"Black" British Aesthetics Today*, Edited by R. Victoria Arana, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, pp. 16-30.

Taylor, Anya. "Coleridge's "Christabel" and the Phantom Soul". *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol 42, no. 4, 2002, pp. 707-730, https://www.jstor.org/ stable/1556293 , Accessed 20 May 2019.

"TCW3". *The Complete Works Poetry*, https://thecompleteworkspoetry.wordpress.com/ people/poets/tcw-3/ , Accessed 19th of June 2023

Tekinay, Ash. "Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel": Doubts about the Universal Order".

Thompson, Molly. "'Happy Multicultural Land'? The Implications of an 'excess of belonging' in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*." *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature*, edited by Kadija Sesay, Hansib Publications Limited, 2005, pp. 122-140

Ulmer, William A. ""Christabel" and the Origin of Evil". *Studies in Philology,* vol. 104, no. 3, 2007, pp. 376-407, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20464291 , Accessed 15 May 2019.

"Vanessa Kisuule". *Vanessa Kisuule,* 2nd of Nov 2023, https://www.vanessakisuule.com/ about.

Verdonock, Michelle. "Female Gothic Poetry in Scotland and Northern England of the 1800s: Anne Bannerman, Sarah Pearson, and Barbara Hoole", 2015.

Vergès, Françoise. Preface. *A Decolonial Feminism*, Translated by Ashley J. Bohrer, Pluto Press, 2019.

Walters, Tracey L. "'We're All English Now Mate Like It or Lump It': The Black/Britishness of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth.*" *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature*, edited by Kadija Sesay, Hansib Publications Limited, 2005, pp. 314-322.

Wang, Dorothy. Preface. *Filigree: Contemporary Black British Poetry*, Edited by Nii Ayikwei Parkes, Peepal Tree, 2018, pp. 11-24.

Wedd, Mary. "Literature and Religion". *A Companion to Romanticism,* Edited by Duncan Wu, Blackwell Publishing, 1999, pp. 67-78.

Williams, Anne. *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Windows, Heather. *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal*, Princeton University Press, 2018.

Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth.* London, Vintage Feminism, 2015.

Wolfson, Susan. "Romanticism and Gender". *A Companion to Romanticism,* Edited by Duncan Wu, Blackwell Publishing, 1999, pp. 415-428.

Wood, Helen. "Beauty and Class". *The Routledge Companion to Beauty Politics*, Oxon and New York, Routledge, 2021, pp. 19-28.

Wootton, Sarah. "Keats's Belle Dame as Femme Fatale". Consuming Keats: Nineteenth Century Representations in Art and Literature, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 107-145.

Young, Lola. Foreword. Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature, edited by Kadija Sesay, Hansib Publications Limited, 2005, pp. 13-14.

Young, Robert. "Hybridity and Diaspora". *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 1-26.

—-. "Sex and Inequality: The Cultural Construction of Race". *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 85-110.

Appendices

A

"UFO Woman (pronounced OOFOE)" - Patience Agbabi - *Transformatrix*

I

Mother Earth. Heath Row. Terminal 5. Yo!

Do I look hip in my space-hopper-green

slingbacks, iridescent sky-blue-skin

pants and hologram hair cut? Can I have

my clothes back when you've finished with them, please?

Hello! I just got offa the space ship.

I've learnt the language, read the VDU

and washed the video twice. Mother Earth

do *you read me?* Why then stamp my passport

ALIEN at Heath Row? Did I come third

in the World Race? Does my iridescent

sky-blue-pink skin embarrass you, mother?

LONDON. Meandering the streets paved with

hopscotch and butterscotch, kids with crystal

cut ice-cream cones and tin-can eyes ask "Why

don't U F O back to your own planet?"

Streets paved with NF (no fun) graffiti

Nefertiti go home from the old days.

II

So I take the tram, tube, train, taxi trip

hip-hugged, bell-bottomed and thin-lipped, landing

in a crazy crazy cow pat. SUSSEX.

Possibly it's my Day-Glo afro, rich

as a child paints a tree in full foliage

that makes them stare with flying saucer eyes.

Perhaps my antennae plaits in winter

naked twigs cocooned in thread for bigger

better hair make them dare to ask to touch.

"Can we touch your hair?" Or not ask at all;

my two-tone hand with its translucent palm,

life line, heart line, head line, children, journeys,

prompting the "*Why's it white on the inside*

of your hand?" "*Do you wash?*" "*Does it wash off?*"

Or my core names, Trochaic, Dactylic,

Galactic beats from ancient poetry,

names they make me repeat, make them call me

those sticks-and-stones-may-break-my-bones-but names.

In times of need I ask the oracle.

Withdrawing to my work station I press

HELP. I have just two options. HISTORY:

The screen flashes subliminal visuals

from the old days which I quickly translate:

Slave-ship: space ship, racism: spacism.

Resignedly I select HERSTORY:

The screen displays a symmetrical tree

which has identical roots and branches.

I can no longer reason, only feel

not aloneness but oneness, I decide

to physically process this data.

III

So I take the train plane to the Equator

the Motherland, travel 5 degrees North

to the GO-SLOW quick-talking fast-living

finger-licking city known as LAGOS.

Streets paved with gold-threaded gold-extensioned

women and silk-suited men; market-stalls

of red, orange, yellow and indigo.

Perhaps it's not my bold wild skin colour,

well camouflaged in this spectrum of life,

but the way I wear my skin, too uptight,

too did-I-wear-the-right-outfit-today,

too I-just-got-off-the-last-London-flight;

or my shy intergalactic lingo

my moonspeak, my verbal vertigo

that makes them stare with flying saucer eyes.

They call me Ufo woman, oyinbo

from the old days which translates as weirdo,

white, outsider, other, and I withdraw

into myself, no psychedelic shield,

no chameleonic facade, just raw.

Then I process Ufo and U F O,

realise the former is a blessing:

the latter a course. I rename myself

Ufo woman and touch base at Heath Row.

IV

No. Don't bother to strip, drug, bomb search me

I'm not staying this time. Why press rewind?

Why wait for First World *Homo sapiens*

to cease their retroactive spacism?

Their world may be a place worth fighting for

I suggest in the next millennium.

So, smart, casual, I prepare for lift off,

in my fibre-optic firefly Levis,

my sci-fi hi-fi playing *Revelations*

and my intergalactic mobile ON.

Call me. I'll be surfing the galaxy

searching for the perfect destination.

B

"ten paces" - Dorothea Smartt - *Connecting Medium*

I fear
if I could turn men to stone
I'd walk round
beside
in front
but never
behind them.

"medusa? medusa black!" - Dorothea Smartt - *Connecting Medium*

Medusa was a Blackwoman,
afrikan, dread
cut she eye at a sista mirror
turn she same self t'stone.
She looks really kill?
Ask she nuh! Medusa would know.
She terrible eyes leave me stone coal.
Medusa lost
looking for love
kept behind icy eyes
fixed inside the barricade
for anybody who come too close,
runnin' from she own
in case the worse thing happen
an' she see she self like them see she.
The blood haunted:
if you black, get back
if you brown stick around…
Is that okay? Being black your way,
whitewashed an' dyed-back black,
am I easier to hold in an acceptable role?
…And if you white comelong y'alright…
Make it go away, the nappiheaded nastiness
too tuff too unruly too ugly too black
…Get back…
Scrub it bleach it operate on it powder it
straighten it fry it dye it perm it
turn it back on itself
make it go away make it go away.
Scrub it, step smiling into baths of acid
and bleach it red raw
peel skin of life-sustaining melanin.
Operate on it
blackskin — lying, useless — discard its powder it.
Head? Fuck it, wild-haired woman,
straighten it fry it, desperately burn scalps.
Banish the snake-woman
the wild woman
the all-seeing-eye woman.
Dye it,
remembrances of Africa fast-fadin'
in the blond highlights,
turn us back on ourselves
slowly making daily applications

with our own hand.
My hair as it comes
is just not good enough.
The blood haunted:
 if you black get back
if you brown stick around
and if you white comelong y'alright…
Say: make it go away make it go away
da nappiheaded nastiness!
Is too tuff too unruly too ugly too black
too tuff too unruly too ugly too black.
Get back
Medusa! Black! [*Steups!*] Get back.

"medusa: cuts both ways" - Dorothea Smartt - *Connecting Medium*

Dread!
An Afrikanwoman
full of sheself
wid dem dutti-eye looks
sapphire eyes
Yes nuh! believe it!
she could turn a man t'stone
some whiteman
nightmare riding
he mind across the centuries
in turn turning we mad

Medusa
dread anger
welling up in her stare
natural roots Blackwoman
loving Blackwomen
serious

He'd be frighten fuh dat
mark wid d'living blood
that bleeds and never dies
turns blood our sweet honey
from a rock
yes, that is sum'ting
would frighten any man

And still it goes on and on and on
around us inside us
their voices
whistling against
our thunder
across an eternal sky

Medusa is Nanny
Medusa is Assata Shakur
Medusa is Cherry Grace
is Eleanor Bumpers   is Audre Lorde
is Queen Nzinga   Sarraounia
QueenMother   is godmother

our mother

Medusa is our mother's mother

Medusa is spirit
Medusa in you is you in me

myself all coiled into one

Medusa is my shield
impregnable
my aegis -
no mythical aegeanpeople shield
this is my armour
with Shango double-headed axe
Yemoja-Ocuti
my battle dress armour
of serious dread

is me in you

"dream bed" - Dorothea Smartt - *Connecting Medium*

Medusa sleeps in old furniture
head deep in her pelvis
modelling clay.
Her hair would grow
righthanded. Snakes hung, glorious.
Medusa's visions
make pillows
that prop her up.
Her head, hair,
her womb folds
up a hidden cavern.
Reach in, under her back door,
turn past pages.
Reflect, research the truth
down under covers.
Tell her stories -
cool paintbrushes
to frame, colour, touch.
And sometimes silk
flecks of orange come
to where in winter
she could be black, serpentine.

"medusa dream" - Dorothea Smartt - *Connecting Medium*

Perseus comes. Full of intent
to carve out a name for himself in blood,
sent on a mission to claim her head.
Swindles her kind, never plays straight,
comes in confusion, proclaiming he knows it all,
tricks his way to the mouth of Medusa's cave and
cannot look in her face.
He takes out a mirror to see what he hopes for
and butchering her image captures her head,
spectacle to dishonour
prophet of the grotesque.
He sees what he wants, he wants her
shimmering in the dark
a head full dread full
confusion

All through that night, changing winds had blown. Medusa could not see the moon, full as it was. Horseman behind her. Se had not seen him. He watched. He rode silent, up behind her. She had lain restless, restless between trees.

Medusa dreamt:

She is with her mother on the bed. Her mother is under the bedclothes. She sits on top of them desperate. Her mother is not moving and she desperately needs to shit. But before she lifts off her bed, it slides, landing solid. She is so ashamed, but relieved - that it dropped out hard and dry enough to remove without trace, she hopes. She searches around for something to lift it with. It's repulsive and she holds her breath, swallows and braces herself to pick it up with her bare finders. She runs with it to the toilet, banging open the door, straight onto her father's knees. He's sitting, doing what she had done - but in the right place for it. She's embarrassed, he's ashamed. He pushes the door, she knows she should not be seeing him like this, but has this thing in her hand, her shit in her fingers! She has to be rid of it. So she leans over him and drops it into the bowl. They are both crying, ashamed, belittled, without dignity... Then he gestures to his daughter to help him. He holds his penis, and pulling, peeling the foreskin, shows her how sore it is. The soft flesh has split, the great flaming sore blisters - red and raw. He's pleading. She cries again. For his shame, not hers.

And waking, it was then she sensed something. Something very wrong.

Medusa could feel her hair, held up tight-fisted.

She looked around, but could see nothing, no one.
Looking to the ground she saw
her body without a head, trembled and shook.
It was then she screamed, and the blood pumped out of her.

"medusaspeak" - Dorothea Smartt - *Connecting Medium*

Trying to save the life
that is one's own,
white foaming at her
mouth, Medusa screams for
you to hear her.

Her granite lips crash
across teeth, sharper
cries roar foaming,
cross her meaning
lost on the wind.

You turn
run afraid.
You refuse to be alone
with her
Your terror leaves
Medusa standing, molten
tears across her rock face.
How can she speak to you
gently of hard things?

Every monster has her place.
A simple truth
she comes to tell,
this shadow from
the beacon,
the source, the god-send, the dark,
the truth.
Who's 'she'?
Honey,
sweet honey,
you are.

Here she is
standing ready
to rip   to claw   to beat
you to your monster self.
Narrow the focus
block the light.

In your own tall shadow
crouch   quiver   whimper.
Let your hair grow long. Rage
down to skin and bone. Rage
red-hot-blue-cold
tearing you. Solitary in the dark.

"let her monsters write" - Dorothea Smartt - *Connecting Medium*

Medusa squeezes herself into
irregular-sized compartments,
wooden and fortress-like,
cosy and difficult and too small
to tuck in her frilly outstretched
body. Surrounding her is
an older I, her centre cave.
Under hair
let her monsters write
from all sides - ceiling walls floor.
Make a deep welcome
for this singsong body
lacy in the night.

"way to go" - Dorothea Smartt - *Connecting Medium*

generations dreaming
words change
but the song of death is
life
our parents live
two lives to death
circling souls
along the road
we have come a long way
and still have a way to go
souls like faces come back
from you to me
to you the backbeat
our parent's voices
well-travelled imaginations
press us with manifestations
but we are mistrustful
hard-ears children
existing on our own
when ascendant generations
clamour to us
to speak with our light

listen!
guardian voices range around us,
slow pupils to the spirit

"let me land…" - Dorothea Smartt - *Connecting Medium*

Rattling, far out, memories recurring,
patterns snake, rippling through the diaspora,
living down a cruel telling
seized by remembered words-of-mouths.

Imagine yourself from outside, uniquely terrible,
softly shimmering, swelling under a seascape,
the Caribbean waters' first light,
dark turquoise broken only by the breeze.

Waves spring from the sea-green
becoming high-riding watershacking locks
Herself and Medusa re-membered,
leaping and falling in ordered confusion,
soft and violent, slow and sudden,
and always the roaring spread of the wide overriding main.

Imagine yourself, from outside,
uniquely terrible, darkly shimmering locks
fallen to clouded land
slapped on by cold on wet, the uniform grey skies.
Their eyes flame lava patterns on skins.
They alight, uncoiled from the diaspora.

Conjuring stones,
incantations rumble; rocks groan, rocks quake,
seized by remembering,
stones swell humming their birth.
Hear their voices; mining seams
beyond the rock force,
lithic jewel eyes, reincarnating powers.

Herself, in stone, Medusa, in stone.
Repelling, mud-slides over their heartfossil canyons.
Each having her metamorphic store,
shadow crevices raucous with crystal coal,
and the chance to burn.

Earth.

No words yet, just sounds; wind
sea spray, distant thunder announce them.
Inside the mist their tide laps in
and these two, Herself & Medusa,

are coming ashore.

C

"The Contract. Femme Fatale. (The second nun's tale)" - Patience Agbabi - *Telling Tales*

Worst job I ever handled, bruv? A woman.

So plain, you'd scan her face for flaws, and find none.

Not a mark on her till the bullets spat.

They fucked up good, should be in here for that

not shelling Jupiter. Call this a prison!

Finishing school. He was never *christened*

Jupiter, but larged it, full of gas.

Jupiter Jones. One of his moons, I was.

He paid with interest, bruv, an when you got

a past, a job's a job. One thing I'm not

is lazy… She was sitting in the bath,

no bubbles, an so hot, I held my breath,

felt overdressed in t-shirt an tattoos.

He wanted me to top myself, she goes,

but where's the fun in that? Lilies, she smelt of,

so strong it made me gag. She eyed me, bruv,

the way all virgins eagle me but scanned

my lids too long, as if *I* killed her husband.

I never. Nor his brother. Not my business.

You never get a babe like that to kiss

Jupiter's arse: she laughed, gave him what for.

Not that he wanted *her*, he wanted her

to want *him*. But she fucked him with religion.

If there's one thing Jupiter hates, it's Christians.

He's killed more Christians than this wife's been headfucked.

I aim —and Lily May's no longer perfect.

She doesn't flinch. Asks me to light her gold-

tipped cigarette. *Do you believe in God?*

I fire again, fuck the analysis.

Again! Who the fuck does she think she is?

And yet I'm answering. *No… I don't know.*

She blows smoke in my face. *I do,* she goes,

like nothing happened. Blood, fresh as graffiti,

the bath, the lino, deep in red confetti

and sister's singing Greatest Hits. I leave.

Took her three days to die. You don't believe

me, bruv? I shelled the boss and jacked it in,

buried the bullet, washed away the sin.

Only babe I ever killed, that kid,

I swear to God, worst job I ever did.

I do, she said, like we were hitched. I breathed

red roses, blubbered like a girl: believed.

D

"A recipe for retaliation" - Vanessa Kisuule - *A recipe for sorcery*

you will need:

a single tongue swollen fat
from the constant muzzle of teeth

black nail polish: two coats

several cups of cheap instant coffee left to cool
a liquid seethe

the hardened instep of a flamenco dancer
the arm swing of a crimper slicing through the night

the worn-down heel of a stiletto

the grin of a golliwog

a barbed kiss

apple cores, banana peels, desiccated toast crumbs

the brittle bones of a nameless ancestry
(for best results, grind down to a fine powder)

every insincere smile bent back on itself

one furled umbrella
a generous dash of a pepper spray

a rusted knuckle duster

gravel
citrus
salt

anything to make old wounds
scream afresh

method:

they have drowned women like you before and still do
burned them at stakes and licked them in asylums for daring to speak
for not sanitising their screams
for plunging their hands below their waistbands and mining for
answers.

do as you have done. bide your time. nurse the bloodlust.

they tap you on the shoulder, lean in and whisper
i'm sorry dear, i'm not sure you're aware but
there appears to be a fully loaded expletive between your legs.

Suspicion is still in the air.
they whisper about you, stroke at your skin
as if they'd like to exhibit it on a magnolia wall.

all kinds of ways will be found to remind you stillness was meant to be
your default.
your anger is ugly and will not put on its frilly party dress

won't sit with its legs crossed and laugh at all the right moments.

you've been trained to be your own leash.

The truest bits of yourself make you uncomfortable
make you hunt your own flesh with blunt teeth.

so when they say *calm down*

when they say *shhh*

when they say *it's all gone a bit far, hasn't it?*

it's as if they've never listened to nina simone at 4am
and felt the fangs of apocalypse either side of their head.

like they've never watched a seven-year-old suck in her stomach.

like they've never switched on the news to a bus in delhi.

like they've never watched grown men
in dark suits write blind dogma inside our wombs.

like they have no grasp of elementary chemistry:

first it simmers
then it boils
and then it
spills over.

E

"The Warner"

Stood and spoke in nothing
but the skin all of us were born in
with a mouth of hooks and mesh.
Cradled in the rim of her har, eggs

and a mattress strapped to her back.
My eyes slipped in the dirt cracks.
Age of school, height of the Golden Stool
was I, when the bells called *doom doom*.

She roamed like a gully through highways
to preach inside the market place.
Her skin glowed like the night we had arrived —
sequins flitting on the cloak of night.

But this was daylight, Saturday afternoon
the sun swung low as a scythe moon.
It was unlike Parson's three-hour sermon
to repent and flee the *Everlasting Punishment.*

Men's lips are swollen by prayers and wishes
but their hands are crocheted from nets.
The great sharks we are in all out fishing
                                let us not forget.

The voice was a muscular swell of wind
her words carried the smell of fish thawing.
Even the cows stood still like monuments
and stopped chewing their tongues to listen.

When they ask what manner of woman is this?
Tell them I am a mast in the midst of a tempest
a flame as fountain, a sail on a lantern
the dark artery in the hearts of men.

Her eyes looked as though she took a blade
scooped out the flesh to make two caves
The people's mouths hung like udders.
Older brothers held onto their mothers.

Be humble as dust swept up by the wind
which is only the journey of time gathering.
Keep watch for a convocation of white coats,

ribbons of milt and feathers of smoke.

The Warner stopped, her hair a shock
a wish blown through a dandelion clock.
I kneeled to pick up one of the pins
as my head raised she began talking again:

Tell me who is your father?
I don't know him miss.

You is a little girl, every little girl has a father.
I don't know him miss.

Don't you want to know him?
I never thought it.

If you want to know follow, I will lead you to him.
But it's midday and the bell has been milked.

I only came to get flour.
For a little girl your tongue is sour.

Let me wet your hands with rum,
wash them, then give me your tongue
to drip honey on but don't swallow it
just wait for his spirit to come collect it.

My eyes caught red running down her thighs,
slow and sticky till the sap drew in flies
weaving in and out of her stride leaving behind
a coastline spread into a beach of light.

No miss, mother said I mustn't drink,
it's time to go, the bell already milk.

Then how will you know your father?
But is not I looking for him.

It was then bats flew from her tomb-like eyes,
she tilted her head and cast a net in the sky.

F

"Mum's Snake" - Rachel Long - *My Darling from the Lions*

Firstly, Mum wouldn't like that I've called it her snake.
It wasn't my snake! It was the snake she put on me!

        *

Every tine Mum tells it she rubs the back of her hand
like a penny. She rubs the red-brown back of her hand.
I had to shave it down to this - not a hair, she says,
for years. She rubs the back of her hand.

        *

Hair is a crowning glory.
A source not only of beauty but power.
Remember Samson?
It can be taken,
buried in the woods at night.
Everything you came into this world with,
all you were to achieve,
the love you were meant for,
Trodden, rotting under the earth.
Don't let any of your aunties touch your hair at the party.
If one of them even reaches out for you, run,
come and find me.

        *

Lord deliver me. My enemies wage war against me.

        *

You don't have to believe me. It will take an incredible
leap of faith. My sister put a snake — a huge one, the kind
that swallows lambs, what's that sort called? A python, yeah,
or an anaconda maybe, but worse because it didn't belong
to this realm, wasn't of the physical, you see.
She put one of those on top of my head. I could feel it
moving. The migraines, my God, they were cosmic.
I couldn't stand the weight of it. I had to get it off,

I couldn't get it off. I was back and forth from the church,
sometimes three times a day — before work, after it,
once you were in bed. The elders tried everything.
The things I had to do, I cannot say.

<p align="center">*</p>

Mum's American sister - the one whose name
will not be said in our house, the betrayal too great -
ecstatic. Dancing on the stage ecstatic.

<p align="center">*</p>

At last, one old prophet from Nigeria heard about me,
said he'd seen something like this long ago.
He said let me speak to her. I spoke to him. God bless him.
He said, take clippers,
the snake is using your hair like grass,
cut the grass, he will be exposed.

<p align="center">*</p>

Had I gone to the doctors
of course they would've said I was crazy!
Can you imagine — *Excuse me, Doctor Mangwana,*
I can feel a snake on my head. A heavy snake
unless I shave my head.
Ha! You would have spent your childhood
visiting me in the Maudsley.

<p align="center">*</p>

So, I took the clippers, gave them to cousin Reignald and said,
take them, my husband won't understand, not being of our land.
Take them, help me.

<p align="center">*</p>

Mum's orb of a 'fro lays on the red & gold carpet.
The clippers hum in Reignald's hand
long after he's pressed OFF. *(Off with her hair!)*

*

Mum's American sister - the one whose name
will not be said in our house, the betrayal too great
- enraged. Screaming into the mirror enraged.

*

Mum's bedroom -
half chapel, half boudoir.
It's a wig shop!
Wigs hang from the bed posts,
top corners of the mirror.
Tight curly wigs,
boob-length wigs,
red and black pom-poms. Jesus
unadorned by frame or glass,
tacked to the wall
above where Mum will later lay
her clean-shaven head to pray
till her knees and elbows are sore.

G

"Ode to South Ldn Gyaldem" - Caleb Femi - *Poor*

October is a strange month.
The sun dies & leaves behind fire petals & you
emerge in the slickest finger waves.
What I would give to see you every night
in my dreams coiling your lower back
like stems slicking around slips of rays,
stopping traffic —traffic stopping.
I am able to describe the setting to the night
architect who builds my dreams
[October sunset as burning bruise]
but of you, I whisper *memory & bronze* &
a long syllable I lose to the tax of waking.
I say you are *unafraid*,
a roof: one made of mosaics,
covering a palace somewhere.
I play my favourite natural sound
[sliced plantain stuttering in oil]
I say, *That's it, that's everything I have,*
build me a looping dream of
October's quenching tongue, & you —
*y*ou, who can't be made again
in the best work of the night.

Summary in Spanish

La poesía desempeña un papel inestimable en la experiencia humana, sirviendo de espejo y de puente a la vez: refleja nuestros pensamientos, emociones y experiencias más íntimos, a la vez que nos conecta con los demás, a través del tiempo, la cultura y el espacio. En palabras de Audre Lorde "Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before" ("Poetry is not a Luxury" 9). Lorde explica además que parte de la importancia de la poesía reside en su capacidad para mover a los seres humanos a la acción, tras ofrecerles un espacio seguro donde contemplar y desarrollar ideas radicales (9). Tanto si esta concepción de la poesía como algo central en nuestra humanidad procede de Lorde, que escribía en los años ochenta en Estados Unidos, como del mismo Keats, que afirmó con bastante sencillez que "'I find I cannot exist without Poetry" (*Selected Letters* 17), queda bastante claro que esta forma de arte tiene una conexión especialmente profunda con nosotros.

Sin embargo, a lo largo de los años, la poesía se ha mantenido en los círculos de la 'alta' cultura y, en tiempos más recientes, se ha visto relegada a una forma de literatura poco apreciada. Hoy en día, en el Reino Unido, donde se centra esta investigación, la poesía representa sólo una minoría de las obras literarias que se publican, promueven y disfrutan los lectores del país. Aquellos que buscan leer poesía se encuentran con una selección notablemente homogénea, poblada principalmente por poetas blancos y, la mayoría de las veces, hombres de las clases sociales más altas, un repertorio que dista mucho de la realidad social y de la escena poética 'popular' del país. Esta tesis considera la poesía como algo que nos pertenece a todos, porque nos habla a todos de una manera más profunda y significativa.

Al ser algo tan fundamental para la humanidad, la poesía debería pertenecernos a todos. Sin embargo, hoy en día la escena poética sigue siendo mayoritariamente blanca y de clase media. Por esta razón, tenemos que abordar los problemas de infrarrepresentación que son tan evidentes. Cuando pensamos en la poesía Romántica, no cabe duda de que la poesía de este periodo forma parte del canon literario británico. Entendemos la poesía Romántica como una especie de esencia de lo británico, algo que ha dado forma a nuestra cultura y al mundo en que vivimos. Por supuesto, hay diferencias en cuanto al grado de nivel dentro del

canon entre diferentes autores y, no podemos negar que algunos de ellos han sido descuidados y no se les recuerda tanto hoy en día. La medida en que los autores románticos han pasado a formar parte del canon depende de diversas variables, entre otras su sexo, clase social y la calidad de su obra. Sin embargo, se puede convenir en que el Romanticismo como movimiento es algo que, todavía hoy, se estudia y aprecia ampliamente y que algunos de los nombres asociados a este movimiento son figuras clave en la historia de la literatura británica. De hecho, parece que su influencia es casi ineludible, ya que aquellos que no se ven directamente influenciados por la tradición Romántica, con toda seguridad siguen recibiendo influencias indirectas (es decir, a través de la obra de contemporáneos influenciados por los románticos) (Montefiore 13). Por esta razón, podemos afirmar que "the Romantic tradition — among others— is still an inevitable part of the intellectual context of poetry today; no one can write poems without engaging with the complex of themes, images, myths, stereotypes, reference-points and conventions which are roughly denominated by the word 'tradition'" (Montefiore 13). Por supuesto, los autores contemporáneos se entablan una relación con esta tradición de diversas maneras, algunos pueden emularla y aspirar a continuarla, mientras que otros la critican activamente. Sin embargo, como ha argumentado Jan Montefiore, "to criticize tradition is not to be disconnected from it" (Montefiore 15). Por lo tanto, podemos afirmar que todos los poemas que analiza esta disertación han recibido cierta influencia de la tradición Romántica y este hecho sitúa incuestionablemente a todos los poemas dentro de una misma tradición: la de la literatura británica.

Cuando se trata de la poesía negra Británica, en cambio, su posición en esa misma tradición de la poesía y la literatura británicas es problemática. Como se ha mencionado anteriormente, no cabe duda de que hoy en día la poesía en general ocupa una posición un tanto marginal en el panorama literario y esto se acentúa sin duda cuando hablamos de autores negros. La poesía que escriben estos autores dista mucho de ser de fácil acceso: las colecciones son difíciles de encontrar en las librerías y la información sobre la obra y sus autores es escasa y remota. Del mismo modo, los poemas de autores negros británicos no forman parte del currículo académico, salvo una o dos excepciones, y las instituciones culturales no les han prestado demasiada atención. Si bien es cierto que entre los años 1990 y 2000 el British Council hizo un esfuerzo por defender la literatura escrita por todo tipo de

autores británicos no blancos, la situación ha cambiado en las dos últimas décadas y la atención que estos autores recibían por parte de una de las principales organizaciones artísticas del país ha disminuido significativamente, mostrando su falta de interés por la diversidad cultural (Ledent 241-242). Hoy en día, como consecuencia de los cambios que han tenido lugar en las industria editorial y en los medios de comunicación, "less seems to have taken place in terms of presenting Black British writing as part of the national narrative — as if promotional efforts in this direction were now felt to be no longer necessary" (Ledent 242). Ledent explica además que, aunque las razones de este cambio no están del todo claras, prevalece en el país "a complacent view of British society as being now free from discrimination, and therefore not requiring any special intercessions for fairer arts representativeness" (242). Este punto de vista es peligroso, ya que difunde la idea de que sólo la calidad de la obra producida determina el éxito y el respeto que recibe un autor, una tergiversación considerable del panorama poético actual.

En el caso concreto de las poetas negras que son mujeres, es aún más difícil encontrarlas en los principales espacios o conversaciones sobre literatura. A menudo, a las mujeres se las coloca en una categoría aparte, que parecería ser una subcategoría de la poesía negra británica. Estas voces "seldom attract any serious critical or indeed scholarly attention. Nor do such writers have rooms in academic institutions. They exist, in my opinion healthily, outside the 'posts' and have not as yet been labelled or categorized further than their ethnicity" (Nasta 72). Esta situación parece reflejar perfectamente la de las poetisas románticas: ambos grupos existen en los márgenes de la poesía y parece que la única forma de obtener reconocimiento es encarnando los tipos de poeta que son aceptables para el discurso dominante, ya sea la poetisa o la mujer negra que escribe sobre la lucha de pertenencia exclusivamente. Esta realidad no es nueva y se extiende también a otras formas de arte creadas por mujeres negras. Como explica Olufemi, "art is threatening because when produced under the right conditions, it cannot be controlled. But gatekeepers and cultural institutions have written women, especially black women, outside of the history of artistic creation and freedom" (Olufemi 84). De hecho, todavía estamos trabajando para revertir este borrado de las mujeres negras de diferentes escenas artísticas y la poesía no es en absoluto una excepción.

Esta poesía que se encuentra en los márgenes de los márgenes, sin embargo, es tan central en la tradición literaria británica como se cree que lo es la poesía Romántica y, como tal, comparte muchas de las preocupaciones de esta misma. Uno de estos temas es, por supuesto, la feminidad en sus múltiples formas. La representación de la mujer es, sin duda, uno de los temas más recurrentes en la historia del arte occidental. En la historia del arte occidental, tanto en el Romanticismo como en la poesía actual. A lo largo los siglos, las mujeres han sido retratadas de diferentes maneras, pero dos ideas principales parecen predominar en las representaciones de personajes femeninos: encajan en las categorías de ángel o monstruo (Gilbert y Gubar 76) y, la mayoría de las veces, son descritas como seres extremadamente bellos. Durante el Romanticismo, los artistas, y en particular los poetas, produjeron una gran cantidad de textos en los que las mujeres eran las protagonistas. Este periodo concreto es especialmente interesante en lo que se refiere a la forma en que los poetas escriben sobre las mujeres, ya que las nuevas ideas aportadas por pensadoras como Mary Wollstonecraft en su *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) cuestionaron el sistema de creencias establecido que consideraba a las mujeres seres inferiores. Aunque se han realizado amplios trabajos sobre la representación de la mujer en la obra de los seis poetas románticos canónicos masculinos (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Keats, Shelley y Lord Byron), otros muchos poetas, entre los que hay muchas mujeres, no han sido considerados en la misma medida y siguen siendo, incluso hoy en día, desconocidos para la mayoría de nosotros. El hecho de que sólo se haya estudiado ampliamente la obra de esos seis poetas ha dado lugar a una comprensión considerablemente estrecha de lo que es realmente la literatura romántica y, al mismo tiempo, nos ha llevado a crear una visión muy restringida del Romanticismo como movimiento artístico, una visión que difiere enormemente de lo que este movimiento fue en realidad. Por ello, hay que insistir en la importancia de mirar más allá del canon. El Romanticismo fue una época en la que las mujeres se involucraron cada vez más en el mundo literario, tanto como escritoras como lectoras, y, a pesar de haber sido ignoradas durante los últimos 200 años, es fundamental reconocer y valorar su trabajo. Esta re-evaluación del canon debería dar lugar a un concepto más amplio y diverso del Romanticismo, que refleje con mayor precisión la creación artística de aquella época. Este concepto nuevo y más amplio del Romanticismo, que debería abarcar tanto a las escritoras como a los escritores, es crucial en

una sociedad como la actual, en la que los jóvenes desafían y replantean progresivamente la dinámica de poder establecida en relación con el género. De ahí la necesidad de recuperar y estudiar los poemas escritos por mujeres junto a los producidos por autores masculinos.

En épocas más recientes, los textos canónicos mencionados anteriormente y las ideas que exploran, que sin duda siguen siendo relevantes en nuestros tiempos, han sido ampliados y actualizados por feministas y pensadores culturales más actuales que siguen trabajando para desentrañar y replantear las ideas preconcebidas de la feminidad y la cultura. Ideas preconcebidas sobre la mujer y la feminidad. Habiendo abordado brevemente el clima actual en lo que se refiere a la poesía escrita por autores británicos negros, no es de extrañar que los esfuerzos por ampliar el canon sigan siendo cruciales si se quiere representar con mayor precisión nuestra sociedad y la escritura producida por ella. La necesidad e importancia de un canon literario o poético en sí mismo podría cuestionarse aquí pero, dado que sigue dictando gran parte de nuestra forma de ver la literatura y que su completa eliminación parece improbable por el momento, ampliarlo parece ser el primer paso lógico. La escena poética británica no puede entenderse adecuadamente sin permitir que las voces de las llamadas minorías étnicas, los poetas discapacitados, los poetas de la clase trabajadora y los poetas de todas las identidades de género entren en el canon, hasta que todos los poetas tengan el mismo nivel de oportunidad y respeto.

Igualmente importante a este respecto es el hecho de que diferentes lectores en diferentes momentos de la historia leen y entienden los textos de diferentes maneras y esto puede ofrecer nuevas perspectivas para la forma en que nos acercamos a esos textos. Algunas de estas perspectivas pueden poner en tela de juicio las interpretaciones generalmente aceptadas que tenemos de textos canónicos concretos y, al mismo tiempo, pueden ampliar nuestra visión de un movimiento literario específico y ayudarnos a contemplar otros textos que quizá hayamos pasado por alto hasta ahora. Dado que nosotros, como miembros de la sociedad occidental y, más concretamente, como mujeres de esa sociedad en particular, estamos cada vez más preocupados por las cuestiones de género y por cómo el sistema perpetúa la opresión femenina, parece interesante examinar tanto la forma en que las mujeres han sido representadas en la literatura a lo largo de la historia como redescubrir las voces

femeninas, las voces de las mujeres británicas en este caso. Este re-descubrimiento de las escritoras tiene como objetivo demostrar que, de hecho, las mujeres han escrito y que han sido sistemáticamente silenciadas. Con ello, pretende contribuir a que las generaciones más jóvenes de mujeres se den cuenta de que existen figuras con las que pueden identificarse y de que el discurso masculino no es el único. Esto también se aplica a los lectores de color de todos los géneros. Mientras que estudiar una selección de textos abrumadoramente blancos y encontrar literatura de autores con los que compartir orígenes o experiencias comunes puede ser a menudo una tarea laboriosa, esta disertación se compromete con la necesidad actual de establecer un canon literario que refleje el país en el que vivimos, con su diversidad y particularidades. La verdadera interseccionalidad es esencial para comprender el mundo y todos sus matices.

Aunque lo ideal sería no hacer la diferencia entre hombres y mujeres poetas, poetas negros y blancos, tanto nuestra sociedad como la de finales del siglo XVIII y principios del XIX exigen que se haga esta distinción. Puesto que hombres y mujeres, negros y blancos ocupan posiciones diferentes en estas sociedades y, en consecuencia, experimentan la vida de maneras distintas, es esencial que tengamos presentes estas diferencias al acercarnos a estos poemas. Como afirma Mary Eagleton, hasta que hombres y mujeres sean iguales, los conceptos de 'hombres' y 'mujeres'" y este último en particular, son términos clave en proyectos como el presente (344). Lo mismo puede decirse de los poetas negros, que navegan por un terreno especialmente hostil en el proceso de conseguir que se publique su obra en Gran Bretaña. Es esencial trabajar por una representación que sea justa y dar visibilidad a la obra de estos autores comúnmente menospreciados. Es importante, sin embargo, alejarse del simbolismo y de las políticas de encasillamiento que, en lugar de contribuir a la diversificación del mundo editorial y académico, perpetúan el racismo. Como explicó Kenneth Parker, "not simply a matter of ensuring that 'the black presence' [be] expressed in the classroom, but more fundamentally, [to ensure that the new curriculum might make] a contribution to the project of destroying racism in contemporary Britain" ("Sea Change" 27). Además, hay que recordar los límites de la propia representación, ya que "also has *political* disadvantages. Whether positively represented or not, the fact that a few individuals *can* represent a community reiterates the comparative weakness of that community" (Getachew

329). El énfasis no debe ponerse en pasar por alto la diferencia, o en fingir que no existe, sino en comprender "the way it enables us to articulate how difference underscores our lives" (Olufemi 86).

Teniendo en cuenta estas ideas, a lo largo del análisis de los poemas nos centraremos específicamente en los conceptos de belleza y maldad, y en cómo los personajes femeninos se relacionan con estas nociones. Al abordar los textos desde esta perspectiva surgen varias preguntas: ¿Se presenta a las mujeres de los poemas como seres malvados? ¿Son innata e intrínsecamente malas? ¿Cómo se relaciona la belleza con el mal en estos textos? ¿En qué se diferencian los poemas escritos por hombres y los escritos por mujeres? ¿Existe alguna diferencia considerable que pueda ser consecuencia del sexo del autor? ¿Cuáles son esas diferencias y a qué se deben? ¿Cómo se compara la representación de la mujer en el Romanticismo con la de la época actual? ¿Qué podemos aprender sobre la evolución de la política y los cánones de belleza al analizar estos poemas uno al lado del otro?

Aunque se hace mucho hincapié en el concepto de maldad en los personajes femeninos de estos poemas, la tesis no pretende seguir la tendencia que se ha desarrollado recientemente en la crítica literaria feminista sobre las escritoras británicas, cuyo objetivo último parece ser demostrar que las mujeres, todas las mujeres en general, no son malvadas y sólo son capaces de acciones moralmente cuestionables en defensa propia ("The Subject of Violence" 46-47). Este enfoque es tan restrictivo y esencialista como el que pretende demostrar lo malvado que es el sexo femenino. Las mujeres, al ser seres humanos complejos como los demás, son tan capaces de maldad como de bondad y, como mostrará la tesis, la diferencia entre estas dos cualidades no siempre es tan clara como parece a primera vista. Además, explorará la relación entre las mujeres, el mal y la raza, ya que se da el caso de que las personas negras han sido demonizados a lo largo de la historia. El análisis desvelará las formas específicas en que los autores negros británicos considerados abordan estas ideas en sus escritos.

No se ha llevado a cabo esta investigación sin ser consciente de la propia posición de la escritora. Como mujer blanca que habla sobre la escritura de autores negros, la autora no

pretende apropiarse de voces o discursos que no le pertenecen. Sin embargo, es necesario abordar y romper los prejuicios sobre la lectura, la enseñanza y la escritura de la literatura negra. A menudo se piensa que como blancos no nos corresponde ocuparnos de esta escritura, que no nos corresponde hablar de ella y que las experiencias e ideas que estos textos expresan están demasiado alejadas de las nuestras. Sin embargo, si así fuera, los blancos sólo estudiarían, leerían y enseñarían literatura de autores blancos contemporáneos, ya que todos los demás son demasiado diferentes de nosotros. De hecho, no tenemos más en común con los poetas románticos que con los poetas negros británicos sólo porque los primeros fueran blancos. Lo que hay que recordar al trabajar con textos escritos por autores de culturas y procedencias distintas a la nuestra es abordar esos textos con respeto, haciendo un esfuerzo consciente por entender de qué hablan sin prejuicios. Audre Lorde se refirió sabiamente a este asunto cuando dijo lo siguiente: "I can't possibly teach Black women's writing -their experience is so different from mine. Yet how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and Proust?" ("Transformation of Silence" 5) y con esta idea en mente se ha escrito el presente artículo.

La tesis se dividirá en dos secciones principales que en cierto modo se reflejan entre sí en términos de estructura: cada una de estas secciones comenzará con una exploración en profundidad de los contextos en los que se produjeron los textos, así como observaciones relevantes sobre la escritura en cada uno de estos períodos de tiempo y el papel de la poesía en dichos contextos. A continuación, el lector encontrará, en cada caso, un apartado que proporciona el marco teórico necesario para acercarse a los poemas en cada caso. Aunque diferentes escritos de diferentes épocas requieren diferentes enfoques teóricos, ambos marcos teóricos parten de nociones relacionadas con los estudios culturales y de género. Una vez establecida la base teórica, cada apartado pasará al análisis de los poemas seleccionados, cada uno de los cuales irá precedido de unos breves aspectos de la vida de las autoras relevantes para el tema objeto de estudio. Para completar la disertación se presentarán las conclusiones extraídas de la investigación realizada.

Objetivos y justificación del corpus

En primer lugar, esta tesis pretende explorar el profundo significado de la poesía como género literario único. Como se demostrará, la poesía sirve de conducto trascendental, resonando con los aspectos más profundos de la existencia humana.

Además, esta tesis pretende subrayar la calidad intrínseca y el valor de la poesía británica negra contemporánea en sí misma. Al hacerlo, se esfuerza por afirmar su papel crítico en la redefinición de lo que consideramos los contornos de la tradición literaria británica, creando, al hacerlo, una comprensión mejor y más precisa de la tradición literaria británica. Los poemas publicados en los últimos veinte años son una continuación de esta tradición y dialogan con los poemas escritos y publicados en el siglo XIX. Por este motivo, ambos corpus de obras deben abordarse como partes de una misma cosa y, además, la poesía británica negra contemporánea, como han dicho algunos autores, se inspira en la poesía romántica.

Además, la autora pretende demostrar que no sólo es posible, sino también vital, crear un cuerpo de trabajo académico que considere la poesía británica negra con el mismo nivel de rigor intelectual que otras obras literarias. Como resultado, se demostrará que un análisis comparativo que sitúe la poesía romántica y la poesía británica negra contemporánea una al lado de la otra no sólo es factible, sino también esclarecedor y ofrece nuevas perspectivas.

Por último, esta tesis pretende analizar y observar la evolución en la representación de la mujer entre el Romanticismo y la época contemporánea. En concreto, se centrará en las nociones de belleza y maldad y se prestará atención a las formas en que éstas interactúan.

Así pues, el objetivo de este trabajo es analizar la representación de la mujer en diversos poemas pertenecientes a dos "movimientos" distintos: El Romanticismo y la Poesía Negra Británica Contemporánea. Para representar la época romántica, los poemas seleccionados para el análisis incluyen "Christabel" de S.T. Coleridge (compuesto en dos partes en 1797 y 1800), "The Dark Ladie" de Anne Bannerman (1800), "La Belle Dame sans

Merci" de John Keats (1819) y "A Legend of Tintagel Castle" de Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1833). Por otra parte, el corpus de poemas británicos negros contemporáneos estará constituido de la siguiente manera: "U.F.O. Woman (Pronounced OOFOE)" de Patience Agbabi y publicado en el año 2000; la secuencia de poemas conocida como "medusa" de Dorothea Smartt, publicada en 2001; "The Contract. Femme Fatale. (The Second Nun's Tale)" también de Patience Agbabi y publicado en 2014; "The Warner" de Omikemi Natacha Bryan, publicado en publicado en 2017; "A recipe for retaliation" de Vanessa Kisuule, publicado en 2017; "Mum's Snake" de Rachel Long, publicado en 2020; y "Ode to South Ldn Gyaldem" de Caleb Femi, publicado en 2020.

La selección de poemas a analizar, tanto para la poesía romántica como para la poesía británica negra contemporánea, se ha llevado a cabo con la intención de mantener las muestras lo más variadas posible, con el fin de llegar a una compilación que represente las épocas de escritura con la mayor precisión posible. En el caso de los poemas románticos, dos de los considerados, los de Coleridge y Keats, se consideran textos clásicos, entendidos sin duda como obras clave del canon británico. En cuanto a los poemas de Keats y Coleridge, se ha escrito mucho sobre ellos, pero las opiniones de los expertos parecen divididas en lo que respecta a sus posibles interpretaciones, y las diferentes formas de entender a los personajes femeninos a menudo se contradicen entre sí. Los otros dos poemas, escritos por Bannerman y Landon, han recibido escasa atención crítica o académica y siguen siendo muy desconocidos aún hoy, por lo que están lejos de ser considerados parte del canon. El caso de Landon requiere más aclaraciones: Aunque los estudiosos sitúan sistemáticamente el final del Romanticismo en el año 1830 y, por tanto, el poema de Landon no pertenecería estrictamente a este movimiento, Stephenson la ha descrito como "one of the most relentlessly Romantic of all the poets writing during the early nineteenth-century" (*The Woman behind L.E.L.* 1). Esto, junto con el hecho de que fue una de las escritoras más populares de principios del siglo XIX, una posición poco frecuente para una mujer escritora, explica la inclusión de su poema en la tesis y su comparación con los de los otros autores. Al analizar dichos poemas, la autora pretende contribuir al proceso de re-evaluación de estas obras, lo que parece esencial porque Landon y Bannerman siguen siendo conocidos exclusivamente dentro del campo de

investigación de la literatura romántica e, incluso dentro de este ámbito concreto, la atención que han recibido es insuficiente.

Cuando se trata de la poesía británica negra contemporánea, las cosas se complican aún más. Como mostrarán los capítulos dedicados a la escritura y la poesía británica negra, la poesía en general no recibe demasiada atención en el panorama literario y académico actual, una realidad que se agrava cuando lo que se considera es la obra de autores y poetas negros. De todos los poetas analizados en esta sección de la tesis, sólo los de Dorothea Smartt puede decirse que están algo cerca de ser considerados canónicos. Es cierto que la obra de Caleb Femi le ha reportado un éxito relativo y una posición destacada en el panorama actual: en el momento de escribir estas líneas, acaba de anunciarse su segundo poemario, que sin duda será objeto de una intensa comercialización. Se trata, pues, de poetas menos conocidos, situados en los márgenes del canon y la tradición literarias británica. Sus obras han sido seleccionadas debido a su exploración de temas que se alinean con los de los poetas románticos mencionados anteriormente, lo que ha dado lugar a una abrumadora mayoría de mujeres poetas frente a una selección más equilibrada. La razón es sencilla: muchos poetas negros que escriben en Gran Bretaña, de cualquier género, se ven en la necesidad de ajustarse al tipo de poesía que se asocia a su raza, una poesía que trata temas más abiertamente políticos. Los autores aquí estudiados están, de hecho, muy comprometidos con las cuestiones sociales y políticas del Reino Unido, pero también muestran intereses que van más allá de las ideas preconcebidas de lo que es la poesía negro-británica. Las obras seleccionadas para esta sección

La obra seleccionada para esta sección ha sido producida entre los años 2000 y 2020, un periodo de tiempo lo suficientemente corto como para permitir agrupar estos poemas, pero lo suficientemente amplio como para permitir cambios en las actitudes sociales y políticas.

Caleb Femi le ha reportado un éxito relativo y una posición destacada en el panorama actual: en el momento de escribir estas líneas, acaba de anunciarse su segundo poemario, que sin duda será objeto de una intensa comercialización. Se trata, pues, de poetas menos conocidos, situados en los márgenes del canon y la tradición literarios británicos. Sus obras han sido

seleccionadas debido a su exploración de temas que se alinean con los de los poetas románticos mencionados anteriormente, lo que ha dado lugar a una abrumadora mayoría de mujeres poetas frente a una selección más equilibrada. La razón es sencilla: muchos poetas negros que escriben en Gran Bretaña, de cualquier género, se ven en la necesidad de ajustarse al tipo de poesía que se asocia a su raza, una poesía que trata temas más abiertamente políticos. Los autores aquí estudiados están, de hecho, muy comprometidos con las cuestiones sociales y políticas del Reino Unido, pero también muestran intereses que van más allá de las ideas preconcebidas de lo que es la poesía negra británica. La obra seleccionada para esta sección ha sido producida entre los años 2000 y 2020, un periodo de tiempo lo suficientemente corto como para permitir agrupar estos poemas, pero lo suficientemente amplio como para permitir cambios en las actitudes sociales y políticas.