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Negotiating Power: Olive Schreiner and Racial Exclusion in New Woman Fiction

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*This article examines the contentious relationship between New Woman literature and the British empire. Olive Schreiner's novella, *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897), and *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) demonstrate how New Women writers adopted exclusionary imperialist ideologies in order to promote their agenda of female emancipation in fin-de-siècle Britain.*

Introduction

The New Woman is a relatively unstable term in the context of literary criticism. Known by many names over the years—"Novissima", "Superfluous Woman", the "Wild Woman", the "Modern Man-Hater"—the New Woman was a controversial figure in late nineteenth-century Britain (Heilmann 197). The term was popularised by Sarah Grand in 1894, referring to a new category of woman who valued her independence and called for radical change in order to achieve it. The New Woman rode bicycles, was self-assured, politically active, and intellectually astute. She advocated for increased access to higher education for women, positions in hitherto male-dominated professional fields, and a restructuring of traditional gender roles within the private and public spheres. Critics of the movement charged them with bringing "Ibsenite anarchism", French decadence, and communism to England, and caricatures of the figure were regular features in publications like the satirical *Punch* magazine (Stutfield 842).

Despite her progressive domestic politics with regards to gender, the New Women—a predominantly White, middle-class phenomenon in Britain—often adopted exclusionary racial politics to ingratiate themselves with the ruling classes. Vron Ware has argued that "feminist ideology and practice were shaped by the social, economic, and political forces of imperialism to a greater extent than has been acknowledged" (119). This article will use two texts by New Woman author Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) and *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* (1897), to explore some of the ways in which the New Woman's literature was steeped in racial biases that were a direct result of imperial culture.

Britain in the *Fin de Siècle*

The New Woman movement coincided with a period of economic and social unrest in Britain. The 1880s saw a massive wave of migration into urban areas from those affected by an agricultural depression as well as a period of industrial stagnation in the cities. Places like London's East End were particularly affected, suffering from rampant poverty, a lack of affordable housing, and the poor living conditions resulting from such circumstances. The unrest resulted in numerous violent altercations like the Trafalgar Square Riots (1886), Bloody Sunday (1887), and the Great Dock Strike (1889). The lack of domestic resources saw Britain aggressively and systematically expanding their colonial conquests. Amidst the growing fervour of popular imperialism, the New Woman's desire to further alter the social landscape by blurring the lines between male and female spheres was seen as a danger to the health of the English 'imperial race' and the larger British empire.

In "The Wild Women as Social Insurgents", Elizabeth Lynn Linton views the New Woman as aesthetically repulsive, using imperialist and nationalist language to emphasise the threat posed by these gender insurgents. One of Linton's greatest concerns was the introduction "into the cultured classes of certain qualities and practices hitherto confined to the uncultured and— savages" (598). This included, amongst other things, the New Woman's desire to smoke, play sports, perform on stage, earn her own money, and travel. However, despite her claims that the New Woman would be integral to the cultural, and by extension racial, degeneration of the empire, recent research has shown the extent to which many New Women were in fact deeply invested in upholding the British empire.

Olive Schreiner, who was born and raised in South Africa to missionary parents, is an ideal conduit for exploring the New Woman's precarious relationship to the empire, and indeed, academia's precarious relationship to the New Woman herself. For while *Trooper Peter* is a text which happens to be written by a New Woman author, *The Story of an African Farm* is specifically a New Woman text, concerned with the status and rights of women in the late nineteenth century. As a result, we shall see how Schreiner uses exclusion and silence to paint two very different portraits of the Black characters in each text, and how this exclusion is informed by the texts' different political agendas.

As Ann McClintock is quick to point out in the introduction of her book, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), “women and men did not experience imperialism in the same way...white women were not the hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting” (6). McClintock’s observations about the position of White women within the empire is particularly helpful as she identifies the underlying tensions present in the forthcoming texts, and especially in *African Farm*, where the New Woman struggles to find her power, often through the exclusion of another marginalised group. In contrast, *Trooper Peter* is an explicitly anti-imperialist text that demonstrates the author’s ire towards the British South Africa Company.

A Critique of Imperialism

Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland was written in direct opposition to Cecil Rhodes’s conduct as Prime Minister of the Cape Colony in South Africa during the Jameson Raid of 1895. Rhodes’s British South Africa Company was a key player in the ‘Scramble for South Africa’ that had taken over many European governments in the nineteenth century, though his work in South Africa began when he moved to Kimberly in 1871 following the New Rush. Schreiner, who had been on the ground witnessing the atrocities against the people of Matebeleland (now Zimbabwe), wrote *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland* as a direct response to the crimes being committed by Rhodes and his troops during the Jameson Raid in Transvaal (Dec 1895–Jan 1896), and as warning to the British public about Rhodes’s intent to provoke war in the future.

In *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, the protagonist Peter Halket is an English soldier part of Rhodes’s company in Mashonaland. After being separated from his troop on a scouting mission, Halket is visited by an unnamed stranger who introduces himself as “A friend” (38). This figure of Christ, further identified by the holes in his feet and by being “a Jew of Palestine”, keeps Peter company for the night, discussing global politics, conflicts in South Africa, Christianity, cruelty, and oppression throughout the centuries (40). Christ constantly questions Peter on his beliefs about race, money, and religion, and while Peter fails to grasp his true meaning, the text makes it clear to the reader that the true meaning of Christianity (as Schreiner understands it) has been lost in the politics of imperialism, and that

ideas of good and bad, rebel and patriot, are subjective terms decided by those in power rather than objective truths.

Refusing to answer Halket's questions about his identity, the stranger instead shares stories of the natives whom he has "known" and "seen" for all their lives. Through his stories, he highlights the humanity of the common people caught up in this war: of an old woman abstaining from food so that a young mother can survive, of a White prospector who cared for his Black servants, one of whom died protecting him when the rebels attacked. Though they end in death, these stories are intended to breathe life into Africa and her people, giving them meaning and purpose apart from being a blank slate and a pot of gold for colonial invaders. One of the ways in which Schreiner achieves this is through exploring Halket's sexuality, or, more importantly, the deviancy of English sexuality within the lawless context of a war zone. In doing so, she draws a parallel between the exploitation of Black women with the exploitation of the Boer land and natural resources.

Soon after meeting the stranger and acknowledging that he is not a threat, Halket settles down to share the story of a Black woman he had become infatuated with and purchased with "a vatje of Old Dop"—a cask of Cape brandy (43). He also purchases another girl of fifteen, though he shows little interest in her when recounting their time together. In the older woman, Halket sees the beginnings of his imperial adventure. She builds him a garden, growing enough food to feed the three of them for six months with plenty to spare, which Halket sells to his neighbours. That she was married with two children before her previous owner bought her is only mentioned in passing. Halket's description of his relationship with the two nameless women is jarring in its callousness, and his inability to look past his own fabricated narrative of events is just another form of violence enacted upon them. Of the young girl, Halket has little to say—"I got her cheap from a policeman who was living with her, and she wasn't much" (43). The woman on the other hand, was beautiful, capable, and smart, learning English faster than he learned the local dialect. These were the qualities Halket observed because they directly benefitted him and made her worthy of his interest. What he fails to recognise is her devotion as a wife and mother, her capability to lie to him in order to gather cartridges and escape with the girl less than six hours after Halket left to fight for the Company. He also fails to recognise that she possesses enough knowledge about weapons and metals that she knows to take the lid of his tea-box so that it might be melted into bullets.

In this short section, Schreiner manages to convey the vast skill set of these Mashona women. Moreover, despite Halket's inability to acknowledge it, Schreiner attempts to add some degree of agency to these nameless, voiceless characters. Through Halket's language, and his deliberate obliviousness, the reader becomes aware of the burden imposed on the Mashona women, who were expected to leave their families, land, and culture behind, and be grateful for it. Halket talks about how he had "never given either of them one touch" in the time they spent with him, but what he means is that he had never hit them (46). As he goes on to reveal, both women, including the fifteen-year-old girl, were pregnant with his children when he left them. To Halket, there seems to be a distinction between physical, disciplinary action, and the sexual violence (though he does not consider it as such) that he enacted upon these women.

The lack of sexual agency afforded to these women is another form of colonial violence inflicted upon them, for while Halket acknowledges the sexual appetites of African men and vows revenge on his slave's husband, she is relegated to an entirely passive role in the proceedings. "They've no hearts", Halket keeps repeating, but what he means is that they have no minds (47). By framing the entire account from Halket's limited, and often deluded point of view, Schreiner attempts to exemplify the cognitive dissonance of what the colonial project claimed to accomplish, and what it actually entails under the leadership of someone like Rhodes. Moreover, unlike most sympathetic depictions of African women at the time, the detail about melting the metal to make bullets in particular portrays these women as more than victims; it also sets them up as active agents of opposition to Rhodes and his colonial agenda, though the text does not explore this idea any further.

The stories of the Christ character are more straightforward in contrast to Halket's in that there is a distinct moral argument he is making about the innocence and desperation of the African people that Halket is unable to see. Though there are some hints that Halket is perturbed to realise that the young mother from one of the stories is the same one he and a fellow soldier had raped earlier, it is not until Christ starts recounting stories of a White pastor that Halket finally appears to have a change of heart (Burdett 41). This pastor, "small of stature and small of voice", spoke vocally and repeatedly against the atrocities committed by the Chartered Company, comparing the actions of the Jameson Raid to the story of Ahab in the Bible, until his congregation dwindled in numbers and he lost the support of his wife (60). In a letter to her brother William, Schreiner revealed that *Trooper Peter* was written for the British public, who had the power to incite or suppress war in South Africa. Indifference was the greatest sin for

Schreiner and that is reflected in her text, when the priest is defending his actions to speak out to his wife despite the backlash:

And he said, ‘Oh my wife, have I not waited and watched and hoped that they who are nobler and stronger than I, all over this land, would lift up their voices and speak—and there is only a deadly silence?...Do I not know only too bitterly how weak is my voice; and that that which I can do is as nothing; but shall I remain silent?...Ever a voice is behind my shoulder, that whispers to me—“*Why break your head against a stone wall? Leave this work to the greater and larger men of your people; they who will do it better than you can do it! Why break your heart when life could be so fair to you?*” But, oh my wife, the strong men are silent! and shall I not speak, though I know my power is as nothing? (68–69).

This impassioned response from the priest on the duty of the individual is Schreiner speaking to her audience in England, the good and just people of England whom she believes have the power to protest the violence taking place in Africa. Moved by the stories, Halket expresses a desire to join the stranger’s ranks, for he is “tired of belonging to the Chartered Company”, and yet, with every task Christ gives him, to spread his message in England, in South Africa, within his company, Halket expresses reluctance, similar to the men in the preacher’s story (75). Finally, the stranger calls upon Halket to find one man, just as he has done with Halket, and to spread his message of mercy and opposing oppression. Just after, the stranger leaves Halket, disappearing into a pale white light. The significantly shorter second chapter of the novella describes Halket’s reformed character after being reunited with his troop. He pleads for the release of a captured native, only to be reprimanded and tasked with shooting the prisoner himself. Still, Halket continues to show compassion, offering the prisoner food and water against his Captain’s orders. Later that night, Halket cuts the prisoner’s bindings, allowing him to escape, and is shot and killed in the resulting commotion, thereby bringing an end to his story.

In *Trooper Peter*, Schreiner gives her readers a nihilistic and grim view of colonial South Africa that reflects the violence committed against both the indigenous population as well as the colonial inhabitants, particularly those directly involved in the fighting. Halket’s blatant ignorance of his power and the violence he is enacting can be read as a sign of fatal naivety—another instance of Schreiner addressing her English audience. Halket’s thoughts in the few hours he is alone in the woods paint the picture of a restless young boy who grew into a young man with a head full of dreams and little idea of how to achieve them. It was all about the

bottom line for Halket: the profit, the companies he would start and sell for large sums of money. Never does he consider what those companies might achieve, the practicalities of business, and his role in it. He distils his plans for making a fortune in very simple terms:

When he had served his time as volunteer he would have a large piece of land given him [sic], and the Mashonas and Matabeles would have all their land taken away from them in time, and the Chartered Company would pass a law that they had to work for the white men; and he, Peter Halket, would make them work for him. He would make money. (18)

There is an interesting parallel here between the free labour Halket expects from the Mashonas and Matabeles, and his role as a “volunteer” in a war that will result in his death. By drawing attention to the fact that Halket receives no compensation until after he has served his term, Schreiner is highlighting how the Charter Company exploits young men by luring them to Africa with dreams of making their fortune even though many, like Halket, would not reap the promised rewards. This intention is reflected in the book’s contemporaneous publication with Rhodes’s appearance before the British Parliamentary Select Committee to address his complicity in the Jameson Raid. The book was widely circulated though it was unable to affect any meaningful political or ideological changes, and Schreiner eventually conceded that “the book had been a dead failure” (First and Scott 231).

The Fictional New Woman and the Empire

As stated earlier, while *Trooper Peter* is a text that happens to be written by a New Woman, *The Story of an African Farm* is specifically a New Woman text concerned with the status and rights of women in the late nineteenth century. In *African Farm*, Schreiner chronicles the lives of Waldo, Em, and Lyndall, in the Karoo region of South Africa. Em is the stepdaughter of Tant Sannie, the owner of the titular African farm, while Lyndall is her niece. Waldo is the son of the kindly German farm-keeper, Otto Farber. The three characters represent the differing attitudes to gender roles during the *fin de siècle* as well as the restrictive boundaries of Calvinist ideology that were prevalent during the period and that Schreiner herself was raised in.

Waldo is described as being an introspective child, raised with an acute awareness of the Calvinist principle of predestination, which adds to his growing anxieties about his fate. After being exposed to John Stuart Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy*, Waldo begins to crave

scientific texts and becomes interested in transcendentalism. His need to believe in the goodness of man, rather than that of a distant, unknown deity, leads him to declare, “I love Jesus Christ, but I hate God” (13). For Waldo, it is the human spirit—man’s struggle in this world and his ability to overcome those struggles—that is of value. It is also for this reason that he is the most sympathetic to Lyndall’s need for emancipation and her dissatisfaction with her role in society. The two engage in multiple discussions where Lyndall is free to air her grievances about Victorian gender roles without facing censure. Patricia Murphy has observed that “while the maternal and unambitious Waldo manifests qualities linked with female subjectivity, the forceful and ambitious Lyndall reveals a predilection to the traits associated with male subjectivity” (217). This reversal of gender roles is characteristic of New Woman fiction and is intended to show the extent to which certain gendered expectations are culturally imposed rather than inherent in one’s nature, as well as how easily that binary can not only be blurred, but completely subverted:

‘Waldo,’ she said gently, with a sudden and complete change of manner, ‘I like you so much, I love you.’ She rested her cheek softly against his shoulder. ‘When I am with you I never know that I am a woman and you are a man; I only know that we are both things that think. Other men when I am with them, whether I love them or not, they are mere bodies to me; but you are a spirit; I like you.’ (169)

In this passage, Schreiner further pushes the boundaries of acceptable relationships between men and women in the Victorian period. Firstly, Lyndall acknowledges her love for multiple men as well as the different motivations for that love, including lust. The connection between Waldo and Lyndall, however, is not a physical one, and it is for that reason that their connection is precious to them. In one another’s company, both are allowed to be more than mere bodies playing a role; they are allowed to think, to challenge themselves and each other, and to express themselves fully in a way that would be considered improper in broader society. The elevation of the spiritual bond in this instance also goes against the traditional Victorian expectations of marriage as a path to having children, and by extension, the notion of motherhood as being a core attribute of womanhood.

If Lyndall and Waldo are to represent the new generation of nonconforming youth, Em, in contrast, is the embodiment of traditional, socially acceptable femininity. She is demure and subservient, a lover of fiction, who not only accepts her subordinate role in a patriarchal society but has fully internalised it. To her, marriage is the key to all happiness, which she demonstrates

during this interaction with Lyndall: “I suppose some day we shall go somewhere; but now we are only twelve, and we cannot marry till we are seventeen” (15). She is presented as weak and in need of protection, and much violence is inflicted on her person from childhood, often as a result of Lyndall’s actions. After one particularly brutal encounter, where Em is repeatedly slapped by their guardian Tant Sannie, and the girls are locked in their room, Lyndall declares, “When that day comes, and I am strong, I will hate everything that has power, and help everything that is weak” (61).

However, despite Lyndall’s promise to “help everything that is weak”, her stoicism prevents her from truly empathising with and comforting Em. Instead, she rebukes her, saying, “I wish you would be quiet....Does it give you such felicity to let Bonaparte know he is hurting you?” (59). Later that same evening, as Em is banging on the door begging to be let out, Lyndall says, “I am going to sleep....If you like to sit there and howl till the morning, do. Perhaps you will find that it helps; I never heard that howling helped any one” (61). This is one of the earliest instances of Schreiner hinting at the darker aspects of Lyndall’s personality. Her need to escape, her desire to never be perceived as weak, means that she cannot in this instance acknowledge Em’s vulnerability and offer comfort. The rigid control she seeks to maintain over her own emotions means that she cannot perceive Em’s distress as anything other than weakness. As is the case with many traditionally feminine characters in New Woman fiction, their primary purpose is to act as a foil for the New Woman character, making her rebellion seem more stark in contrast. However, unlike Edith from Sarah Grand’s novel *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), Schreiner’s portrayal of Em is far more radical on second glance. Despite her initial enchantment with the idea of marriage, we see Em develop a true sense of self as the narrative progresses. One might even argue that her character is a more radical representation of womanhood because of her ability to persevere and build a life for herself despite the limitations placed on her.

Trooper Peter, African Farm, and the Politics of Race

The racial elements of both *Trooper Peter* and *African Farm* are hard to overlook, especially when you consider Schreiner’s position as an author associated with anti-imperialist, progressive ideologies. The relationship between Schreiner’s (proto-)feminism and her (anti-)imperialism has been debated since the 1970s, though, as Bart Moore-Gilbert points out:

the celebration of *The Story of an African Farm* as an early classic of the western women's movement was accompanied by a general unwillingness on the part of its advocates to address the racial politics of the novel in any detail, so that Lyndall's struggles were often considered in relative isolation from other pressing issues entailed on them by the colonial context in which these struggles take place. (88)

However, in 1980, Nadine Gordimer was one of the first to broach the subject of Schreiner's complicated relationship with what she called "The Prison-House of Colonialism". Gordimer cites Schreiner's understanding of Europe as the "world of ideas", and Africa as the foundation upon which European culture would be imported to create works that were "solitary contradictions of the way...life was being conceptualised, politically, socially and morally" (97). Following Gordimer, academics like Joyce Berkman, Carol Barash, and Joseph Bristow have acknowledged that "despite all its feminist strong-mindedness, it is hardly free from racial prejudice" (Bristow xxvii). Schreiner's complicated relationship with racial politics in *African Farm* is particularly crucial to our understanding of New Woman literature as a whole. For while we might be inclined to attribute the increased racial awareness in *Trooper Peter* to personal growth and an evolution in Schreiner's political leanings (which was almost certainly the case), it is also important to acknowledge the purpose for each text, its intended audience, and the layered politics that affect her engagement with the indigenous African population.

Like *Trooper Peter*, *African Farm* has no named Black characters; those that are present are inconsequential servants referred to only by their racial designations (Hottentot and Kaffer) and are portrayed as little more than savages. Tant Sannie's right-hand woman, the nameless Hottentot maid, is portrayed as cruel and vindictive, laughing at Em's distress when Waldo's father Otto is sent away. Furthermore, Tant Sannie herself, the Dutch guardian of Em and Lyndall, while White, is repeatedly referred to as the "Boer-woman", and the title "tant" is an Afrikaans term for "aunt". By surrounding Tant Sannie with African companions and terminology, Schreiner appears to be associating her antagonist with the regressive and oppressive African countryside. There is an either-or dynamic within the narrative, reflected in Lyndall's character, which, in its aim to liberate our tenacious protagonist, often ends up oppressing those in opposition to her. And therein lies the difference between the treatment of Black characters in *Trooper Peter* and *African Farm*. The glaring silence of the indigenous population in *Trooper Peter* was a rhetorical device designed to draw attention to the tyranny of imperial rule. In their silence was a resolution, a portrait of their mental fortitude, and their stories were given voice by Christ himself. Conversely, in *African Farm*, the Black voices we

do hear are deemed either inconsequential or worse, threatening, and in need of regulation. Much of this has to do with the ways in which power was dispensed in the Victorian period, and the limited arenas in which women were allowed to wield power. The eponymous farm in Schreiner's novel is for all intents and purposes a matriarchal system. Male interlopers like Bonaparte Blenkins may interfere, they may manipulate, terrorise, and gain a modicum of power, but the inheritance of the farm passes from Tant Sannie to Em. However, Tant Sannie—being the “Boer-woman”, surrounding herself with indigenous companions, and falling for the charms of Blenkins—clearly makes her an unsuitable matriarch. In order to distinguish her from Lyndall, Schreiner chose race and racial undertones as the differentiator between her primary protagonist and antagonist.

This follows the tradition of New Woman writers and activists often adopting nativist language as a means of ingratiating themselves with those in positions of power in order to avoid backlash. New Women of a certain class understood that compromise was necessary to further their cause and their prominence in society. What little clout they had largely derived from their positions as middle-class White women; to associate with lower classes or races would have only provided more fodder for those looking to discredit them. To maintain their position, therefore, many prominent New Women embraced oppressive and reactionary ideologies with relation to empire and racial hygiene. This could also extend to the role of middle-class White women and their need for maintaining a traditional family dynamic. Notable New Women like Sarah Grand and George Egerton for example, who were outspoken in their desire for women's liberation, especially in relation to marriage and sexuality, had also at times tempered their message with regards to the empire. Their liberal domestic policies were in sharp contrast to their engagement with global politics. They recognised the role that women had to play in “regenerating the British imperial race” and, as a result, advocated for traditional family roles within one's own race and class (Richardson xv).

Conclusion

A combination of imperialist propaganda, conciliatory politics, and rigid social hierarchies contributed towards the regressive and exclusionary racial politics present in Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*. Unlike *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, which is a story written by a New Woman, *The Story of An African Farm* is a New Woman text, specifically concerned with uplifting White British women. As a result, the latter was compelled to

compromise on racial grounds and embrace certain imperial ideologies that the author knew would work in favour of her central protagonist. By demonstrating the complicated negotiations British New Woman writers undertook to appeal to different audiences, we might be compelled to reassess the progressivism of proto-feminist movements in the *fin de siècle* and their role in enabling oppressive ideologies of racial purity that upheld the British empire.

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