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Gothic Brexlit: Maggie Gee's New Monsters in *The White Family*

Abstract: Recent analyses, such as Kristian Shaw's (2018), suggest how Brexlit reflects Britain's shifting sense of community after 2016, revealing changing narratives surrounding British national identity, and the perceived Otherness of European migrants and post-colonial minorities. Scholars like David Foster Russell (2022) and Roger Luckhurst (2023) assert that the 'anxiety model' associated with Brexit-related imageries of social collapse and foreign subjugation finds its roots in the *fin de siècle* Imperial Gothic genre, which echoes Said's "rhetoric of blame" (1993) of absolving the Self while demonizing an Other. Gothic Brexlit, if such a thing exists, thus emerges not as a reactionary or subversive aesthetics per se, but as the flipping ideological construction of Otherness between pre- and post-referendum fiction: from portraying the EU as a Frankensteinian 'undesirable Other' to framing a civil-war-like dimension that involves the UK Leavers as a new form of monstrosity. However, long before the Brexit vote, Maggie Gee's *The White Family* (2002) anticipated this reversal of scapegoating dynamics blending Gothic, family saga, and Condition-of-England tropes to expose crises of Englishness, along with the prevailing climate of political disillusionment and social fragmentation in contemporary public discourse.

Keywords: *Brexit*, *Brexlit*, *Gothic*, *monsters*, *othering*, *trauma*

1. Gothic Brexit: A Tale of Othering

Nearly a decade after the United Kingdom's 2016 referendum to leave the European Union, the fallout of what many feel to have been a "troubling act of national self-harm"[1] continues to ripple through literature. In fact, a significant body of scholarly research and commentary by prominent writers, journalists, and academics has since sought to analyse and address what Zadie Smith described as the "deep fracture"[2] at the heart of contemporary British society. This break, blamed on neoliberal policies that gradually dismantled the Welfare State and caused decades of systemic inequalities, laid the groundwork for the stark societal divisions further polarized by Brexit. These include enduring disparities between northern and southern England, a widening disconnect between rural populations and London's elite — as well as between affluent and impoverished Londoners themselves — but, most tangibly, the escalating racialized contrasts among white, brown, and black communities. While Smith emphasizes the need to move beyond simplistic explanations of Brexit as a result of "dark and dangerous stupidity",[3] the ideological and discursive framework subtending the referendum might reveal an overlooked Gothic matrix. In fact, critics like Roger Luckhurst and David Foster Russell were among the first to point out how the Gothic modes of anxiety, social collapse, and foreign usurpation can be identified as an inceptive pattern in Brexit-themed fiction. Luckhurst, in particular, singled out three Gothic tropes used in the Brexit rhetoric: the melancholic pastoralism of the "Sunlit

[1] Kristian Shaw, *Brexlit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 169.

[2] Zadie Smith, "Fences: A Brexit Diary", *The New York Review of Books* (18 August 2016), *www.nybooks.com*.

[3] The full quotation describes the Leave victory as "dark and dangerous stupidity, all the more pernicious for the way it is worn so lightly by its perpetrators and tolerated, sometimes even indulged, by the rest of us". Lyndsey Stonebridge, "The Banality of Brexit", in Robert Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 7.

Uplands"; the masochistic metaphor of "Self-Harm"; and the faux-medieval libertarian fantasies of Britain as a "Vassal State".[4] By contrast, Russell proposed "a more fruitful approach"[5] to understanding Brexit and its narratives, suggesting that they actually derive from the specific sensibility of the late Victorian and early Edwardian Imperial Gothic genre.

According to Patrick Brantlinger's seminal theorization in *Rule of Darkness*,[6] Imperial Gothic interprets *fin de siècle* anxieties regarding the fragility and transience of colonial systems. Positioned within the broader label of a "literature of crisis",[7] this genre engages in the decadent representation of imperial powers as simultaneously triumphant and inherently precarious, perpetually haunted by the atavistic threat of civilizational regression. This looming sense of deterioration emerges as the direct consequence of colonial rule driven by fears of racial hybridization, cultural contamination, and – most ominously – the potential collapse of social order instigated by the presence of "undesirable" Others.[8] In psycho-social terms, Othering refers to the practice through which individuals construct their own identities in relation to others.[9] This act of delineating others as distinct from one's hegemonic ideals helps to "reinforce and reproduce positions of domination and subordination".[10]

When applied to literary criticism, though, Othering processes have been a central focus of both Gothic and postcolonial scholarship. Drawing on Freud's psychoanalytical concept of the uncanny (*unheimlich*), the Gothic Other represents repressed fears and desires from within. In this view, the Other is not entirely external but reflects the darker aspects of the self, leading to recognition and alienation. Following this line of argument, Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*[11] further analyses how societies reject and 'monstrify' elements that threaten collective identities while correlating the uncanny Other with the Abject. For what concerns postcolonial criticism, instead, Edward Said's concept of 'Orientalism'[12] can certainly be considered as the foundational theory of Othering by Western societies that create an Other through cultural representations and discourses. Then, Homi Bhabha's problematization of Othering through the concept of mimicry[13] explains how colonizers simultaneously demand that colonized people imitate their culture while ensuring their uncanny attempts remain marked as different and inferior. Not by chance, in most novels ascribable to the Imperial Gothic genre, the colonized Other is presented as a racialized figure of irrational violence who is physically grotesque and morally degenerate. In this way, this dehumanized Other embodies the colonizer's ambivalent feelings of fear and desire toward the colonized subject. However, this tension between the opposing drives of revulsion and attraction embedded in the colonial gaze is

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[4] Roger Luckhurst, "Brexit Gothic", in Rebecca Duncan, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to Globalgothic* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2023), 322-336.

[5] David Foster Russell, "Imperial Gothic 2.0: Brexit, Brex-Lit, and Everyday Euroscepticism in British Popular Culture", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 32.2 (2024), 350-367.

[6] Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (New York: Cornell U.P., 1988).

[7] Anne Wright, *Literature of Crisis, 1910-22* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984).

[8] Brantlinger identifies the main thematic threads of the Imperial Gothic genre in the themes of "individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of opportunities for adventure and heroism in the modern world". Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, 253.

[9] Lois Weis, "Identity Formation and the Processes of 'Othering': Unraveling Sexual Threads", *Educational Foundations*, 9.1 (Winter 1995), 17-33.

[10] Joan Johnson et al., "Othering and being othered in the context of health care services", *Health Communication*, 16.2 (2004), 253.

[11] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1984).

[12] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, 1978).

[13] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, 28 (Spring 1994), 125-133.

ultimately resolved in Imperial Gothic narratives by flattening out such complexities and suppressing any potential empathy towards the Other so as to legitimize their oppression.

For these and other reasons – thoroughly examined in Russell's already mentioned article[14] – the Imperial Gothic genre has gained renewed significance in contemporary British literature, particularly when associated with the narrative patterns and conventions of the Condition-of-England novel.[15] This intersection has given rise to the provocative classification of Brexit-themed fiction (Brexlit) as 'Imperial Gothic 2.0' which can reflect the shifting ideological reconfigurations of Otherness in pre- and post-referendum novels. In fact, while pre-referendum narratives predominantly casted the EU as the quintessential undesirable and demonized Other, post-referendum narratives pivot toward exploring a more introspective and localized dimension of monstrosity. England, and its specific demographic cohort of Leave voters, thus becomes the epicentre of a national identitarian crisis and the cradle of Brexit's new monsters.

Such is the case of Maggie Gee's *The White Family*:[16] a novel that eludes a strict Brexlit classification in chronological terms, but nonetheless anticipates many of the thematic concerns and narrative strategies now associated with this genre. In fact, as we will see, by giving voice to each member of an archetypal 'left-behind', working-class, English family, Gee delivers a blunt critique of the crumbling myth of British multiculturalism through the lens of the Gothic mode. Before delving into the analysis of the book, I will first examine how this mode was employed in the discursive construction of the Brexit campaign and in interpreting the alarming consequences of the final deal.

2. Trespassing Monsters: Figures of Abjection

Assuming that Brexlit replicates Othering modalities rooted in Gothic literary traditions, particularly within the subgenre of Imperial Gothic, the pervasive deployment of metaphors or allusions to vampirism, spectral entities, or different figurations of the abject emerges as a predictable rhetorical strategy in Brexit public discourse. In particular, the vampire metaphor has frequently transcended its original literary domain in order to be strategically reanimated within pro-Brexit propaganda so as to channel contemporary fears surrounding national sovereignty, cultural identity, and the perceived hazards of transnational migration. Satirical representations like Neil Tollfree's 2016 article, "Transylvania joining EU could see one million vampires in UK by 2020" humorously invoke Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and suggest that continued EU membership could expose Britain to an invasion of foreign "hellish creature[s]":

> It's just simple numbers, said Michael Gove. Transylvania has millions of vampires, and if we remain in the EU then we are putting out the welcome mat and Britain – which has been largely vampire-free since the 1800s – could be overrun with them. And that's just vampires; we haven't even started doing the maths on Frankensteins, werewolves, and Mummies. Simply put, the only way to guarantee that you and your family won't have your blood drained by a hellish creature of the night is to vote for Brexit.[17]

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[14] Russell, "Imperial Gothic 2.0".

[15] The Condition-of-England novel is a subgenre that originates as a response to the Industrial Revolution and is often linked to Victorian writers such as Dickens, Gaskell, or Trollope, who in their novels addressed social inequalities and advocated for reforms. After a decline during Modernism, it re-emerged in the 1950s in order to address post-war concerns about national identity, immigration, and the welfare state. By the late 20th and early 21st centuries it experienced another resurgence and tackled themes such as devolution, multiculturalism, and economic crises.

[16] Maggie Gee, *The White Family* (London: Telegram Books, 2002). Quotations from the novel refer to this edition and will henceforth be included in parentheses in the text.

[17] Neil Tollfree, "Transylvania joining EU could see one million vampires in UK by 2020", *NewsThump* (23 May 2016), *www.newsthump.com*.

This association between vampires, foreignness, and British political xenophobia surfaced in even more serious political discourses too. Nigel Farage, who was the UKIP leader and, ironically, also served as Member of the European Parliament, controversially claimed that "any normal and fair-minded person would have a perfect right to be concerned if a group of Romanian people suddenly moved in next door".[18] This exemplifies how immigrants, particularly those arriving from the Balkan route during the 2015 refugee crisis, were represented as parasitic entities draining national resources while disrupting the integrity of local communities.

But Farage didn't limit himself to conjuring vampires as the sole Brexit ideological construction of Otherness. Also zombies were figuratively resurrected in Farage's infamous *Breaking Point* poster, featuring a photograph of predominantly adult male Syrian and Afghan refugees, most with dark skin, advancing in a single file along the Slovenian-Croatian border. Unveiled during the final week of the referendum campaign, the sole visible white individual from the original photograph was conveniently obscured by a text box reading "Leave the European Union on 23rd June". This deliberate manipulation re-signified the visual narrative of the humanitarian migration crisis into the ultimate dystopian scenario of a zombie apocalypse that galvanized fears of a Muslim incursion and alleged ethnic substitution.

Similarly, while modern Europhiles admitted that national "democracy and politics ... are like walking dead in the sense that they can no longer govern",[19] Eurosceptics undermined the legitimacy of the EU by contending that it cannibalized their sovereignty through a faceless, phantasmagorical techno-bureaucracy, "neither living nor dead, present nor absent".[20] In this hauntological debate, the traditional British perception of the EU as a Frankensteinian geopolitical patchwork fostered a narrative that allocated the Continent as the ultimate site of abjection: a Gothic Other that threatens British identity but also guarantees its problematic exceptionality. This ambivalent dynamic of mutual alterity and estrangement reached its apex in 2016, at the aftermath of the referendum, when the Frankensteinian metaphor was eventually recycled by pro-Remain voices to depict Britain and the Brexit deal itself as an abomination.

Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole, for example, described the UK as "the body of Frankenstein's monster"[21] that can be re-animated only by the shocks of imagined threats such as foreign invasions. O'Toole further likened Brexiters to necromancers, doomed to "recoil in horror from the specter they themselves summoned" (94) while also employing a zombie imagery to reflect on the enduring legacy of empires: "Perhaps Empires don't end when you think they do .... Perhaps they have a final moment of zombie existence. [Brexit] may be the last stage of imperialism – having appropriated everything else from its colonies, the dead empire appropriates the pain of those it has oppressed" (21). A year later, MP Jeremy Corbyn invoked this same Frankensteinian metaphor to criticize Theresa May's Brexit deal, portraying it as an awkward, malformed bargain, ultimately unsatisfactory to all.[22]

As shown thus far, vampires, zombies, and Frankenstein initially operated as rhetorical devices aimed at foreign ethnic groups and, more prominently, the gargantuan political machinery of the European Union. The referendum, however, brought a profound fictional and emotional caesura that fundamentally shifted the locus of monstrosity inwards. Indeed, post-2016 novels reframe the EU as a

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[18] *itvNEWS* (17 May 2014), *www.itv.com*.

[19] Adelina Marini, "A European Union of Zombies", *euinside* (8 May 2014), *www.euinside.eu*.

[20] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 2006 [1993]), 63.

[21] Fintan O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (New York: Apollo, 2018), 39.

[22] Lizzy Buchan, "Brexit: Corbyn compares Theresa May's deal to 'Frankenstein's monster' amid ridicule over lorry test", *The Independent* (7 January 2019), *www.independent.co.uk*.

'desirable' Other, marking a departure from its earlier dystopian depictions. Considering the British academic and cultural establishment's alignment with the Remain front, it is unsurprising how Brussels, almost abruptly, ceased to play the Orwellian technocratic villain to become a repository of emotional affiliation, nostalgia, and regret. On the contrary, the new coordinates of Brexit's chronotope of fear will be relocated within the ostensibly authentic heart of the UK, populated by a distinctive class of 'Made in England' monsters. In fact, not only did England deliver the largest majority of Leave votes among the UK's constituent nations, but as the most populous nation, its decision outweighed the pro-Remain majorities in Scotland and Northern Ireland.[23] Ultimately, it is precisely this association between Leave voters and Englishness that underpins the post-referendum ideological shift in the Brexlit monstrified portrayal of Otherness.

Lingering in the homes of every genuinely English family, Leave voters are now reimagined as an unprecedented iteration of 'undesirable' Others and main culprits behind Brexit's socio-economic debacle. This inversion of the rhetoric of blame and Othering processes reflects the escalating, almost civil war-like tensions between Leavers and Remainers over the emotional implications of the referendum. In this view, the Brexit vote can be seen as a visceral act of retaliatory politics that enabled Leavers, who perceive themselves as marginalized and neglected, to destabilize the hegemonic narrative of the liberal, cosmopolitan, pro-Remain elites. Journalist and novelist James Meek explicitly addresses the "Brexit feeling" as a deeply embodied form of collective mourning, analogous to "learning that the mine or factory where you and your family have worked for generations is closing".[24] Meek further supports this simile by arguing that, for many Leavers, the referendum transcended political victory and became a mechanism for redistributing the emotional burden of loss and displacement: "for Leavers the merit of voting to leave the EU wasn't only in winning. It was in getting their opponents to feel like losers – to feel what they had felt, that deep unease at the shattering of their dreamscape. My bad feeling was somebody else's catharsis".[25]

Meek's conceptualization of the Brexit feeling as "somebody else's catharsis" or a "[p]sychic dislocation" is the ungraspable phantom at the core of Maggie Gee's *The White Family* (2002) as she incorporates the Eurosceptic storytelling horizon of the pre-referendum era with the post-referendum reversal of monstrification dynamics here discussed. Most intriguingly, through a seamless fusion of allegorical structures, Gothic Othering, and hallucinatory dimensions of psychological fragmentation, Gee's novel serves as a painful prophecy of the crises of contemporary English identity that came to define the Brexit momentum.

3. Monsters Within: Meet the Whites

Written out of "grief and shame" following the 1993 murder of Stephen Lawrence,[26] *The White Family* tells of an English family reunited around the patriarch, Alfred White, who is confined to a hospital bed following a medical crisis later revealed to be cancer. The narrative adopts the raw, realistic style typical of the Condition-of-England novel, with a Gothic sense of disorientation achieved through shifting focalizations and the use of free indirect discourses by unreliable narrators. By presenting

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[23] Brexiteers won the referendum with a narrow margin of 51.9% against 48.1%, but in England alone the margin was 7%. This is of great relevance since England "is home to 84% of the UK's population [and, therefore, its Leave-vote] outweighed substantial Remain majorities in Scotland (62.0%-38.0%) and Northern Ireland (NI) (55.5%-44.6%)". Ailsa Henderson et al., "How Brexit was made in England", *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19.4 (2017), 631-646.

[24] James Meek, *Dreams of Leaving and Remaining: Fragments of a Nation* (London and New York: Verso, 2019), 112.

[25] Ibid.

[26] In the novel's preface, Maggie Gee candidly confesses: "I was motivated to write *The White Family* by my grief and shame about the 1993 murder of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager with a brilliant future, at the hands of white racist thugs in South London" (xvi).

multiple perspectives and interweaving flashbacks, Gee reconstructs key moments in the family's history, from the wartime romance between Alfred and his wife May, to the abusive childhood endured by their children Darren, Shirley, and their youngest, Dirk. These experiences are marked by recurring misunderstandings that obstruct any meaningful dialogue and hinder mutual healing within the family who witnesses the collapse of England's perceived 'indigenous' identity as ideologically tied to the mythos of the original Anglo-Saxon settlers.

In this context, onomastics becomes a vital interpretive tool to unlock the layered meanings in Gee's novel. Alfred White's name, for instance, evokes the eponymous Anglo-Saxon ruler Alfred the Great who defended the kingdom against the Vikings and laid the foundation for English cultural memory and identity by commissioning the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. As Mine Özyurt Kiliç notes, "[t]he allegorical structure of the novel suggests a reading of Alfred's hospitalization as King Alfred's defeat in battle"[27] that establishes a thematic connection between Alfred White and England's cultural heritage. This connection is further reinforced by Alfred's homonymy with his wife's favourite poet, Lord Alfred Tennyson, whose verses and quotations provide a contrapuntal voice to the novel's narrative. According to Kiliç, references to Tennyson's words such as 'idyll' and 'ambergris', bring to mind Idylls of the King, thus allowing Gee to draw a parallel to another legendary monarch, King Arthur. This juxtaposition underscores the contrast between "King Arthur's failure to set up an ideal kingdom"[28] and Alfred White's inability to protect both the national space (epitomized by Albion Park) and the private space (his family) from those he perceives as invaders – namely black individuals and foreigners in general. In fact, for nearly fifty years Alfred worked as the park keeper, devoting himself to preserving Albion Park as one of the last remaining public spaces in Hillesden Hill "to which all paths led" (43). Just as Alfred serves as the central figure around whom his family revolves, Albion Park functions as a "thematic link between national identity, the sense of belonging, and the landscape"[29] binding all the characters' lives and thoughts within the novel's circular structure. Notably, Alfred's first and final appearances occur in the park, first when he faints after a heated argument with a black family[30] and then when he dies in the arms of his wife in a final act of public duty.

The ideal intactness of Albion Park serves as a repository of Victorian ancestry and an objective correlative for the contemporary state of England. The park is first described as a "thing of glory" adorned with "magnificent nottering fairy-tale [gates, crafted from] Victorian curlicues of iron-work [alongside a] solidly impressive Victorian pile, two-story, detached, with fine large windows [established] when the money from the empire was used for public works" (43). This description evokes an *ex-post facto* Victorian memento marked by national prosperity that encompasses British imperial values such as patriotism, communal sacrifice, and the civilizing imperative of the white man's burden. A burden and a duty that literally weighs on Alfred, who likens the neglect of the nation's moral character to the decline of the park, lamenting that, without him, "it [the park] goes back to jungle" (221). The use of the term jungle is purposely revealing as it conjures the typical anxieties of Imperial Gothic narratives, i.e. fears of cultural regression and "going native",[31] used to

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[27] Mine Özyurt Kiliç, *Maggie Gee: Writing the Condition-of-England Novel* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 130.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Kiliç, *Maggie Gee*, 129.

[30] In the opening scene, Alfred reproaches a young black girl retrieving her toy airplane from the park's grass. The girl's father confronts Alfred arguing that "This Park belongs to everyone", to which Alfred retorts, "[S]ame rules for everyone, as well. I'm just asking you lot to get off the grass" (14). Alfred's use of "you lot" and the following remark "English people know not to go on the grass" reveal how the interaction transcends the enforcement of park rules and reflects the entrenched privilege and exclusivity that define Alfred's worldview.

[31] Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, 253.

justify British rule. In his increasingly anachronistic role as park/nation-keeper, Alfred embodies English nostalgia, mourning "the good old days" when, in his view, racial homogeneity and social cohesion prevailed as "[t]here weren't any coloureds [and we] were all the same. We were all one. No one was rich. We stuck together" (222).

Yet, this communal vision of England that Alfred yearns for has all but vanished, and not because of the "flood" (192) of immigrants decried by populist tabloids such as *Spearhead*[32] which both Alfred and his son Dirk rely on for news. Instead, it is the result of the pervasive influence of Thatcherite ideals, famously encapsulated in the claim that there is no such thing as society, which have eroded public spaces and dismantled public services. This sense of disappearance is poignantly mirrored in the depiction of Alfred and May as frail figures shrunken by age and illness, just as the Hillesden community is shown to be "evaporat[ing]" (223) through a process of gentrification evident in the opening of new ethnic restaurants, cafés, and shops:

> There was a Sushi Bar – imagine it! – with narrow windows and queer blue light, and a girl peering out had half-moon eyes, but the boy she was with was very black. There were three Indian restaurants, side by side, which made you wonder how they could survive. The Star of the East, just fancy, in Hillesden! There were two shops advertising 'Cheap International Phone Calls', and another one selling those uncomfortable beds with wooden bases and thin flat mattresses .... Hillesden isn't dying. It's coming up. (178)

Kiliç highlights the dual character of this gentrification as both a result of economic recession and, at the same time, a form of reverse colonialism which "addresses the middle-class occupiers' need for luxury".[33] If Alfred, his wife May, and their youngest son Dirk remain constrained by the limited means of their working-class milieu, such is not the case for their older children, Darren and Shirley, who manage to improve their social status, the former through professional success in journalism, and the latter thanks to the inherited wealth from her late husband, Kojo. By embracing a bourgeois, quasi-radical chic lifestyle – characterized by ostentatious displays of cultural capital, such as a preference for organic foods and premium retail options – they distance themselves from the values and worldviews of their family of origin, enacting a form of individual gentrification.

However, the White siblings remain united in their shared inheritance of unresolved transgenerational trauma. These wounds clearly stem from Alfred's authoritarian, patriarchal rule, as well as May's ostrich-like, dismissive attitude as a mother, and burst out in various forms of psychological distress. In Darren's case, the manifestation takes the form of recurrent issues with alcoholism and anger management, particularly evident in his relationship with his third wife. His chronic inability to establish or maintain intimate familial connections is exemplified by his divorces and estrangement from his children. Despite his professional success in journalism, Darren's personal life remains deeply affected by the enduring influence of paternal dominance, resulting in a man whose attempts at intimacy are characterized by a passive-aggressive use of baby talk. Darren's profound sense of self-alienation is poignantly summarized in his confession of existential despair to his childhood friend Thomas (who plays a vital role towards the end): "I hate my life" (209).

Like her older brother, Shirley's emotional scars are rooted in her dysfunctional parents, but in her case intertwine with her infertility struggles. In fact, Shirley's childbearing trauma begins during her first year of college when she gets accidentally pregnant and her mother forces her to give the baby up

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[32] *Spearhead* is a fictional newspaper that constantly represents England as an invaded nation. According to *Spearhead*, English natives "shan't lose [this war against the immigrants, as] the future of England [hinges on their determination to defend the country] hold the pass [and, most importantly] dam the flood" (192).

[33] Kiliç, *Maggie Gee*, 132.

for adoption in order to avoid social stigma: "the neighbours would never let it drop" (338). This event leaves Shirley burdened with wrenching feelings of loss and guilt, which apparently lead to her subsequent failures to conceive. This deeply impacts her relationships with both her Ghanaian husband, Kojo, and current Jamaican partner, Elroy King. However, rather than a physiological condition, Shirley's infertility is a somatic expression of her psychological trauma derived from the sum of childhood abuses, spousal bereavement, and her younger brother's estrangement. Nonetheless, Shirley emerges as the sole character to materially reverse – and thus benefit from – the narrative device of the Imperial Gothic's inheritance plot which subtends the whole novel. This narratological device frequently incorporates Gothic elements such as the inheritance of decaying estates, hidden family secrets, or cursed legacies, to critique the instability and moral ambiguity of imperial authority and colonial exploitation.

This same focus on the inheritance plot, albeit in a nuanced form, also emerges as a crucial thematic node within Dirk's narrative arc, encapsulating his psychological deterioration driven by the perceived usurpation of his "legitimate expectations" in terms of property rights. Indeed, Dirk's already fragile psychological state is destabilized when Mr Dinesh Patei – whom Dirk derogatorily refers to as "the paki" (188) and who is presented as the embodiment of racial alterity – takes over the local newsagent's shop where Dirk used to work for the family friend and previous owner, George Millington. This acquisition would make Mr Patei Dirk's new employer, thereby shattering Dirk's pathological sense of proprietorial entitlement to the shop's succession, serving as a microcosmic representation of broader postcolonial anxieties surrounding displacement and dispossession within the white working class. As Dirk claims in a delusional interior monologue: "I'd rather die, or kill him. Kill them. Kill them, all ... Everything was falling around my ears. My dreams of the future. My expectations. My own legitimate expectations. That's what *Sparehead* says; we are losing our birthright, and suddenly it was all happening to me, beneath my very ears, in broad daylight" (190). Dirk's paranoid vision of being constantly under attack, invaded, surrounded by conspiring immigrants, whom he scapegoats for both his and England's misfortunes, fuels his longing for the homogenous homeland of Alfred's memories:

> My dad talks about it down the pub. How all the kids were normal then. Normal white. And there wasn't any crime. Not everyone beating the shit out of each other. Not everyone hating everyone else. There was brotherhood then. We were all English. Hillesden was a village, in those days. I sometimes think I was born out of my time. It's just my luck to be born now, with no opportunities for native English. And prejudice against us just because we're white. (186)

Although Dirk's reconstruction of his country's heroic past takes the form of what Arjun Appadurai terms a "nostalgia without memory",[34] it enables Dirk to legitimize his deep-seated sense of victimhood through a postcolonial revisionist rhetoric which frames the white population as a persecuted minority. This strongly echoes Enoch Powell's infamous tirades following the 1948 British Nationality Act[35], where he depicted the "ordinary man" – the quintessential English citizen – as disillusioned, fearful, and made "strangers in their own country".[36]

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[34] Introduced in his work *Modernity at Large*, "nostalgia without memory" refers to how contemporary consumer culture and media create sentimental attachments to idealized historical periods or ways of life that the individual never personally lived through. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[35] By granting citizenship to its former colonies, the British Nationality Act initiated a massive wave of immigration, particularly from the Caribbean – most notably the Windrush Generation – and South Asia. While these new patterns of mobility enriched the nation's cultural diversity, they also exacerbated racial tensions, which subsequently influenced the development of restrictive residency and naturalization policies, such as the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968.

[36] Enoch Powell, "Rivers of Blood", *The Telegraph* (6 November 2007), *www.telegraph.co.uk*.

However, if Alfred's views are progressively contextualized as somehow justifiable within the framework of his generational identity – shaped by the imperial legacy and narrative of the Second World War – Dirk's vision of England takes on a different, and more sinister psychological significance. For him, England's white imagined community not only represents his father's most cherished legacy, but also an opportunity for positive validation. In fact, despite having endured Alfred's relentless outbursts and physical abuses, Dirk ends up idolizing him, seeking his impossible approval by fully identifying with him, particularly in his racist judgments against Shirley's black partners. Dirk's disdain is evident in his remarks about his sister's first husband, Kojo: "She can't love him .... I mean, he's not half-caste, or something like that. He's black as black. He's a fucking gorilla" (70). These comments closely parallel Alfred's own worldview, as seen in his ridicule of Shirley's new partner, Elroy, and his claim to Britishness: "'Elroy is English,' said Shirley. 'Well – British. Elroy is as British as me or you.' 'Oh yes?' said Alfred, now alarmingly red, blue eyes alight, clawing at the bedclothes. 'He's about as British as bananas is Elroy.'" (58).

And yet, Dirk's racism is more troubled than Alfred's also because it appears to mask some deeper, unresolved homosexual desires. This is subtly hinted at in the brief reference to the "strange magazine" May finds in Dirk's room, which contains "photographs of black men without any clothes" (75).[37] Dirk's repression of, or perhaps disgust toward, his own sexual orientation is central to understanding his ultimate descent into a delirium of persecutory thoughts as he resolves to kill the first black man he encounters in Albion Park, enacting what can be interpreted as a symbolic purging ritual. Devastated by his father's impending death and the loss of his job, Dirk exclaims, "[E]verything's going. Everything's gone. There's nothing left for me round here. Nothing left of what I had. Even Dad won't be in the Park anymore. No one will know us. We won't exist". (301) Dirk's escalating psychosis drives him to fatally misidentify his eventual victim, Winston King, as Dinesh Patei, thereby overlapping the unsuspecting Jamaican man with his two favourite obsessions: black men and the recurring theme of "invasion". In fact, Winston is none other than Elroy's brother (Shirley's brother-in-law) and can therefore be linked to Dirk's sense of intrusion within the private space of the White family. Meanwhile, as a black man walking through Albion Park, Winston symbolizes the immigrant "flood" overwhelming England. More significantly, though, Winston's portrayal as a closeted black homosexual deeply resonates with Dirk's internal turmoil, reflecting what he most loathes in and about himself. As a result, the act of Winston's murder represents Dirk's most grimly and intimate act of self-repudiation. Not by chance, the murder is imbued with overt sexual tension, primarily due to the setting of the crime, which happens at dawn, in the absence of witnesses, in the park's covered passage to the toilettes: "this place his dad could never sort out" (346), visited exclusively by gay men and drug addicts. What follows is an ambiguous narration of the events based on the intended polysemy of the exclamation "fuck you" in which Dirk's murderous intent conflates, just as plausibly, with the narrative of a sexual encounter in a dark room:

> The nigger had gone into the place Dirk hated. Time to be brave. Time to be a man. One hand in his jacket, Dirk followed him into the sharp, foul stink of the dark .... But something soft brushed against his shoulder, and he leapt round, swearing, knife in hand, and saw him clearly; he was black, pitch-black,

[37] Speculations regarding Dirk's sexual orientation emerge earlier in the novel, notably during his daydream about visiting South Africa. In this paragraph, the Victorian masculinity rite of passage associated with imperial exploration is reimagined through a homoerotic vision of a safari adventure culminating in a surreal pool-party, where black men are metaphorical prey for Dirk's desires: "One day he'd travel. He'd like to travel. To parts of the world where things were still all right.... He closed his eyes. Lions, tigers. Sort of pink blossoms, lots of them. Boogie-something. Boogie blossoms. And – swimming pools. And strong white men. Muscular. Toned. Working out in the sunlight. Short haircuts and – brick-hard buttocks. Press-ups flipping over into sit-ups, and fuck, they all had enormous hardons, and most of the men round the pool were black" (39).

> African black, as black as the toilets, and his face had a horrible, soft sort of look, like he was a girl, like he was in love, and fucking hell, he was touching his cock. I don't believe it, his great black cock. (347)

Here, Dirk's distorted sense of self and desire climaxes in a violent act of bodily penetration, metaphorically replacing sexual intercourse with the act of stabbing Winston: "He slipped the knife gently out of his jacket and hit the bastard in the middle of his chest, the blade sliding in surprisingly easily, sticking it, jerking it, forcing it in, holding it there, screaming with panic, '*Fuck you, fuck you!*'" (347).

Winston's murder in Albion Park closes the novel's circular structure as it constitutes a kind of reversal to Alfred's initial fainting after his dispute with the Black family. However, Alfred's reaction to Dirk's crime is not of rejoiced vengeance of the Whites, intended as a family synecdoche for a whole ethnicity. Rather, it has the bitter taste of failure, a profound betrayal of his life's work as the guardian of the park, and the nation it represents. For this reason, when May expresses her belief that it was Dirk who committed the crime, Alfred leaves the hospital while still in pyjamas, to denounce his own son to the authorities. He then returns to the park one last time to die in May's arms at the very spot where he had proposed to her after the war. This scene is glorified through an intertextual reference to Tennyson's 1855 poem *O that 'twere possible*: "O that 'twere possible / After long grief and pain / To find the arms of my true love / Round me once again!", [38] which merges with May's fading lyrical imagination: "Wind in the leaves / Among his people... / Here in the grass he was safe to sleep" (414) in a bittersweet elegy that pays an almost imperceptible tribute to Rupert Brooke's patriotic sonnet *The Soldier* (1915).

In the end, Alfred White – the devoted public servant and late Park Keeper – is actually granted the privilege of dying "at peace", much like Brook's soldier,[39] as he "slips away into the past, slipping away beneath the future" (414). He finds his final rest in the "rich earth" of Albion Park, now transformed into that "corner of [an increasingly] foreign [and unrecognizable] field" that remains, at least for Alfred, his "forever England." But as readers are tricked to mourn Alfred's passing as that of a national hero and symbol of English moral fibre, the legacy he leaves behind is far from redemptive. Instead, it is one of anger and hatred that keeps haunting broken individuals within a fractured nation on the brink of its final reckoning.

In this perspective, the structure of the novel's epilogue is particularly iconographic as Alfred White and Winston King's funerals take place on the same day: "side by side [in] a triumph of mismanagement" (417). Their processions, starkly contrasting in terms of ethnicity and size, march along opposite banks of the river toward the same cemetery. Overhead, a police helicopter monitors the crowds, struggling to discern "with no effing idea of which side is which" (417), while the tabloid press scrambles to capture statements and images, anticipating the onset of an epochal clash. Within this grand theatrical spectacle, each character fulfils their predetermined role, unable to actually grow or change the trajectory of their respective lives.

Darren White, described as "oddly fish-like", is lost and consumed by his own temper, brawling with a reporter from *The Sun*. Dirk, confined to prison under protective custody due to fears of lynching by Winston's mourners, is barred from attending his father's funeral. Meanwhile, May stands utterly alone – not only because Alfred's death has severed her last anchor to the world, but also because her daughter, Shirley, has made her choice: "I'm sorry, Mum" is all Shirley can offer as she

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[38] Alfred Tennyson, *Maud, and Other Poems* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1855), 88.

[39] The opening stanza of Brooke's poem reads: "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England. There shall be / In that rich earth a richer dust concealed" and concludes with the line "In hearts at peace, under an English heaven." Rupert Brook, *1914 & Other Poems* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1915), 15.

turns to Elroy and his family, her partner and "his people", who have now become "her people, hers by choice" (417). Gee's novel thus compellingly explores the power of family ties, whether biological or elective, while emphasizing that the act of forging one's own path through agency transcends and even redefines the inherited legacies of our origins.

4. Against Redemption: Trauma and Identity Politics

Through its exploration of tainted inheritances, othering processes, and haunting interplay between macro- and microcosmic disintegration, *The White Family* gives voice to the structure of feeling associated with the 'left-behind' white working class – a sentiment that, fifteen years after the novel's publication, would shape the outcome of the Brexit referendum. More strikingly, Gee's novel employs the Gothic mode to problematize the theoretical notion of 'monstrification', proving how the nuclear family can produce its own unique horrors and abominations, not through supernatural forces, but through the normalization of hatred, prejudice, and violence. As these poisonous attitudes metastasize, transforming ordinary people like the Whites into moral monsters, the novel unsettles readers by evoking a disquieting empathy for its characters' vulnerabilities and histories, even as it refuses to condone their actions. Alfred White's bigotry and overt racism, for instance, are filtered through the lens of obsolescence and loss, thus defining him as a man desperately clinging to a vanishing world and identity. While Alfred's final heroic act of "public duty" (396) can be conveniently interpreted as a redemptive moment of accountability, this interpretation fails to acknowledge the superficiality of his realization. In fact, Alfred's self-important lamentations: "It's all my fault ... I am the Park Keeper. I am the Park Keeper. My fault, May. I left my post" (397), reveal a narcissistic attachment to an idealized, non-existent nation rather than a genuine reckoning with the toxic legacy he has passed on to his son. This misplaced loyalty is foreshadowed by May's early observation that "the Park matters more than us" (10), underscoring the hollowness of her husband's moral integrity. Yet, Alfred cannot be seen as the sole architect of his dysfunctional family. His wife's passive acceptance of patriarchal oppression renders her a disturbingly banal and insidiously complicit figure, whose silence enables the emotional and psychological damage inflicted on their children.

Amid this legacy of destruction, Shirley emerges as the novel's most profoundly positive figure. Indeed, by challenging Alfred and Dirk's anxieties of reverse colonialization resulting from the physical incursions of the 'Other' into the white English body (politic), Shirley stands out as a vital maternal force with Joycean undertones, akin to Molly Bloom's life-affirming presence in *Ulysses* (1922). She becomes a vector of hybridity, both through her interracial relationships and as a figurative universal womb, evoking humanity's shared origins beyond any illusory notion of racial purity. Indeed, Shirley's journey toward resolution culminates in a moment of unexpected catharsis: the birth of "unidentical twins, both olive-skinned, both curly-haired, but one much paler than the other" (415), conceived with both Elroy and Thomas during a single night. Her decision to embrace this pregnancy starkly contrasts with her earlier coerced adoption, symbolizing the resolution of her internal conflict and the assertion of her agency. Shirley's narrative arc thus serves as a counterpoint to the destructiveness of Alfred's legacy, offering a vision of hope and renewal grounded in acceptance, reconciliation, and the transformative potential of embracing change.

In this perspective, Gee's *The White Family* transcends its original temporal setting and offers a timeless critique of identity politics and how they can be weaponized both within the familiar framework and the broader community dimension of nationhood. In doing so, the novel anticipates the Brexlit genre and offers a cautionary tale of the monsters we risk creating when we fail to understand the complex interplay between personal trauma and national identity.