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Seeing through Shadows: The Black Female Gaze in the Uncanny Worlds of Helen Oyeyemi

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Abstract— *Helen Oyeyemi is a British novelist and short fiction writer. She is an immigrant from Nigeria. Her fiction explores colonial themes, Gothicism and duality. The main characters in Oyeyemi's writings are primarily young and teenage girls. These characters are set in the backdrop of diaspora, where they face the complications of diversity. Helen Oyeyemi's work often engages with the concept of the "Black female gaze" in unique and unsettling ways, particularly within the framework of horror, folklore and magical realism. While not explicitly focusing on traditional horror tropes, Oyeyemi's novels explore the uncanny, the haunted and the dislocated sense of identity, often through the lens of Black female protagonists. Her narratives confront themes of race, gender and power in ways that subvert mainstream horror conventions, emphasizing psychological depth and cultural history. For the present work the novels namely White is for Witching and Mr. Fox are chosen to study the colonial gaze, female gaze and black gaze.*

Keywords— ***Gaze, gender, patriarchy, racism, colonialism***

Helen Oyeyemi is a British author born on December 10, 1984, in Ibadan, Nigeria. She moved to London with her family when she was four years old and later attended Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, where she studied Social and Political Sciences. Oyeyemi began writing at a young age, and her debut novel, *The Icarus Girl* (2005), was published while she was still a student at Cambridge. This novel, which blends Nigerian folklore with psychological horror, set the tone for Oyeyemi's future work, characterized by magical realism, myth and elements of fairy-tale. Oyeyemi has written several critically acclaimed novels, including *White is for Witching* (2009), *Mr. Fox* (2011) and *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014), each of which explores complex themes such as identity, race and gender, often using non-linear storytelling and surreal elements. Her novel *Peaces* (2021) showcases her distinctive and inventive style. Known for her unique voice and genre-defying narratives, Oyeyemi has received numerous accolades, including being named to Granta's list of Best Young British Novelists in 2013. She has also published short stories, plays and essays, establishing herself as a prominent figure in contemporary literature.

Gaze theory, which draws on psychoanalysis, film studies and feminist theory, investigates how visual media and literature place viewers or readers in relation to the subjects they witness. It investigates how power dynamics, identity and social structures are formed via acts of seeing and being seen. The theory began with Jacques Lacan's work, which investigated the concept of the "gaze" in psychoanalytic terms, and has subsequently been broadened by philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Laura Mulvey, particularly in terms of gender, racism and colonialism. Jacques Lacan first proposed the concept of the "gaze" as part of his research on the "mirror stage" in child development, in which the infant connects with an external image, resulting in a sensation of alienation. Lacan defines the gaze as a state of self-consciousness, specifically the awareness of being gazed at by another. This produces a sense of vulnerability and power imbalance, as the observer frequently exerts control over the subject. The gaze thus serves as a technique for

constructing power dynamics between subject and object, self and other.

Mulvey's theory examines how women are sexualised in visual culture and reduced to spectacles for male enjoyment, depriving them of autonomy. Feminist critics have built on this notion, examining how women, too, internalise this gaze and perceive themselves through the lens of male desire, a concept known as the "self-gaze." Alongside gender, gaze theory has been used to address concerns of racism and colonialism. In his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon addresses the racialised gaze, specifically how white culture perceives Black people. For Fanon, the colonizer's gaze dehumanises the colonised, reducing them to racial objects. The colonised subject becomes acutely conscious of their "otherness" in the face of the colonizer's gaze, reinforcing colonial power dynamics.

Building on Fanon's work, postcolonial theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha and bell hooks have investigated the intersections of race, gender and power in the gaze. hooks, for example, criticises the "oppositional gaze," which she uses to explain how Black women, in particular, resist being passive objects of both the white male and white female gazes. Instead, individuals actively reinterpret and question the pictures and representations that are pushed upon them. In contemporary media and literature, gaze theory is a critical framework for understanding how visual representation creates identity and power. In cinema, the male gaze remains a key point for feminist critique, but there is growing interest in how other types of gaze, such as the female or queer gaze, provide alternatives to dominant patterns of perception. The female gaze, for example, aims to portray women as persons with agency rather than objects, emphasising emotional connection, subjectivity and complexity. In literature, gaze theory is used to investigate narrative viewpoints and how characters perceive and are viewed by others. Writers like Toni Morrison and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have questioned the gaze in terms of race and gender identity analysing how characters navigate the complications of being perceived and assessed by society.

Helen Oyeyemi's work often engages with the concept of the "Black female gaze" in unique and unsettling ways, particularly within the framework of horror, folklore and magical realism. While not explicitly focusing on traditional horror tropes, Oyeyemi's novels explore the uncanny, the haunted and the dislocated sense of identity, often through the lens of Black female protagonists. Her narratives confront themes of race, gender and power in ways that subvert mainstream horror conventions, emphasizing psychological depth and cultural history.

Oyeyemi employs many kinds of the gaze—particularly the masculine gaze, the Black gaze and the colonial gaze—to investigate how characters are perceived and see themselves in contexts impacted by historical and cultural power dynamics. Oyeyemi's use of magical realism, myth and psychological depth reinterprets standard gaze theory, focussing on how her Black female characters are "looked at" and how they resist, subvert or reclaim that gaze. Oyeyemi frequently questions the importance of the masculine gaze, which objectifies and reduces female characters to passive subjects. In *Mr. Fox* (2011), for example, the heroine Mary Foxe fiercely rejects Mr. Fox's patriarchal narrative, which strives to dominate and "kill" women in his stories. Mary's inversion of his narrative signifies agency reclaimed, as she rewrites the story to flip the male gaze back on itself.

Helen Oyeyemi's novels *Mr. Fox* (2011) and *White is for Witching* (2009) use surreal landscapes to examine the intersections of race, gender and identity. The Black female gaze is central to these works, as it reclaims agency for Black women in narratives dominated by patriarchal and colonial power structures. Oyeyemi employs supernatural and literary methods to reimagine how Black women see and are perceived, allowing them to challenge dominant gazes—whether male, white, or colonial—and express their own complicated identities. Through the protagonists of *Mr. Fox* and *White is for Witching*, Oyeyemi investigates how the Black female gaze turns fantasy and horror worlds into spaces of resistance, self-reclamation, and empowerment.

The Black female gaze, as defined by theorists like bell hooks and others, is a significant act of reclaiming identity. According to hooks, “The ‘gaze’ has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally… In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating ‘awareness’ politicizes ‘looking’ relations—one learns to look a certain way in order to resist” (hooks, bell 116). In a world where dominant narratives have traditionally objectified, marginalised, or erased Black women—particularly the male and white gaze—the Black female gaze asserts agency, power, and self-definition. It challenges the ways in which Black women are frequently portrayed as passive objects of desire, violence, or fantasy, instead presenting them as active players in creating their own tales. In both *Mr. Fox* and *White is for Witching*, Oyeyemi employs this lens to challenge conventional storytelling and empower her Black female characters. These women are not passive recipients of external influences, but active architects of their own narratives, influencing how they are regarded in both fantastical and real-world settings.

Mr. Fox (2011), a novel by Helen Oyeyemi, skilfully integrates aspects of fairy tale, mythology and literary fiction to challenge standard narratives about gender, power and violence. One of the novel's key themes is the subversion of the male gaze, which has traditionally been used in literature to objectify, silence and subjugate women. Through the interaction between its major characters—Mr. Fox, a male writer and Mary Foxe, his muse and literary creation—Oyeyemi criticises the patriarchal tendencies ingrained in storytelling and reimagines a space where female characters regain their agency, voice and subjectivity.

Mr. Fox begins with Mr. Fox, a wealthy novelist who frequently kills the women in his books. His violence represents the way male authors have traditionally "killed" women in literature, turning them to passive, helpless victims of male desire and action. Mr. Fox's muse, Mary Foxe, defies this trend, prompting him to re-evaluate how he perceives and writes about women. This sets the setting for Oyeyemi's subversion of the masculine gaze, in which she deconstructs and redefines the relationships between men, women, and storytelling. Mary Foxe is a multifaceted person, both a creation of Mr. Fox's imagination and a self-sufficient being. Her function in the narrative is to fight Mr. Fox's aggressive impulses towards women in his novels while also exposing the limitations of his worldview. She accomplishes this not only via direct confrontation, but also by directing him through a succession of alternate narratives that reinvent men and women's relationships. In these sketches, Oyeyemi challenges the traditional male gaze by putting women at the centre of the narrative, not as objects to be stared at or controlled, but as active participants with their own wishes, thoughts, and voices. Mary challenges Mr. Fox to confront the repercussions of his objectifying gaze by demonstrating how the women in his novels can live differently if given the opportunity to share their own experiences. As a result, the novel becomes a meta-narrative about storytelling, criticising the patriarchal institutions that have shaped literature but also advocating alternative ways of perceiving and depicting women. One of the primary ways *Mr. Fox* challenges the masculine gaze is by reinventing female agency. Mary Foxe's books feature multifaceted, self-aware women who refuse to be defined by masculine desire or violence. In one such story, a lady named Daphne refuses to be the victim of a man's homicidal scheme, instead turning the narrative on its head and taking command of her fate. When describing Miss Foxe, Oyeyemi writes, “She encouraged herself to see her very small presence in the world as a good thing, a power, something that a hero might possess” (65).

Mr. Fox frequently references violence, particularly violence against women. In many aspects, the work criticises the idea of female victimhood that dominates classical fiction. Mr. Fox's habit of killing off his female characters is a metaphor for how literature and narrative have traditionally "killed" women by denying them agency and reducing them to symbols of male pain, guilt or redemption. However, Oyeyemi does not present women solely as victims of male aggression. Instead, the women in *Mr. Fox* frequently fight, undermine, or endure the violence perpetrated on them. In doing so, they undermine the very structures that strive to oppress them. Oyeyemi twists the relationship between violence and the gaze, implying that female characters are more than passive recipients of male aggression; they may actively oppose and change their own stories.

In Oyeyemi's writings, Black protagonists are frequently hyper-aware of how they are regarded by others, whether in white society or in personal relationships. This is similar to the concept of the Black gaze, which focusses on how Black people negotiate their self-perception in the face of external judgements or stereotypes. In *White is for Witching* (2009), the protagonist Miranda Silver's connection with race and identity is complicated by the gaze of her family's haunted mansion, which represents a colonial and racist history that actually consumes Black people.

The Black gaze, as opposed to the hegemonic or white gaze, describes how Black people perceive themselves and others in a society affected by institutional racism and colonial past. It originates as a response to white society's historical objectification and misrepresentation of Black people. The Black gaze tries to reclaim agency by examining how Black people perceive and interpret themselves outside of the stereotypical frames imposed by a white-dominated world. In *White is for Witching*, Oyeyemi explores how characters from various racial origins perceive themselves and one other in a world where race and identity are riddled with conflict.

Miranda Silver, a young mixed-race lady, is central to *White is for Witching*, as she struggles with both her physical and psychological inheritance. The novel is set in Dover, England, in a mansion with its own enigmatic, sinister presence, and Miranda's psychological conflicts are linked to the race and colonial history ingrained inside its walls. Miranda has an eating problem called pica, which causes her to obsessively devour non-food items such as chalk, and this disorder serves as a metaphor for her internalised battle about her identity and racial ancestry.

Miranda's sense of self is fragmented, and her perspective of her own body is influenced not only by her

sickness, but also by her family's history and cultural constraints surrounding race. Miranda, a biracial lady, is torn between two worlds: she is tormented by the heritage of her white ancestors, but she is also struggling with her relationship with her Black mother, Lily. This duality—her whiteness and Blackness—causes internal struggle and estrangement. In this environment, Miranda uses the Black gaze to navigate her self-perception as she fights to reconcile the aspects of herself linked to her family's oppressive white history and her mother's marginalised Black identity. Miranda, struggles with her sense of self and her reflection, as her experiences blur boundaries between herself and her mother. Miranda's interactions with her own image reflect a self-gaze influenced by the expectations and history of women in her family. She frequently questions her own reality, mirroring the idea of a female gaze turned inward to grapple with inherited trauma and identity.

The soucouyant's appearance in Oyeyemi's work alludes to Miranda and her family's psychological and cultural challenges, particularly the racial tension and generational trauma passed down through the centuries. The soucouyant represents the haunting nature of history, particularly colonial and familial legacies, as evidenced by Miranda's encounter with the haunted home at 29 Barton Road and the family's tenuous connection to their lineage. Miranda feels, "She is a double danger—there is the danger of meeting her, and the danger of becoming her. Does the nightmare of her belong to everyone, or just to me?" (Oyeyemi 157). The house's hatred towards outsiders, particularly those who do not adhere to its racial and cultural norms, reflects the ways in which nations founded on white supremacy reject and oppress individuals who do not fit in. The house's predilection for white purity is exemplified by its influence on Miranda, which exacerbates her eating disorder and rejection of food while paralleling her battle to reject her Black identity. The Black gaze is suppressed within the home, as Miranda's sense of self is progressively influenced by the house's demands for purity and whiteness. The children of the housekeeper write to Miranda warning her about how haunted the house is:

> "Dear Miranda Silver,
>
> This house is bigger than you know! There are extra floors, with lots of people in them. They are looking people. They look at you, and they never move. We do not like them. We do not like this house, and we are glad to be going away. This is the end of our letter" (Oyeyemi 57).

Despite these oppressive circumstances, Miranda's vision becomes a means for resistance. Her interactions with others, especially her complicated relationships with family and friends, reflect her attempts to define herself outside of the haunting and engulfing mansion. Her moments of self-reflection, however painful, depict a fight for self-definition that reflects feminist examinations of the female gaze as a form of self-exploration. Miranda converses with the house and her past while she examines her own identity, allowing her to gradually carve out her identity. This idea is consistent with feminist literature, which views the female gaze as a means of regaining agency. Miranda's perspective is crafted by Oyeyemi to be deeply introspective and fragmented, a journey towards discovering her identity outside the eyes of others. In this approach, White is for Witching implies that, while the feminine gaze can be repressive, it also has the ability to liberate through self-awareness and acceptance.

By internalizing the gaze of her family and society, Miranda's perception of herself becomes fragmented, a reflection of the complex pressures placed upon her as a young woman navigating race and mental health. This aligns with feminist theory on the female gaze, where the internalization of societal scrutiny shapes a woman's self-perception and behaviour. Oyeyemi thus critiques how women's autonomy can be compromised by the expectations and demands placed on them, particularly in the context of racial and familial legacies.

Oyeyemi's characters and narratives often disrupt traditional portrayals, offering perspectives that resonate with the complexity of Black female identity and self-perception. Her works provide subtle yet profound commentary on the Black female gaze by centring experiences that resist and redefine how Black women see and understand themselves.

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