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Violets in Exile¹

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This essay performs a post-structuralist reading of two late nineteenth-century texts by the Canadian writer, Sara Jeannette Duncan. As a critical method, post-structuralism emphasizes that interpretations of texts always are non-definitive and, therefore, always are readings of texts. Furthermore, post-structuralism assumes that both reading and writing are mediated by an infinite number of cultural discourses which include those of language and literature. While more traditional critical methods such as humanism and structuralism assume a certain stability of both the literary text and the human subject within a cultural context, post-structuralism views texts and subjects as unstable constructions of cultural discourses.

In Western thought, at least, traditional criticism derives from the separation of self and other into positive and negative categories. This division translates into the binary oppositions which have coloured thinking about relations between master and slave, imperial centre and colony, and men and women, for example. Post-structuralist criticism, however, aims to “deconstruct” binary oppositional thinking when it comes to reading literary texts. This method often treats the human “subject” psychoanalytically, that is, as constructed both psychically and materially by the powerful discourses of culture and language. Feminist post-structuralist criticism attempts to read texts and subjects by deconstructing the binaries of gender and their operation in language and literature.

In Sara Jeannette Duncan’s semi-autobiographical *The Simple Adventures of a Memsa-hib* (1893) the garden is symbolic of her life in Anglo India as a “violet in exile”:

As to the garden, there was not a tropical seed in it, they were all English flowers, which made the *mallie’s* excellent understanding with them more remarkable, for they spoke a different language....Violets too — violets in exile, violets in pots, with the peculiar property that violets sometimes have in India, of bringing tears to the eyes if one bends over them. (*Simple Adventures* 165)²

Nearly a decade later, Duncan's psychological autobiography, *On the Other Side of the Latch* (1901) also treats the conditions of physical and psychological exile metaphorically through the agency of the English garden in Anglo India. In this work, Duncan's own garden is an ambiguous representation of Anglo-Indian exile and the "cult of home."³ As the female subject writing "on the other side of the latch" in this garden, Duncan represents not only her physical life in late nineteenth-century Anglo India as a colonial subject, but also the psychical condition of the female subject as artist, that is, of herself as doubly exiled — a woman writer in a colonial context.

Theories of Exile

As a metaphor of exile, the garden is also a symbol of the psychic split endemic to the condition of the female subject. The loss of or separation from the home culture and concurrent disjunction with the place of exile both effects and represents the splitting "I," a condition of the subject that may not be specific to the physical exile of the colonial or the expatriate, but by which it is exacerbated. The position of female subjects in general, and women writers in particular, is one of exile within the dominant patriarchal culture. Using linguistic and literary forms which are defined and valued by that culture, these women write both within and against these definitions and values.

The position of exile is described in post-structuralist and feminist theories of the subject, which see this condition in psychoanalytic terms. As psycholinguist Julia Kristeva reminds us in her extensions of the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the subject's entry into the constructions of language and culture represents the split from pre-Oedipal amorphous authenticity. Thus in the psychoanalytic view of the speaking subject, the "self," as a fully self-possessed and self-conscious being, is always already in exile. Thus, psycholinguistically speaking, male subjects are exiles in the symbolic order of culture and language; but females, because the discourse of the symbolic order is phallogocentric — that is, male-centered — are doubly exiles. The difference between women writers and men writers is that, as gendered subjects, the latter are legitimized by the literary cultures within which they write. The writing of women on the other hand is always already exilic.⁴

Exile for the writer means displacement of the "professional tools [which] are inextricably related to the cultural and linguistic realities of his/her country of origin."⁵ Duncan's marriage was certainly voluntary, but it entailed her removal from the "place" of her English-Canadian cultural community. After ten years in Anglo India she clearly delineated

the social-political contradictions and nuances of south-eastern Ontario (formerly Upper Canada) in *The Imperialist* (1904), with “that sharpness of focus, that detailed accuracy of recall, and that intensity of affection for a place and a time that only distance and loss can bring” (*The Imperialist* 313). Duncan’s Anglo-Indian writing, on the other hand, is marked by the displacement of female characters as gendered subjects in the colonial context. For example, Elfrida Bell of *A Daughter of Today*, Hilda Howe of *The Path of a Star*, Judith Church of *His Honour and a Lady*, the Rani Janaki of *The Burnt Offering*, and the female subjects of the linking short narratives comprising *The Pool In the Desert* — Judy Harbottle, Helena Farnham, Dora Harris, Madeline Anderson and Violet Forde — are all varieties of “violets in exile.”

Stories of Exile

Duncan’s summer journal *On the Other Side of the Latch* (1901), written outside the “four sheltering walls” of realist discourse signifies more than the disjunctive conditions of geographic exile. Her impressionist autobiography compels the reader’s active mediation in Duncan’s recusance of literary forms, social conventions and gender constructions within which, paradoxically, she writes. *On the Other Side of the Latch* records a period of convalescence, a temporary exile under a physician’s orders, in the garden of the house in Simla in which she and her husband Everard Cotes lived. The journal is written both within the autobiographical convention of recording actual events and, in its use of impressionist, rather than realist, technique against the doubled exile of the woman writer as colonial subject.

Duncan’s garden not only represents the ambiguities of colonial exile, but also exhibits the paradoxes of women’s exilic writing, that is, writing both within and outside the edifice of dominant literary discourse. The garden on the other side of the latch, as a construction of Anglo-Indian culture’s cult of home, is painfully evocative as a reminder of displacement:

There is no refreshment to exile like the cold, sharp fragrance of chrysanthemums, especially white ones. It brings back, straight back, the glistening pavement of Kensington High Street on a wet November night, and the dear dense smell of London and a sense of the delight that can be bought for sixpence there. (*Latch* 258)

But as Duncan also recognizes, she and the garden are “on the outside,” bereft of “the four walls of the little shelters we build for ourselves” (*Latch* 2) and of the pegs and notches, cultural constructions, with which one frames the imagination. She acknowledges that her

location on the outside necessitates a shift in subject matter; her record of this summer convalescence will not be that of the conventional reality of the “world’s ways.” Accordingly, she signals the operation of “impressions” in her text:

I have to confess that my head always feels particularly empty in a garden but that is no reason why one shouldn’t see what is going on there, and if the impressions that arrive are a trifle incoherent — the wind does blow the leaves about — they will be on that account more impressionistic. (*Latch* 16)

The confessional intimacy of this text, in contrast to the realist representation that marks her journalism, novels and sketches, is decidedly “impressionistic.” Unlike most of Duncan’s work, which appears to be stylistically uninfluenced by the aestheticist literary movement of the 1890s, the innovations of which sought to free art from the constraints of social and literary conventions, *The Other Side of the Latch*, in its departure from the realistic and often ironic technique common to Duncan’s novels and stories, may be read as an experiment in the direction of the various innovative short narratives published in British and American journals during this period. Her autobiographical impressions in this work may be read as influenced by the looseness and lightness of form experimented with in short narratives by proponents of the contemporary aesthetic movement.

The configuration of female subjectivity and exile is the formal linking trope of Duncan’s quartet of stories in *The Pool In the Desert* (1903) and in the ironic figure of the “I” who narrates each piece. For example, the opening paragraph of the title story introduces the “I” who is both observer and participant in the moiety of Anglo-Indian life about to be represented. This “I” figures an ironic split between the writer of the memsahib’s story and the memsahib herself. The “I” is also both singular and collective — the “me” voices resistance to and compliance with the conventions of “we.” Duncan’s narrating “I” negotiates the Anglo-Indian female colonial position. The behaviour of Judy Harbottle and Somers Chicele in the title story is contextualized by the social exigencies and pressures of Anglo-Indian culture. The “I” thus comments on behaviour in an Anglo-Indian context against an implicit contemporary late nineteenth-century context of morals and conventions. The text is thus constituted by the mediation of “you” reading, in this context, a complexity of paradoxical motivations figured as the memsahib. Accordingly, the first sentence of the title story presents three female subjects, whose spheres are the verandahs and drawing rooms of Anglo India — the narrator, Anna and Judy:

I knew Anna Chicele and Judy Harbottle so well, and they figured so vividly at one time against the rather empty landscape of life in a frontier station, that my affection for one of them used to seem little more, or less, than a variant upon my affection for the other. (PD 3)

The “I” of the second narrative in the quartet, “A Mother In India,” also constitutes a first-person narrator who is writer, observer and participant. Helena Farnham is split along the lines of English cultural values, social conventions and the exigencies of Anglo India. Helena’s roles as wife and mother conflict under the pressure of the “cult of home” to which she sacrifices the “maternal relation” with her daughter Cecily. Duncan’s treatment of the loss and separation so closely associated with notions of exile demonstrated in *On the Other Side of the Latch* is reiterated more succinctly in “A Mother in India.” A “mother in theory,” as she describes herself, Helena is inscribed as a female subject in exile.

The “I” of the third story, “An Impossible Ideal,” also is a self-conscious participant in the narration, and similarly split, but this time between the boundaries of colonial administration and his (this narrator is male) imagination. These boundaries stifle spontaneity and imagination in both communication and art in the Simla hierarchy of the colonized and the colonizers. The visiting artist Ingersoll Armour, Philips reveals in this retrospective autobiographical account, was prized for the refreshingly non-realist renderings of the Anglo-Indian landscape in his paintings, but sanctioned for his unrestrained acquaintance with native subalterns: “to understand how we prized him, Dora Harris and I, it is necessary to know Simla....[He] bloomed there conspicuously alone” (PD 117). The feminine image of Duncan’s violets in exile thus accompanies the portrait of the artist I. Armour mediated through the male intelligence of an Anglo-Indian colonial official.

The use of “I” as the first initial of I. Armour’s name suggests an autobiographical identification distinct from that of Philips, the narrating voice of this piece. Underwriting, so to speak, the disruptive mood of I. Armour, who comes dangerously close to becoming “a prosperous artist-bourgeois with a silk hat for Sundays” (PD 201), may be an identification with the position of Duncan herself. Marrying I. Armour, Philips comments, would be “very romantic — like marrying a newspaper correspondent” (PD 207). The “I” of I. Armour thus also suggests an autobiographical identification with the subversive “mood” — to use Genette’s term — of the artist figure, which is framed by the authoritative voice of the teller, Philips, who is a representation of British imperialism and Anglo-Indian administration — a figure of orientalism.⁶

In the original edition of *The Pool In the Desert*, the title story’s identification of the

female voice as writer has established the artist-subject as feminine. Thus feminized, I. Armour of "An Impossible Ideal" effects deconstruction of stereotypical binaries which oppose the terms male/imperial/conventionality to the terms female/colonial/creativity in the linking narratives of *The Pool In the Desert*. The "I" of I. Armour is a trope of the artist-subject already identified as a feminized figure vis-à-vis imperial and patriarchal codes, localized this time as the narrative mood of the artist who is in a feminized position when it comes to the hegemony of Phillips, this story's teller, but who, in the end, escapes the dominating discourses of Anglo India.

The narrating "I" of the fourth story, "The Hesitation of Miss Anderson," resists a conventional portrait of Madeline Anderson as sentimentalized heroine. The narrative, Duncan's "I" tells us, depends on the "reason" she hasn't gone abroad before:

So much that happened afterward, so much that I am going to tell, depends upon this reason for not going before, that I also must talk about it and explain it;...her reason was a convict, Number 1596....[W]hen in February death gave him his quittance, she took her freedom too, with wide intentions and many coupons. (*PD* 215)

Narrative voice as both teller and writer is doubled again in the fourth narrative. This final narrative appears to create a text which would elicit the reader's passive contemplation rather than active mediation. But in its negotiation of conventions of realism and romance and this narrative invites the reader's participation in the construction of Miss Anderson's story as it deconstructs conventional binary oppositions of romance and realism.

Madeline Anderson and Violet Prendergast appear to embody stereotypical female opposites of good and bad in their representations of duty and self-interest. Madeline's representation of conventions of feminine loyalty and modesty is undermined by the intervention of the unconventional Violet Prendergast/Forde. The latter's coincidental seduction of the same two men upon whom Madeline fixes her affections could receive various treatments under the aegises of realism or romance. Conventional realism would perhaps see Madeline defeated in not only the first relationship in America, but also the second relationship in Simla. Conventional romance would perhaps see Violet duly punished, perhaps by death in the Jamesian manner of self-made American women abroad in exotic settings. However, in Duncan's negotiation of the conventions of how things are and how they ought to be, both women end happily paired. Ironically, Miss Anderson remains with the ambiguous prospects of Anglo-Indian memsahibship before her, while her nemesis Violet Forde escapes this commitment to the "good" woman's role as loyal nurturer in an Anglo-Indian marriage, and

ironically, to the exile it would entail.

The ending of the final story in Duncan's quartet underlines the gender position of traditional female gender roles; it also undermines the conventional positioning of females in romance and realism in order to demonstrate the constructedness of both.⁷ "The Hesitation of Miss Anderson" provides the final link in the reification and recusance of gender and genre negotiated by the linking narratives of *The Pool In the Desert*. Duncan's treatments of Violet and Madeline resist the cultural and literary conventional opposition of good and bad women. It is significant that Violet's name alludes to Duncan's autobiographical *On the Other Side of the Latch*, where nostalgia for "home" and unaccommodation of herself as writer are evoked in the image of violets exiled in an Anglo-Indian garden.

In their representations of Anglo-Indian experience, *The Other Side of the Latch* and *The Pool In the Desert* have larger ramifications for both the colonization of the female subject in the patriarchal culture of British Imperialism and the position of the female writer in dominant discourses of culture and literature. The autobiographical impressions of Duncan's summer convalescence in *The Other Side of the Latch* comprise an extended metaphor for the exilic position of the female writer in a colonial context. The linking narratives of *The Pool In the Desert* enunciate the female position in the colonial constructions of Anglo-India, resisting the structured impositions of social, literary and linguistic conventions. Both works constitute an intelligent, artistically sound departure from her more usual mode of the realist novel and demonstrate that the short narrative form itself is an effective challenge to social and aesthetic conventions of the day.

¹Born in Brantford, in the province of Ontario, Canada in 1861, Sara Jeannette Duncan began writing in the 1880's as a journalist for the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, the *Montreal Star*, the *Boston Globe* and the *Washington Post*. In 1888, as correspondent for the *New York World* and the *Montreal Star*, she travelled from Canada to Asia, Africa and Europe. During her stay in India she met her future husband, Everard Everett Cotes, who was curator of the Museum of Calcutta. Duncan married Cotes two years later in London, England. They returned to India where they resided as subjects of the British Raj until retirement in England in 1922, the year of her death. During the three decades Duncan lived in India, she wrote several novels and stories set in India and drawn from her intelligent and incisive interpretations of Anglo-Indian society and politics. Duncan's views on the position of both colonial and female subjects may also be read as variations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (and continuing to the present time) of "a widespread colonial impulse: the need to rebel against the biases of gender, race, place, and romantic speech which during the previous half-century had coloured cultural aspiration and literary expression" (New 114).

²See Saros Cowajee, ed. *Women Writers of the Raj: From Kipling to Independence*. According to her "Glossary of Indian Words and Phrases," the term "Mali" [mallie] refers to "gardener" (264). See Gail

Finney, *The Counterfeit Idyll: The Garden Ideal and Social Reality in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. According to Finney, in European and English literature, “insofar as the garden represents a synthesis of nature and art or culture, its literal and figurative ramifications encompass dominant sociocultural concerns of mid-nineteenth-century fiction” (vii). The garden represents tension between a nostalgic ideal and the social reality of the present. The governing image of Duncan’s autobiographical garden narrative is that of the exilic garden, placing her and her “ideal” place “on the other side of the latch.”

³In Anglo India, physical separation from and loss of place resulted in, according to Rebecca Saunders, “a people divided against themselves — exile created a split in the mind of the colonizer between the temptations of freedom from restraint on one hand and the need for self-imposed restrictions on the other” (Saunders 304). The Anglo-Indian garden played the ambiguous role of both reinforcing the sense of exile, and serving as reminders of home, not only for nostalgia’s sake, but also to foster the “elaborate cult of home” (304), a garrison in the wilderness of the Indian “other.”

⁴See Angela Ingram, “On the Contrary, Outside of It,” in *Women’s Writing in Exile*, eds. Broe and Ingram, page 2. See Julia Kristeva’s psycholinguistic theory of the subject in her *Desire in Language*.

⁵See Maria Ines, ed. “Introduction,” *Exile in Literature* (London 1988).

Carole Gerson notes that “at the turn of the century many of Canada’s most successful fiction writers were expatriates, including Gilbert Parker, Charles G.D. Roberts, Bliss Carman, E.W. Thomson, Grant Allen, Lily Dougall, Robert Barr, and Sara Jeannette Duncan. The latter’s “abandonment of Canada” in her first novel, *A Social Departure* (1890), was seen by Graeme Mercer Adam as symptomatic of the Canadian writer’s “disadvantaged position in the larger literary world” (Gerson *A Purer Taste* 14).

Hallvard Dahlie’s view of Duncan as writer in exile places her as a forerunner to later writers like Ethel Wilson and Mavis Gallant, also shaped by “international rather than national perspectives” (36). For Dahlie, exile in Duncan’s writing serves a purpose counter to that in Edith Wharton and Henry James’ treatments of the contrasts of the Old World and the New: “As in Henry James and Edith Wharton, both the Old World and the New have the opportunity of being the shaping influence, though...throughout her work, Duncan generally opts for the New....It is in this respect that Duncan’s vision diverges most strongly from that of James, where characteristically it is New World innocence that emerges as the deficient quantity” (49). For Dahlie, exile in Duncan’s writing represents a positive move away from the “dissipation of garrison attitudes and the attendant consolidation of a confidence about the Canadian reality” (49), a “sociological fact” which, as Dahlie implies, represents the disjunction of the “other,” of difference, and the Anglo-Canadian, British, imperial, white, and masculine assumption of the “Canadian reality” (*Varieties of Exile* 49).

⁶“An Impossible Ideal” raises issues of the British imperial consciousness and the Orient. The relation of British imperialism and the Raj follows that paradigm of Western consciousness, the hierarchical binary of subject and object — in this case, the European “self,” and the Oriental “other.”

In his *Orientalism* (1978), see Edward Said’s definition of “orientalism” as the European view of the Orient pervading all discourse pertaining to colonialism — political, historical, cultural. According to Said, “Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient — ...in short, Orientalism [may be defined] as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). Noting the deep historical and psychic roots of orientalism as European agency in the Orient, Said asserts, “The Orient is...the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and on of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (1).

⁷See Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (1991). This study of contemporary popular romance fiction aimed at a female audience observes that the popular romance both corroborates fantasies about “how things should go,” and represents a material world of fact and history that is congruent with what readers perceive as “real” (186-187): “One has to wonder, then, how much of the romance’s conservative ideology about the nature of womanhood is inadvertently ‘learned’ during the reading process and generalized as normal, natural, female development in the real world” (Radway 186).

The ending of "The Hesitation of Miss Anderson" draws attention to the constructedness of both literary form and women's lives. Radway observes that the fantasy ending undercuts the realism of the narrative that has engendered it, thus reaffirming the cultural belief that "women are valuable not for their unique personal qualities but for their biological sameness and their ability to perform that essential role of maintaining and reconstituting others" (Radway 208).

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