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Imperial Maternalism and Lady Franklin in Richard Flanagan's Wanting

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Abstract

Colonial sufferings and trauma of Mathinna are predominantly prevailed in any studies on Richard Flanagan's *Wanting*. It is very hard to know about feministic approaches on the character of Lady Jane Franklin. This research article focuses on imperial maternalism from postcolonial feminism to reveal such unsung character who is longing for cultural control. Imperial maternalism is a concept developed in postcolonial feminist studies which is used to control the colonial domination by a mother's role of care and language. By looking at Lady Franklin's adoption of Mathinna, her public grief, and her influence inside a male-dominated colonial world, the paper shows how a woman's power can work and also be limited under empire.

Key words: Motherhood, Lamentation, Authority, Postcolonialism

Introduction

Wanting (2008) conveys the story of Sir John Jane Franklin, 'man of science, one of the age's greatest explorer' (Flanagan,16) and Lady Jane Franklin, the Aboriginal girl Mathinna, and also Charles Dickens. Desire, loss and the violence of colonial life in nineteenth century Tasmania are prevailed in it. The novel brings moral contradiction of empire between Mathinna's adoption by the Franklin family and late affair of Dickens. Flanagan's narrative style and a lot about the characterisation of Mathinna are explored in plenty of works have postulated in Ho Lai-Ming's work. It shows that Lady Jane has not possessed much reception. Her prominence is on an adoptive mother, a grieving widow and a public moralist are received vivacity in this work, "Through her husband, Lady Jane had set about with great enthusiasm founding hospitals, charities and schools, leading the society away from the simple making of money and towards the reason of an enlightened Old World (*Wanting*,103)." Kindness and Domination are the principle characteristic of Lady Jane that leads her towards the mater key. This article has met that research gap through the approach of imperial maternalism which explored the "colonial control" by the justification of "motherly care" of lady Jane (Burton,9). It depicts that she is trapped by the empire and stands by it through the exploration of her motherhood, lamentation and, authority.

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Significance and Relevance

It is firmly understood that gender contradiction has predominantly prevailed in empire where masculine gender secured and possessed every aspects of the power holding positions. History remembers names of men but very hardly women. It portrays women are one of the better parts of the achievers. They are considered as subordinators and their voices are often mute: "They had nothing in common other than a respect for ritual" (Wanting,54). Lady Jane is portrayed as a side character in *Wanting*, yet she has virtues and good mannerism throughout the novel "The grief had nowhere to go but inside her. And then time ran out her body changed. And so now, watching the little Aboriginal girl on the beach, Lady Jane was shocked to sense some intolerable weight dissolving, to feel an unnameable emotion rising" (Wanting,50). She stands as an example of the mixture of imperial ideas rather than Mathinna and Dickens. Thus the study focuses on feministic approach in this historical gender imbalanced fiction to explore her motherhood, lamentation, and authority to bring out postcolonial gender politics. Besides, a woman's natural character of caring and helpful may act an agent to control the cultural:

Lady Jane could see that whatever magic Mathinna had possessed as a small girl on Flinders Island had now vanished. Now she was no longer pretty but dirty and unattractive, no longer delightful and happy but spiteful and miserable. In truth, thought Lady Jane, she has under my care only gone backwards, and can only degenerate further. The dance had left the dancer. (Wanting,196)

Mathinna's sufferings and Flanagan's narrative style are predominant in much of the previous works on *Wanting* especially in the writings of Burton, Mohant, Narayan, Ho Lai-Ming, and Burton, yet Lady Jane has not been touched much from the perspectives of feministic point. Jane is an adoptive mother, widow in colonial imperial, her motherhood, mourning, and authority have not undergone much on imperial maternalims hitherto. Hence, the feministic reading of this paper fills this gap.

Literature Review

Imperial maternalims has controlled and justified colonial and postcolonial culture which emphasised as upper class western women extended the concept to embrace their maternal role as a "civilizing device" in Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915.* It reveals gender bias and discipline in the empire, as Lady Jane imposed this concept towards to Mathinna to improve and take care of her attitudes to a civilised society. It is understood that scholars such as Clare Midgley and Anna Davin have used this concept in other imperial contexts. In "Resisting Gendered Citizenship: The Politics of Colonialism, Nationalism, and Maternalism in India", Nigam has emphasised that the roles of women were "just daughter, wife, and mother rather than any social responsible, Indian women were not secured a place at decision making" (19) It advocates that maternal narratives are useful to trace out both domination and exclusion of women in policymaking and active citizenship during colonialism and after independence. Besides, Nigam brings out that Indian women were in need of British guidance, as they were symbolised of "sacrifice" and "marginalised" in patriarchal society. Motherhood is a powerful tool that instrumentalized within political and patriarchal system. Lady Jane has used her

maternal role on both cultivating and disciplining to legitimise the colonial control with limited autonomy. Imperial maternalims has given mothering as dualism to Lady Jane that "oppressing and empowering" on Mathinna and society. She has been under oppression to mould her adopted girl child on being a grieving widow. "Mothering has emerged as a role to gain social authority as leadership and activism to Kenya Christian women" (Higgs,35) through the institutions of Mother's union and YWCA which emphasised matricentrism, in "From 'Imperial Maternalism' to 'Matricentrism': Mothering Ethics in Christian Women's Voluntarism in Kenya" by Eleanor Tiplady Higgs. "Mathinna's adoption operates as a ridiculous form of imperial desire and cannibalism" is highlighted in (Ho,27) moreover "her body is framed as a heterotopic space signifying colonial haunting and disruption" as registered in (Wadoux,9) Mohanty critiques Western scholarship for portraying Third World women as passive and domestic (M, 336). Narayan argues that colonised women live "caught between complicity and critique" (88). Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Highlights that "the voices of the ruled are mediated or silenced" (221). Together these studies show a gap: Lady Franklin's gendered role in *Wanting* has not yet been analysed using the concept of imperial maternalism.

Charlotte Wadoux in her article "The World Had Forgotten about Us" shows how *Wanting* and *Mister Pip* use heterotopia, or "other space," to reveal colonial control and identity loss. She stresses that Mathinna's life and body become a carceral space of confinement and erasure. Lady Franklin's adoption is seen as creating such a controlled space, a private "heterotopia" of discipline that fits the concept of imperial maternalism. *The Regarp Book Blog* review describes *Wanting* as not just a historical novel but an emotionally rich, genre-defying work, placing Flanagan among major world writers. This supports at Lady Franklin's motherhood and mourning as part of the novel's emotional core, not merely as facts. Salhia Ben-Messahel in "Colonial Desire and the Renaming of History" argues that "colonisation rewrites and renames history, turning naming into a tool of domination". This highlights how Lady Franklin's "civilising" of Mathinna participates in renaming and erasure. Finally, the *Compulsive Reader* review emphasises that "desire and its control drive both personal and historical narratives in *Wanting*". This helps a feminist reading to see Lady Jane Franklin's actions as shaped by strong feelings such as grief, ambition, and maternal urge are intersecting with power and patriarchy.

Theoretical outline

Burton defines imperial maternalism as "the extension of middle class women's maternal roles into the colonies as a civilizing mission" (9). It mixes care with control. Mohanty states this kind of care "domesticates" non-Western women (336). Narayan notes that women in colonies are often "caught between complicity and critique" (88). Spivak warns that maternalist language can hide or silence indigenous voices (8). Bell hooks and Anne McClintock remind that criticism of empire must also look at "internal patriarchy, because motherly authority can also support gendered power" (386). By all means the paper studies about how Lady Jane's roles as mother and widow show the troubling union of female virtue and imperial control. The broad feminist tradition is stated in Elaine Showalter's work that gynocriticism moves the study of "literature from the male view of women to the study of

women's own experience and writing" (S 131). It is emphasised in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* that "one is not born but becomes a woman" (B 267). This is emphasised Lady Jane Franklin's roles as mother and widow are created by imperial patriarchy rather than by nature. It is argued in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* that "women need their own space and freedom" (4). This shows that Lady Franklin has lack of real intellectual freedom even though she has social influence. This is found in Mary Wollstonecraft's "call for women's education" (124), which comes close to the civilising language of Jane's uses for Mathinna. Margaret Atwood exposes the "hypocrisy of benevolent authority" (108), which matches Flanagan's picture of Lady Franklin. Maya Angelou's life writing celebrates black women's strength, a voice missing from Lady Franklin's story but visible in Mathinna's silence. Finally, it is argued in Gayatri Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* that "colonial and elite voices can hide the agency of the subaltern" (284). This explains that how Lady Franklin's motherly care may also cover Mathinna's own voice instead of giving it space.

Motherhood

Lady Jane Franklin adopts Mathinna as a civilising project, she calls it a charitable educational experiment, it seems as care but also imposes European rules "Lady Jane had come to take her home. She did not care what her fool husband thought or did, or what the wretches that passed for colonial society might say. She had intended simply stating her desire and leaving immediately with Mathinna" (Wanting,192). Burton shows that "such acts helped justify colonial rule" (12). Mohanty points out that "benevolence can erase native identity and bring back Victorian values" (336). Lady Franklin's nurturing becomes assimilation, not liberation "'For how is it possible for so many so remarkable to vanish off the face of the earth for so long without trace?'" (Wanting, 23). At the same time, her actions fit Narayan's idea that "colonised women live inside power systems that limit freedom" (88). Her motherhood is not just affection but also cultural imposition "'Is it any wonder, then, that this mystery has captured the imagination of the civilised world?' said Lady Jane," (Wanting, 23). It shows that how private relations are tied up with colonial power,

'Indeed,' said Lady Jane, momentarily startled. "That's precisely it. She halted, lost in some distant, elusive thought, then spoke as if reciting something learnt long ago by painful rote. 'Rats, we know, have cunning,' she said slowly, 'but we do not think such cunning equates with humanity or civilisation. While they are rewarded, they pretend to one thing. Yet they are capable of the grossest deceit of...' (Wanting, 27).

Lamentation

Lady Jane Franklin's mourning for Sir John is both real and planned "I am so alone, she thought. Those bare, black feet. She had burnt the letter and then done something characteristic. She had cried. (Wanting, 23)." In Victorian society, black clothes and rituals were public signs of virtue. Flanagan shows her in black robes at memorials, turning her grief into imperial image.

Lady Jane Franklin had extensive acquaintances, bad breath, and was dreaded in more than one circle. There was no accounting for her triumphs. It was said that she was a woman of beguiling, charm, but looking at her that morning, Dickens could see little of it. Rather than the black of

a widow's weeds, she wore a green and purple dress, down the front of which hung a bright pendant showing Sir John in white Wedgwood profile an odd touch, Dickens felt. It was as if Sir John were already an ice man. (Wanting, 24)

Burton says maternal language gave women moral status in colonial contexts that mourning also becomes a public resource, "Yet Lady Jane maintained her determination love, her refusal to accept a mystery as a tragedy" (*Wanting* 25). Hooks warns that "women's grief can also support patriarchal authority" (23). McClintock shows women's roles in nationalism or empire are "hidden by male stories but still essential to empire's life" (386). Lady Jane's mourning thus gives her public influence but also shows her part in imperial representation, "Her life, as a studied melancholy, she savoured. To admit to happiness would have been inappropriate, but as her cursing driver sought a way around, she believed herself to be fulfilled" (Wanting,234).

Authority

It is understood that women's power in empire is often indirect. Lady Jane uses money for expeditions and controls public stories about Sir John. She shapes his legacy, but she cannot stop Mathinna's fate:

Lady Jane longed to stand up, run away; wished for someone, anyone, to wash soothe her, comfort her. She wished to be held. She wished to feel her dress being tugged. She saw red garments unloose parrots, possums, snakes. When she was young, she had wanted to be known as sweet. She was not sweet. She had fallen such a long way. She remembered the softness of those dark eyes; the sight that once had angered her and now moved her so, of those bare feet. (Wanting, 28)

Narayan calls this being "caught between complicity and critique" (88). Spivak reminds us that "maternal authority can cover up the suffering of the ruled" (128). Imperial maternalism gives Lady Franklin a kind of public authority but only inside accepted gender roles.

It was an unexpected observation for them both. She resolved not to let such feelings frighten her. For Lady Jane, what saved the child from being a child was that she was a savage, and what saved her from being a savage was that she was a child. (Wanting,51)

Her failure with Mathinna shows that her power is limited "She is ready learning prayer, Robinson told h Her future is bright indeed" (Wanting,65) and

She wished to be the mother she had tried so hard never to appear, to put her nose in Mathinna's wild hair and comfort and protect her, and revel in her difference and not seek to destroy it, because in that moment she knew that the destruction of that difference could only lead, in the end, to the terrible courtyard below, and the white coffins below that. (Wanting,194-95)

The paradox is shown as she is influential yet bound by colonial and patriarchal structures, "Lady Jane, who never normally touched children, reached out and took Mathinna by her arm. The child wheeled around grinning, till she saw the white woman who had caught her" (Wanting,52).

Conclusion

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Objective of this article is met with the application of imperial maternalim on the side character of Lady Jane Franklin. The feministic postcolonial reading reveals that she is not just as a passive woman but as someone active in imperial power. Her motherly care is assimilation, her grief is performance but also empowerment, and her authority is real with some limitations which are already constructed. This paper brings out women's complicity in empire with limits and agencies.

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