



Domestic colonialism: The domestic space and imperial power in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Morrison's *A Mercy* explore the enforcement of British domestic standards throughout the Empire, implemented to further fabricate the cultural distance and racial divide between the colonizer and colonial subject. Both texts dramatize the ruination of the domestic space, destabilizing a colonial system through undermining and invalidating the colonizer's glorified self-image and 'higher culture.' In obscuring the process of colonial cultural exportation - reshaping the domestic space and refusing to conform to colonial values on traditional family life - the novels undermine a system of imperial power.

A narrative of imperial expansion and global economy has been far removed from a discourse of feminine domesticity and family life; the domestic space seen as separate from a world of commerce, trade, and activity. Catherine Hall argues that this split between public and private life emerged with the Industrial Revolution, claiming that with 'the development of capitalism' came the 'separation of domestic labour' from 'commodity production.'¹ Yet, while the ideology of separate spheres can be a valuable gateway into understanding history, this dichotomy of the interior and exterior space can be extremely deceptive when approaching post-colonial criticism. This is because the imperial space and domestic space are intricately connected. As evident in contemporary journals like *The Calcutta Review*, domesticity had a political and imperial function. Established in 1844 by Sir John Kaye, *The Calcutta Review* compiled information and correspondents regarding Colonial India. The paper called on 'England's daughters to be true to the traditions of their race' and 'honour the great nation whom they represent.'² The pamphlet warns that women cannot underestimate the 'sacredness' of their 'influence and position in India'; their duty to create happy homes and safe shelters from the unforgiving Indian climate.³ Hence, the home is active in setting an example and maintaining moral standards – the domestic space integral to the imperial image. English households were a self-replicating source of propaganda; clean, civilized, and exclusive spaces that reinforced the idea of British cultural superiority. Consequently, it is important to appreciate the domestic space as a worldly space and recognise, in line with poststructuralist theory, the 'politization of the private sphere.'⁴

Cereus Blooms at Night explores the relationship between the domestic and colonial space through the missionary work of the Reverend and the structure of the Thoroughly Family. The family run a quiet and well-ordered household, with evenings spent in prayer,

¹ Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p.51

² Dawson, J. E., 'Woman in India: Her influence and Position', *Calcutta Review*, 83:166 (1886), 347-357 (pp.357) (A)

³ Dawson, p.347 (A)

⁴ Eli Zaretsky, 'Identity Theory, Identity Politics: Psychoanalysis, Marxism, Post-Structuralism', in *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, ed. by Craig J. Calhoun (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p.199

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silent reading, or 'writing in their journals.'⁵ The Reverend encourages Chandin to copy such behaviour, imposing his domestic ideals on the young boy. As a result, Chandin eventually begins to feel ashamed of his own family and social background - the 'status of Hindu gods and goddesses' that line the walls and the faint smell of 'pooja smoke', 'sweat', and 'eggplant' that permeated the house.⁶ Chandin begins to think less of himself, as he compares the Reverend's grand home to his family's two-room ajoupa quarters in the barracks'.⁷ In his 'innocence' and nativity, he concluded that his peoples lack of such finery and material wealth was a result of 'apathy and a poverty of ambition.'⁸ Mootoo is confirming here the importance of domesticity and material culture in validating derogatory racial stereotypes that justify an unequal system of imperial power. Said argues that 'men have always divided the world up into regions that have either real or imagined distinctions from each other'.⁹ The Reverend uses his family to strengthen and reinforce such racial distinctions. *The Calcutta Review* remarks that 'many an Indian's so-called home' is 'but the phantom of its English antitype'; actively constructing this binary of opposition between the coloniser and colonial other via domestic institutions.¹⁰ Similarly, the Thoroughly family perform this exclusive model family too, in Said's words, 'keep intact the separateness of the Orient'.¹¹ The domestic space is used to elevate the English above the 'ignorant' and 'ill-mannered' native population. Material culture was used in addition to 19th-century ideas about the science of race and what Said terms the 'biological bases of racial inequality' – adding to the conceptualization of the backward or archaic Oriental Race, in comparison to the more advanced and progressive European Civilization.¹² Esme Cleall argued that the 'constant washing, cleaning, and ordering' of this 'material paraphernalia ...symbolically embodied the preservation of civilization against the corrupting effects' of the "heathen land."¹³ These material objects became emblematic of British class and prosperity, part of performing an elaborated version of British domesticity abroad to reinforce a notion of colonial cultural supremacy.

Mootoo interrogates how this domestic display operates to maintain distance from the colonial subject. In the cricket matches held for the seminarians in *Cereus Blooms at Night*, lunch consists of 'cheese sandwiches' and phrases like 'good fellow' and 'bravo [...] my boy' can be heard, cheered from the pitch side-lines.¹⁴ There is a strong, almost exaggerated, effort to maintain English standards and replicate polite society here. Mootoo examines this process of formulating a collective cultural identity. The White European's are over-performing their distinctiveness, out of insecurity and anxiety that their superior status and glorified sense of self will be counteracted or invalidated, through interaction with the Other. In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Chandin became desperate for his people to see 'inside' the Reverend's home, so they too 'could embrace not just the Reverend's faith, but his

⁵ Shani Mootoo, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (London: Granta, 1999),p.31

⁶ *Cereus*,p.30

⁷ *Cereus*,p.27

⁸ *Cereus*,p.31

⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003),p.39

¹⁰ Dawson, J. E., 'Woman in India: Her influence and Responsibilities', *Calcutta Review*, 83:166 (1886), 358-370 (pp.369-370) (B)

¹¹ *Orientalism*,p.206

¹² *Orientalism*,p.206

¹³ Esme Cleall, 'Far-Flung Families and Transient Domesticity: Missionary Households in Metropole and Colony', *Victorian review*, 39:2 (2013), 163–179 (pp.168)

¹⁴ *Cereus*,p.39

taste.¹⁵ Here, Mootoo is making a direct link between the success of imperial projects, and European cultural domination through the implementation of domestic standards, and the wealth and prosperity of the colonial home. Patriarchal ideologies like the 'Angel of the House' and 'Sanctity of the Home' cannot be limited to a discourse of gender or domesticity, as they have an imperial purpose. The private space is of international concern and significance. Alison Blunt states that 'the presence of English domesticity in colonies' was 'necessary for the reproduction' of 'the social, moral and domestic values' that 'legitimated imperial rule.'¹⁶ This is evidenced in Dawson's writing, that the 'daughters' of England 'prove worthy of their higher culture' and build homes that faithfully emulate British cultural values and reflect the 'high prestige' of their 'countries position.'¹⁷ This passage speaks to the power and place of the home, in the rhetoric of empire. These domestic institutions were seen as advocates of the nation, representatives of English class, culture, and education. Dawson argues that based on domestic culture, 'we are fairly entitled to claim indisputable superiority.'¹⁸ This kind of imperial propaganda can be seen to affect Chandin. He looks back to his parents 'mud house' - the 'peerhas they used for sitting' and 'the rough planks of wood' that functioned as kitchen shelves - and feels nothing but shame and embarrassment.¹⁹ The novel analyses how domestic institutions were used to enforce a racial hierarchy and validate a system of British imperial power. To quote Deirdre David, 'domesticity was transplanted to the empire' to serve a 'hegemonic, didactic purpose in exhibiting the supposed superiority of a colonizing culture.'²⁰

A Mercy also explores forms of domestic colonialism. When Lina lived with the Presbyterians, she was told that 'bathing naked' was a 'sin' and eating 'corn mush with one's fingers was perverse.'²¹ Cultural differences in domestic practices were fundamental in constructing a distinction between the Presbyterians and the Native Americans. Applying Balandier's theory on the 'dominate minority' here, the Presbyterians painted the native population as 'backward' and 'primitive' - to justify an imbalance of power and European domination over a native majority.²² To quote, Balandier argues that the European 'minority acts on these natives with a vigor disproportionate to their number.'²³ So, instead, it 'predicates its domination' based on its 'incontestable material superiority' (e.g., racial, legal status etc.)²⁴ Hence, the Presbyterians 'burn' Lina's 'deerskin dress' and 'scissor inches from her hair' to strip her of her identity and reinforce their own 'material superiority.'²⁵ Balandier's framework argues that Europeans will become more zealous and aggressive in their behaviour, as they gradually feel increasing pressure and anxiety from their minority status. This is reflected in the Presbyterian's extreme attempts to 'convert' Lina and destroy her culture. Women's magazines and household guides of the eighteenth century issued advice to colonial families living in India, instructing women on how to preserve the sanctity of the

¹⁵ *Cereus*, p.31

¹⁶ Alison Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886-1925', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 24:4 (1999), 421-40 (pp.423)

¹⁷ Dawson, p.370 (B)

¹⁸ Dawson, p.359 (B)

¹⁹ *Cereus*, p.31

²⁰ Deirdre David, 'Imperial Chintz: Domesticity and Empire', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27:2 (1999), 569-577 (pp. 569)

²¹ *A Mercy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2008), p.46

²² George Balandier and Joseph Cunneen, 'The Fact of Colonialism: A theoretical Approach', *CrossCurrents*, 2:4 (1952), 10-31 (pp.19)

²³ " "

²⁴ " "

²⁵ *Mercy*, p.46

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home and maintain standards in foreign terrain. Platt warns, in one household guide, that 'their ways of living are not ours' and 'for hygienic reasons...close proximity is not desirable.'²⁶ In analysing discourses from later periods in the Empire, it can be inferred that *A Mercy* explores a form of proto-imperial domesticity – that later develops into a more formalized domestic imperial policy, as witnessed in *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Platt's review. In Mootoo's novel, domestic imperialism is a more covert and established power strategy. Morrison, however, shows this process in development.

A Mercy also explores the exportation of European legal legislation and private property laws. Moehrle warns that one cannot forget the link between domesticity, and economic and commercial institutions. Moehrle argues that Europeans were given an 'incentive to participate in the economic system because they were exposed to and enticed by a domestic ideal.'²⁷ *A Mercy* shows early colonists building a European economic market, through domestic institutions. Vaark and D'Ortega's, in establishing these grand estates, are imposing a material and domestic European culture onto an indigenous population and reconstructing a European class system. However, in structuring the text through multiple narrative voices, Morrison challenges the European experience, giving the reader access to different global perspectives. From this vantage point, she subverts dominating Eurocentric narratives and knowledge production systems. That is, she counteracts this systematic circulation of European scholarship objectifying or representing the Orient; or to quote Said, enforcing the Oriental World's 'intelligibility and identity' by a 'series of knowledgeable manipulations.'²⁸ Said argues that knowledge is a form of power - and by European nations claiming knowledge over a civilization, for example claiming authority on its history, internal affairs, culture, and even its 'future' – they dominate it, because, to an extent, that nation now exists as they define it.²⁹ Though Lina, Morrison challenges this distorted European conceptualization of the Orient. Said argues a large amount of European literature has emphasized a 'knowledge of the orient' as something 'alien and unusual' – something one 'judges', 'disciples', 'depicts' or 'studies'.³⁰ However, in giving Lina authorial power, we see a reversal of this process. The White European is being exhibited and displayed for a critical deconstruction. While no one in Morrison's novel is contained to someone else representation of them – Lina does offer an alternative perspective on European domestic ideology and the social practices of early modernity. Lina was confounded by how territorial and possessive Europeans were of their wealth and property, puzzled as to why Jacob saw the need to build mental gates to mark and protect his estate; so 'sinister' they made Lina think she was entering the 'world of the dammed'.³¹ Here, Lina challenges European cultural domination and domestic ideology, making the reader rethink the legal practices of private property and land ownership. Both Jacob and D'Ortega implement a system of land tenure and dispose of a Native American culture of collective ownership or communal living, where the land is viewed as a public resource. Instead of living off the land, Jacob exploits and exhausts it of its natural resources to fuel the construction of a 'profane monument to himself'.³² Lina was utterly 'mystified' by such strange and erratic behaviour. Morrison is

²⁶ Kate Platt, *The home and health in India and the tropical colonies* (London: Tindall and Co, 1923),p.21

²⁷ Christina Moehrle, *Imperial Domesticity: Native American Gender Ideology and Conformity in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Fordham University, 2011),p.5

²⁸ *Orientalism*,p.40

²⁹ *Orientalism*,p.32

³⁰ *Orientalism*,p.40

³¹ *Mercy*,p.49

³² *Mercy*,p.42

inverting the colonial gaze, using Lina as a vehicle to refracture or disrupt this process of cultural exportation and subvert early forms of domestic imperialism.

Cereus Blooms at Night also challenges Western cultural hegemony, by dramatizing the destruction of the nuclear family. Encouraged by the Reverend, Chandin builds 'his own home' in a cheap 'underdeveloped section of Paradise called Hillside.'³³ This nuclear family and colonial remodel, however, soon becomes a place of terror, brutality, and horrific sexual violence. The house is 'thwarted by monsters and demons'; imagery from childhood nightmares being used to communicate and personify the unimaginable and inarticulable terror and trauma of Mala's youth.³⁴ The patriarchal ideology that the heteronormative, nuclear family will provide a shelter and escape from the terrors of the outside world, is completely subverted. These exported social structures and domestic values are shown to be failing. Mala's home is haunted by experiences of sexual violence. She is instead forced to build a new home for herself, relocated in her imagination and the memories of her childhood. To apply French philosopher Bachelard's theory, Mala has travelled to her place of 'Motionless Childhood' - living in her own vivid imagination and fixating on images and experiences of 'happiness' from her youth, as a method of coping with childhood abuse and abandonment.³⁵ In this, *Cereus Blooms at Night* challenges ideas of domesticity through exploring the home as an imaginary space, not a material one. Mala is recentralizing her home; recollecting stories from her childhood and memories of her mother, to build a space of peace, shelter, and security - something a 'traditional' family home could not provide her.

Cereus Blooms at Night challenges a system of imperial power, by exposing the hypocrisy of the Thoroughly family and inverting this 'exemplar' model of domestic nuclear bliss. Sarah and Lavinia, in running away together, undermine the authority of the Reverend and challenge colonial cultural values on gender roles, family life, and the organisation of the home. We see those on the receiving end of colonialism oppression, like Sarah, negotiating and refiguring a family identity – defying a process of cultural exportation. Lavinia and Sarah redefine the role and position of women in society. They refuse to set an example of a good Christian household and shatter the illusion of the happy nuclear family. If a policy of domestication strengthens imperial power by enforcing western cultural assimilation, Sarah challenges a colonial system by refusing to adapt or accommodate to its cultural values. Jan Mohamed states 'that in the hegemonic (neo-colonial) phase, the natives accept a version of the colonizer's entire system of values, attitudes, morality, and institutions' – so in rejecting and redefining these institutional structures, Lavinia and Sarah are destabilizing a system of imperial power.³⁶

A Mercy also challenges British cultural values, by exhibiting material waste and redundant domestic spaces. After Jacobs's death, Rebekka 'refuse[s] to enter the grand house.' Goldberg approaches the novel through a focus on the 'the economics underpinning the narrative' and how slave 'enslaved workers must be sacrificed to produce ... capital.'³⁷ Following this thematic reading, the abandoned building becomes symbolic of the horrific waste of such a 'sacrifice.' The estate - built on the profits of slave trade and labour –

³³ *Cereus*, p.50

³⁴ *Cereus*, p.156

³⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p.5

³⁶ Henry Louis Gates, *Colonist Literature in "Race", Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 81

³⁷ Jesse A Goldberg, 'Slavery's Ghosts and the Haunted Housing Crisis: On Narrative Economy and Circum-Atlantic Memory in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*', *MELUS*, 41:4 (2016), 116–39 (pp.117)

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becomes completely superfluous (with no heir to inherit the property after Jacob's death). It becomes representative of the uneven distribution of resources, and the use of enslaved labour to provide a sickening excess of wealth and material assets. While the mansion was constructed as a testament to Jacob's life and achievements, in the hope to secure his legacy, after his death Morrison restores the property into a monument that holds and carries the forgotten lives and stories of enslaved Black Women. When Florens carves her account into the walls and floor of Vaark's estate, she is marking her painful experiences of loss and oppression onto this tribute of colonial wealth and power. 'From now you will stand to hear me' she states.³⁸ Quan argues that she is marking her suffering into the 'collective cultural memory of the nation', carving space for the history of the nation's silenced voices.³⁹ In this respect, both authors redesign domestic spaces to challenge imperial power.

To conclude, both texts explore the relationship between the domestic and imperial space. Both authors interrogate how imperial powers use domesticity as a framework for which to experience and fabricate racial differences, and subsequently aggrandize their own cultural status. Morrison and Mootoo, however, look beyond the European experience in their revision of family life and modification of domestic culture. In obliterating an illusion of domestic nuclear bliss, refashioning the family, and undermining the social and domestic practices of early modernity – both authors challenge European cultural domination and domestic colonialism, subsequently tackle systems of colonial and neo-colonial power.

³⁸ *Mercy*, p.158

³⁹ Zhou, Quan, 'Cultural Memory and Ethnic Identity Construction in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*', *Journal of Black Studies*, 50:6 (2019), 555–568 (pp.563)

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