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Demystifying the Resistance: Negotiating the Gaze in H. Rider Haggard's *She* and *Ayesha*

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Abstract: This paper explores the possibility of resistance to the imperialistic male gaze by studying and analyzing the nuances of gender struggle in H. Rider Haggard's *She: A History of Adventure* and *Ayesha: The Return of 'She.'* It relies upon the theories related to the power of gaze in gender studies and the hierarchical heterosexual division of active seer and passive being-seen, while it further recognises any resistance or even a reversal of the established division of power. The paper also demystifies this resistance by focusing on the political motives of the central character of the novels as a philosopher, ambitious conqueror, and ruler in addition to her role as a supernatural being. The paper engages with the questions related to the current gender power struggles by analyzing them in the context of the late nineteenth century British colonial politics and literary imagination. It reassesses the late Victorian representations of the oriental women by reading them in the light of current feminist politics of reclaiming the power as its active agents.

Keywords: Resistance; gaze; reverse gaze; gender struggle; demystification.

“My empire is of the imagination” claims the title character of Rider Haggard's *She: A History of Adventure* (1886) (hereafter *She*) (132). On the contrary, the British Empire had various modes of manifestation other than the imagination by the second half of the nineteenth century. There were multiple means through which the Empire was brought home for the British public to see and know the extent of its dominion. The Great Exhibition (1851), which displayed the artifacts from different cultures and nations of the Empire, projected the reach of the British colonial power. The Empire was also visualized in the British magazines and weekly newspapers that published illustrations and pictures of colonized nations, brought in by naturalist explorers, adventurers, and journalists. *The Graphic* (1869-1932) was one such weekly illustrated newspaper that published photographs from all the corners of the British Empire to attract its English readers.¹



However, this visualization did not simply fulfill what the imagination about the Empire lacked but further provided a sense of possession. Andrew M Stauffer notes that the volumes of *The Graphic* in which Haggard's *She* was serialized between October 1886 and January 1887 included "pictorial spreads and articles on Constantinople, Burma, South Africa, Egypt, and India, some of which connect in significant ways to the novel itself." He further claims that these volumes included articles that dealt with "British military occupation of Egypt and conflicts in the Sudan" (18). These images from the colonies and the nations where the quest for British dominion was active were supposed to evoke a sense of possession signified by the ability to visually represent what was politically and militarily occupied. Haggard's novels, *She* and its sequel *Ayesha: The Return of 'She'* (1904-1905) (hereafter *Ayesha*), are set in this imperial discourse of visualization and possession.

Haggard's novels can further be established in the dichotomy of active imperialistic gaze and Africa/Asia as its passive object by reading them as successors of the late eighteenth-century survival and sentimental travel narratives by the European naturalists and explorers in Africa. These narratives transform the quest for natural history into a mission of discovering the "secret of life" (*She* 20). A common theme between Haggard's novels and the survival accounts by the European naturalist travelers is the description of hardships and danger that the explorers face in their journey to the interiors of Africa.² Haggard's narrator, Holly, stresses the description of the physical and psychological impediments in journey towards the fictional lands of 'Kôr' in East Africa (*She*) and 'Kalon' in Central Asia (*Ayesha*). He narrates the swamps that lie in the journey as "measureless desolation" or "dreadful wilderness of swamp" (Haggard, *She* 48, 53). This geographical imagery can be directly compared to the West African swamps as projected in English explorer Mary Kingsley's account. Mary Louise Pratt claims that Kingsley understood these swamps as "a landscape that the Africans themselves seem neither to use nor value, a place where they would never contest the European presence" (209). Holly also acts as a naturalist explorer when he claims to have discovered a "distinct species" of the wild goose that, according to him, "may interest naturalists," and which is further named "the Unicorn Goose" by Job (Haggard, *She* 47).

Pratt's study of survival literature by eighteenth-century naturalists and the Victorian explorers' narratives highlights the imperialistic purpose attached to them. She argues that the exploration expeditions in Africa were not limited to scientific studies but involved objectification, commodification, and



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commercialization of the landmass, its cultural and economic resources, and its people. She writes, “on the one hand commerce was understood as at odds with the disinterestedness of science. On the other, the two were believed to mirror and legitimate each other’s aspirations.” Further, she argues that the “commercial prospects placed science arguably within the general public interest, though in fact the benefits of mercantile expansion and imperialism accrued overwhelmingly to small elites” (34). She describes Victorian explorers’ promontory display of the African interiors as “a brand of verbal painting whose highest calling was to produce for the home audience the peak moments at which geographical ‘discoveries’ were ‘won’ for England” (197). Reading Haggard’s novels as fictional successors to survival and naturalist narratives situates them in the imperialistic discourse of these narratives. The purpose of reading the novels in the context of possession through exploration and discovery and in the context of the visualization of the colonial empire through the fictional narratives is to highlight the imperial gaze of Haggard’s protagonists, Holly and Leo.

Ayesha is an immediate sequel to *She*, therefore, this paper reads both novels as a continuation of the same narrative. When it comes to reading the novels as narratives of the British Empire’s glorification and its expansion, critics have produced contradicting arguments. On the one hand, critics have studied Haggard’s romances as “successful adventuring that doesn’t lead to full-fledged colonization,” while on the other, they have also argued that their British male protagonists are carriers of an “imperialist gaze” that “surveys territory about to be both penetrated and appropriated” (Libby 4; Stott 84). Even though Holly and Leo show no valorization or glorification tendencies towards the British Empire, they hold a dominating position as British male explorers in Africa and Asia. Their British male identity allows them to gaze and judge the natives and their culture from a dominant and privileged position. As Edward Said argues, academic and personal narratives by European travelers to Orient were motivated by a “Western confidence” and by Orientalism as a discourse of superior West and inferior East (176).

Rebecca Stott’s study of Haggard’s romances reveals that the British male explorers in Africa carried a male voyeuristic gaze elevated to the level of scopophilia along with the imperial gaze. She argues, this “gaze is both the imperialist gaze, the appropriation of new territory for scientific theory, and the gaze of desire (passion) and of voyeurism . . .” (85). This paper develops upon Stott’s argument to study the masculine gaze of Haggard’s novels’ British explorers, Horace Holly and Leo Vincey, as an



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extension of their imperial gaze. The argument is that the imperial gaze of the explorers is transformed in *She* and *Ayesha* into the masculine gaze of ownership over the feminine object. Laura Mulvey has projected a hierarchical gender division in the economy of 'seeing' and 'being seen': "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (62). In a somewhat similar argument, derived from the idea of establishing ownership by the right and possibility of looking, John Berger suggests that being able to look is to be able to possess and keep (83). Through his study of European oil paintings, he further argues that the wealth portrayed in these paintings and the possession of the paintings themselves display the ownership of the "spectator-owner" over them (135).

In the novels, gazing as an activity carries a scopophilic tendency as one of its most potent characteristics. Holly and Leo are the explorers whose motive is to "lift the veil from mysteries which have been hid for ages" highlighting the gender dynamics of this exploration (Haggard, *Ayesha* 152). The quest is established within the heterosexual binary of the gaze as suggested by Mulvey, where the active and seeking gaze is masculine while the veiled and passive object of exploration is feminine (67). In *She*, Billali, the chief of the Amahagger tribe, invites Holly to "gaze upon" a remaining foot of a woman's corpse that he has been attracted to since childhood. Holly is not merely fascinated by the tale behind the foot but rather goes into a fanciful reminiscence of the lived experiences of the woman to whom it belonged. The language of his imagination highlights the physical beauty of the foot's owner as he imagines it to be of a "blushing maid's" and of a "perfect woman's." The foot itself is described as a "shapely little foot" on "jewelled whiteness" of which "the lips of nobles and of kings have been pressed upon" (Haggard, 82). However, what seems to him the most logical aim for his scopophilic gaze is reflected in the act of keeping the foot away in his Gladstone bag (Haggard, 83).

Holly and Billali attempt to preserve as well as possess female beauty through their roles both as male lovers and possessors. Holly's emphasis on keeping the relic in his Gladstone bag implies a transfer of possession of foot, both as a symbol of feminine beauty and as the remains of the fallen civilizations of Africa. This incident displays themes of fetishization and veneration of female beauty, common throughout both the novels.

The fetishization and veneration of feminine beauty are critical within the power dynamics of gender struggle. Mulvey argues that the position of a female figure in the dichotomy of seeing and being



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seen is twofold. The female figure is both an object of the male scopophilic gaze and, in psychoanalytic terms, “a threat of castration” due to “her lack of a penis” (64). Discussing the position of female figures in cinema, she argues: “the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the [castration] anxiety it originally signified.” However, Mulvey further observes that the “male unconscious” escapes this castration anxiety through two avenues: “by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object” and by “turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence overvaluation, the cult of the female star)” (65).

Ayesha’s defiance of the male possessive gaze through her secretiveness and inaccessibility also becomes a cause of male castration anxiety. The narratives project the concept of secretiveness and its intrusion by the imperial male gaze at two distinct locations. In *She*, the intrusion occurs when Holly, while tracing his way through the labyrinth of caves, encounters Ayesha in a ritualistic lamentation over the corpse of Kallikrates in his tomb (Haggard, 122-123).³ In *Ayesha*, both Holly and Leo intrude upon the “vast congregation of all the dead” in the Sanctuary (215). These episodes are depicted in terms of an intrusion upon some “unholy rites” or “secret ceremonial” (*She* 123; *Ayesha* 216). In both situations, the intruders are punished through a reflection upon the possibility of being discovered, which produces a feeling that is described by Holly in terms of sickness and fainting or that of shrinking back with “terror written on our faces” and “oppressed with fear and wonder” due to the “dreadful than anything” sight (*She* 122; *Ayesha* 216). Such an impact is significant and alludes to castration anxiety, specifically due to the circumstances of its cause.

Karen Horney argues that the castration anxiety in a male is the residue of an instinctive judgment of childhood that “his penis is much too small for his mother's genital,” which then develops in a “dread of his own inadequacy, of being rejected and derided” (248). She argues that this dread further leads to a “wounded self-regard” within the male child’s consciousness and produces the castration anxiety through “frustration-anger.” Horney suggests that such anxiety can be “reinforced when the boy observes traces of menstruation” (249). Ayesha’s secretive rituals can be read as a metaphor for menstruation, which produces a feeling of sickness and fainting in Holly and Leo. These feelings are triggered by the reminiscences of what Horney calls wounded “masculine self-regard” when faced with a powerful woman



against whom their masculinity seemed inadequate or whose mysteries were beyond their understanding as explorers (248).

The destruction of “masculine self-regard” is avoided in the novels on the very terms that Mulvey observes in the portrayal of the female lead in cinema through the narrative stance of fetishizing Ayesha’s physical appearance. The descriptions of her physical features, reflected through her unveiled form, are present in the text wherever the masculine gaze is threatened with obstruction or subversion. These descriptive representations of her physical form fall in the ambit of Mulvey’s two avenues of avoiding castration anxiety. In the first meeting between him and Ayesha in *She*, Holly escapes from a situation of a destructed gaze and objectification by Ayesha’s reverse gaze by describing her appearance as seen through her wrappings “so thin that one could distinctly see the gleam of the pink flesh beneath them” (Haggard 106). He further attempts to soothe his destructed gaze by “boldly” voicing his desire to “gaze upon” her face (115). Furthermore, in the scene where Holly intrudes upon Ayesha in Kallikrates’ tomb and is horrified by the “power of fascinated terror,” he avoids this terror by focusing upon the possibility of seeing “her form” (122).

During Ayesha and Leo’s betrothal, her robe appears to Holly as “those of a queen rather than a priestess,” while she herself appears as an “empress” who “looked more royal” than any other. This ambitious display of power and dominance by Ayesha, multiplied by the fact that Ayesha is also carrying the jeweled sistrum - a symbol of her authority, once again pushes Holly towards a narrative objectification of her beauty and sensuality to avoid the castration anxiety. Interestingly, “Ayesha’s human beauty” is fetishized in terms of cultic “spiritual glory,” and her “power, mystery and love” reminds Holly of her “divine presence” (Haggard, *Ayesha* 209-10). Ayesha is projected as a fetish of male desire for sexuality and power.

Ayesha as a possessor of supernatural beauty has been compared with the figure of ‘femme fatale,’ whose beauty “is a curse” and threatens to destroy the morality of men through temptation (Stott, 74).⁴ However, Holly’s role as a narrator, who could describe her unveiled beauty, may also suggest his position as its possessor (Haggard, *She* 106, 116). In her reading, Pratt recognizes three distinct characteristics of a “Victorian discovery rhetoric”: “the landscape is *estheticized*,” “*density of meaning*,” and “relation of *mastery* predicated between the seer and the seen” (200). Holly’s description of Ayesha’s beauty at various



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junctures seems to be mirroring these characteristics. Holly, as Pratt has observed in Richard Burton's *Lake Regions of Central Africa*, aesthetically narrates Ayesha's beauty as if unveiling a work of art from its wrapping. He refers to her appearance as though rising "like Venus from the wave," perhaps referring to *Venus on the Waves* by François Boucher (Haggard, *She* 172).⁵ The painting by Boucher portrays Venus in sensual and indolent imagination. Holly's allusion to a painting for describing Ayesha's beauty can further be argued as a justification of exploration against the worth of the reward. As Pratt observes that the aesthetic description of the geographical discovery in Burton justifies the "value and significance of the journey" (200).

"Density of meaning" is described by Pratt as one of the qualities of these geographical descriptions that project the landscape as "extremely rich in material and semantic substance" (200). Similarly, Holly's description of Ayesha's beauty is full of references to valuable ornaments that she wears such as "sandals, fastened with studs of gold" and "her white kirtle . . . fastened by a double-headed snake of solid gold . . ." (Haggard, *She* 116). During Leo and Ayesha's betrothal, Holly observes her wearing a narrow band of gold with a hooded asp of single, crimson jewel (*Ayesha* 209). Holly's ability to describe Ayesha's beauty in materialistic terms allows him to at least, as Pratt suggests, "evaluate" it, if not possess. This power of evaluation is akin to the "viewer-painting" relation that provides a sense of possession through visual observation (Pratt, 201). Berger also associates paintings with their ability to be "bought and owned" while analyzing the analogy between possessing and ways of seeing (83-85).

The dread of male castration is projected in *She* in literal terms. Ayesha derives her powers and beauty from the phallic symbol of the "pillar of fire" by stepping into which Ayesha "came forth undying, and lovely beyond imagining." Ayesha claims that she gained the knowledge of pillar from a male hermit by tempting him through her "beauty and . . . wit," (217, 212, 211). It is for this symbolic castration of the hermit through her temptations and her overarching ambitions that Ayesha is punished by the very pillar of fire as she attempts to bathe in it again (221-22). The punishment itself consists of Ayesha's transformation into an old, weak and "monkey form," where "her skin changed colour, and in place of the perfect whiteness of its lustre it turned dirty brown and yellow" (223, 224).

Furthermore, Ayesha is also described in a parodic manner at various junctures to avoid castration anxiety fulfilling Mulvey's first avenue of "devaluation" of the "guilty object" (65). In *She*, this attempt is



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reflected in Holly's contemplation about Ayesha's identity as she remains hidden behind the curtain: "who could be behind it?- some naked savage queen, a languishing Oriental beauty, or a nineteenth-century young lady, drinking afternoon tea?" (Haggard 105) As a British male, Holly's comparison of Ayesha with a young British lady may imply an attempt to gain a dominating position against her by evoking the Victorian patriarchal social structure. Holly further describes Ayesha's veil as "grave-clothes," wrapped in which she reminds him of a "corpse" (106). Even Job is terrified by her appearance as if he has seen a ghost as he proclaims, "here's a corpse a-coming sliding down the passage!" (147).

Holly goes to a length in suggesting that Ayesha, with her supernatural physical characteristics and secrets, provides a scope of study for a "man for whom physiology has charms" (*She* 127). Haggard's narrator evokes the historical position of the scientific gaze of European naturalists and explorers in Africa, as studied by Pratt. Ayesha is transformed into a specimen to be discovered, analyzed, and categorized just like the "systematizing of nature" (Pratt 34). Pratt argues that in the descriptions of naturalists' quest in South Africa, natives were "produced as objects of formal ethnographic description" (51). The native identity was bereft of its culture, political economy, and religious traditions and reproduced as an object of the scientific gaze.

Keeping all these arguments in mind, this paper recognizes the possibility of resistance to the imperial male gaze by studying the nuances of gender struggle in *She* and *Ayesha*. The essay will further demystify this resistance by focusing on the political motives of Ayesha as a philosopher, conqueror, and ruler rather than as a supernatural and fetishized being as depicted in the novels.

Ayesha's awareness of her beauty's impact upon the seer and the understanding of the seer's desire to possess it is a critical aspect of her power politics. It is with this awareness that Ayesha not only controls the gaze of the seer but also commands the will of the seer. On being requested by Holly to "gaze upon" her face, Ayesha warns him that if she showed him her face he would eat out his heart "in impotent desire" because, as she claims, "I am not for thee . . ." (Haggard, *She* 115). Holly, despite his dominant position from where he can describe her beauty, is not allowed to possess it. He is regularly reminded that even his privilege to gaze upon her face is granted to him at her will: "Say, hast thou seen enough?" (117). In her resurrection episode, as soon as Ayesha gains her beauty, her appearance weakens Holly and Leo to a submissive position: "our knees gave way beneath us, . . . Leo and I sank till we lay upon the



ground” (Ayesha 200). In such a situation, the gazer, despite his active scopophilic gaze, is vulnerable against the object of the gaze.

The novels, within the domain of the English adventure genre and the imperialist romance of the late nineteenth century, have been read as reflecting the misogynistic imagination and “masculine imperative” of Victorian Imperialism (Patteson 5).⁶ They project a successful adventure of Holly and Leo, who not only could discover the secrets of Ayesha’s eternal beauty and mysterious power but also possess and punish its overreaching ambition to a certain extent (Haggard, *She* 223). The success of the adventures is only marred by the tragedy of Leo’s demise (Ayesha 292-93). However, the possibility of resistance to the masculine imperial gaze can be traced through the character of Ayesha and her authoritative position. The tactics by which she avoids the male imperial gaze, her ambition as a metaphorical reverse gaze, and the terms on which she utilizes her beauty and power to control the dynamics of seeing and being can be read as instances of political resistance. Although, such a reading can be made possible only by understanding her political and philosophical will as the source of her power to resist, instead of reading her supernatural capabilities as her only advantage.

Ayesha possesses a critical understanding of the power dynamics of the active gaze versus the dominated position of the object of such a gaze. She actively utilizes the tools of surveillance and spying to gather information about the rival army (Haggard, *Ayesha* 244). Furthermore, as a ruler, she dictates the terms and tactics through which she acquires a position of the active gazer while at the same time avoiding the objectifying gaze at her against her will. She is attended by men and women who are bred deaf and dumb to evade any threat of her secrets from revealing (*She* 115). Her followers already conform to the terms and conditions of this play of seeing and being seen. As she sits as a judge upon the crime of Amahagger people who attacked Holly and his party, she is also attended by a “great number of people. . . .” Holly emphasizes that the way this gathering stared at with a “peculiar gloom” could have reduced anyone “to misery.” However, as soon as Ayesha enters the chamber, each member of this gathering prostrates flat on the ground to avoid gazing at her (128).

A salient example of the struggle related to the power dynamics of the gaze occurs when Holly is brought into Ayesha's private chambers (*She* 104-06). This episode is also significant because Holly has not yet experienced her supernatural abilities or eternal beauty but only heard rumors about it. While



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approaching Ayesha's chamber, Billali gets into a prostrating position and begins to creep. However, Holly refuses to conform to any such act of veneration due to his pride and identity as an Englishman that disapproves him to "creep into the presence of some savage woman," while doing so "would be a patent acknowledgement of inferiority" (104). His denial is attached to the sense of superiority of belonging to a conquering and imperial nation.

Even with such a predetermination to uphold his superiority, Holly faces another situation that, as he claims, "produced a very odd effect upon my nerves. I was frightened, I do not know why." It is his narration that reveals the source of his nervousness and fear in the fact that Ayesha was observing him through the curtain, and he could feel "her gaze," while he himself "could not see the person. . . ." Holly narrates her gaze, and its effect on him, as "the gaze of the watching being sinking through and through me, filling me with a nameless terror, till the perspiration stood in beads upon my brow" (*She* 105). He is afraid not only due to his failed gaze or with the fear of displeasing "some naked savage queen," who could "blast" him on the spot, but also due to the presence of a "watching being" (104, 105). It is also interesting to notice that the curtains do not restrict Ayesha's gaze as she later reveals to Holly, "thou wast afraid because mine eyes were searching out thine heart, therefore wast thou afraid" (106). In this situation, Holly is under the similar anticipation of the observing gaze and its disciplinary power as experienced by an inmate subjected to Bentham's panopticon (Foucault 200-02). Moreover, the failure of Holly's gaze is reiterated to him by Ayesha at various junctures by describing him as a "blind fool" who "hast no vision." When Holly distrusts her abilities to turn iron ore into gold through alchemy, she again retorts, "why should I be vexed with thee, who art both blind and deaf?" (Haggard, *Ayesha* 232, 250).

This panopticon-like placement of the curtains in her chamber allows Ayesha to gain a dominating position over visitors, such as Holly, who defy her authority. Furthermore, it also destroys what Luis F. López González calls "the 'phallic gaze'" that "represents an active desire to dominate and *penetrate* the object it beholds" (350). Such a destruction of the 'phallic gaze' invokes castration anxiety as reflected in Holly's fear of "nameless terror." Similarly, in a particular scene, Ayesha averts Leo's attempt to attack her through the impact of her reverse gaze. He confesses to the effect of her gaze on him as if he "received a violent blow in the chest," and "all the manhood had been taken out of him" because Ayesha "was watching, and, seeing him come . . ." (Haggard, *She* 171).



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The stance of Ayesha to avoid the direct gaze while herself being able to gaze back acquires a critical meaning in the economy of seeing and being seen. Preminda Jacob argues that wherever the “gaze is hegemonic; its interactivity is present only in the unequal exchange between two animate beings” (244). It is the power of Ayesha’s active gaze that puts her in a dominating position while she avoids being gazed back at. Her secrecy against the imperial male gaze is also significant within the historical and political relationship between Britain and Africa/Asia during the late nineteenth century.

In his study of the European photographers in colonial Nigeria, Andrew Apter highlights the position of the photographers who could avoid the secretive nature of Nigerian tribal culture to capture the photographs of ritualistic dances and practices. These rituals were often forbidden to be seen even by the members of these cultures. Such violations of the “visual prohibition” were made possible either through trickery or, in some cases, by the authority of the colonial government (566). Apter suggests that it is not only the cult value of certain rituals that governed the possibility of seeing and capturing the visuals but also the political power positions (566-68).⁷ In such a background, Ayesha’s secretiveness acquires a political meaning, where she successfully avoids the gaze unless it is with her agreement.

Curtains are not the only means by which Ayesha avoids the gaze of the others. Another tool of her defense is her veil. It can be argued that Ayesha’s veil and her political identity as ‘She-who-must-be-obeyed’ go hand in hand. She enacts the role of a judge in the capacity of a ruler only in her veiled appearance. She veils herself as she is about to judge the fate of Ustane, the Amahagger woman who chose Leo as her husband in the fashion of her tribe (*She* 154-55). The veil is critical to Ayesha’s identity as a ruler or authority figure, and its absence puts her in a vulnerable position. In *Ayesha*, she is supposed to remove her veil to prove her identity at the behest of her rival Khania of Kaloon, Atene. This test of her identity is also critical in the context of the legitimacy of her rule over the Fire Mountain and the College of Hes (189). As it is now inevitable to remove the veil, Ayesha’s position is described as so vulnerable that even her attendant Papave, “tower over her mistress, the Hesea” (192). She also appears unveiled in front of her attendees and followers in the episode of her betrothal with Leo. She suggests that her appearance with her drawn veil reflects her position as a betrothed to Leo. It is not simply a betrothal but also a power transference denoted by Ayesha’s act of casting “down her sistrum sceptre,” the symbol of her authority as the priestess of the Fire Mountain, as soon as the betrothal ceremony ends (*Ayesha* 210-



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211). Since Ayesha had already decided to give away her authority, her unveiled form can be understood as a sign of her submission.

Ayesha's attitude towards the imperial male gaze is not reflected in her resistance alone but can also be understood through her metaphorical reverse gaze powered by her political ambition and authority. In the novels, the gender-based dichotomy of the gaze, as suggested by Mulvey, is subverted. Holly describes that Leo has always been an object of the scopophilic gaze of "every young woman who came across him . . ." (Haggard, *She* 13). When Leo and Holly arrive among the Amahagger people, Leo is again the object of the sexual gaze of the Amahagger women, upturning the power dynamics through their matriarchal culture (59). Just after punishing Ustane with death for defying her command, Ayesha could tempt Leo out of his anger not only with her beauty but also by her reverse gaze that Holly narrates: "she stood forth, and fixed her deep and glowing eyes upon Leo's eyes." He further narrates the impact of her gaze upon Leo: "his clenched fists unclasp, and his set and quivering features relax beneath her gaze" (172). Ayesha's gaze destroys Leo's sensibility and understanding to such an extent that he questions the very womanhood of Ayesha: "'art thou a woman?'" In response, Ayesha's assertion of her identity as "'a woman in truth - in very truth . . .'" not only reinforces her reversed gaze but also avoids its transformation into a cultic power (172).

A more discernible display of Ayesha's reverse gaze lies in her political ambitions. She is a powerful and potent ruler, as reflected in her identity of 'She-who-must-be-obeyed' or even as a commander of a conquering army (Haggard, *Ayesha* 274-275). She trusts her conquering prowess, where she can tell the outcome of a battle because, as she claims, "I shall direct it," more than her role as an oracle and seer (257). While she enquires about England from Holly and Leo, she displays not only a desire to visit it but also claims that she will "overthrow" the British queen to ensure that Leo "shalt rule this England" (*She* 192). In *Ayesha*, Holly reminds the readers of Ayesha's proclamation to conquer Britain, which has now transformed into a greater ambition to "make Leo the absolute monarch of the world" (240). Ayesha's political ambitions project her self-identification as a ruler as she asserts, "'If I arise amidst the Peoples, I must rule the Peoples, for how can Ayesha take a second place among mortal men?'" or "'it will please me, to see Powers, Principalities and Dominions, marshalled by their kings and governors, bow themselves before our thrones and humbly crave the liberty to do our will'" (240, 241).



Ayesha's ambition and desire to conquer England and then the rest of the world can be placed in the domain of the British colonial politics of the late nineteenth century. Her ambition is powered by her strategic planning of empowering the Chinese multitude by whose "uncountable" numbers she plans to "flood the little western nations" (*Ayesha* 242). This strategy itself brings in the binary of East versus West, while Ayesha towers in this projection as an Eastern conqueror. She further solidifies her allegiance with the East as she claims, "then the East, that has slept so long, shall awake — shall awake, and upon battlefield after battlefield such as history cannot tell of, thou shalt watch my flaming standards sweep on to victory" (243). This proclamation of her ambition to conquer the Western nations as a representative of the East can also be studied in the light of Stephen D. Arata's study of late-victorian fiction, including *Ayesha*, *She*, and *Dracula*, as narratives of "reverse colonization" (624). Arata suggests that the source of fear in the late-Victorian popular fiction is "that what has been represented as the 'civilized world' is on the point of being colonized by 'primitive' forces" (623).

Ayesha's political threat to the Western world in the form of 'reverse colonization' and the anxieties that it produces for British subjects, Holly and Leo, shapes the dynamics of gender struggle through the power politics of gaze. Holly observes and narrates the intensity of Ayesha's ambition in her eyes which "took fire from it till, . . . they became glowing mirrors in which I saw pomp enthroned and suppliant people pass" (Haggard, *Ayesha* 241). Further, as Ayesha reveals the source of the financial resources for her expedition, Holly observes that "her shape grew royal and in her awful eyes there came a look that chilled my blood . . ." (246). The impact of Ayesha's ambitious gaze upon Holly and Leo may again be understood in terms of the dread of castration anxiety discussed above. These anxieties manifest through Leo's self-assuring response to Ayesha's ambition and her "contemptuous tone" as he questions her with the possibility that the Western nations may "combine, . . . and attack thee first?" (243).

Ayesha's political power seeps into her attitude towards Leo, which further becomes the source of his uneasiness. A prime reason for Leo's anxiety in his relation with her is located in the subversion of Mulvey's division of active gaze and passive object of the gaze- based on the heterosexual binary. Despite conforming to her role as a feminine part of their relationship, Ayesha insists upon keeping active surveillance upon Leo in all circumstances. In *Ayesha*, her phallic gaze replaces her control over the phallic symbol of 'pillar of fire' as a sign of her dominance in *She*. In a particular instance of such



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surveillance, Leo's anxiety is projected through his frustration of being spied upon and treated "as though he were a little boy." Holly narrates that Leo even claims that he is capable of facing the dangers such as a leopard, which he faced in this very instance of the novel, and that he "had killed every sort of big game known and passed through some perils and encounters . . ." (*Ayesha* 235-36). The reference to the traditionally masculine activity of hunting reflects that Ayesha's surveillance affects Holly and Leo's sense of masculine pride.

Ayesha's ability to maintain an active reverse gaze could also be seen as reflected in her wisdom and philosophy. She shows an archeological interest in the paintings of the caves of Kôr, while her ability to decipher the ancient Chinese inscriptions remains unmatched by Holly, who could not have understood their meaning without her help (*She* 134). Holly's inability is further highlighted by Ayesha's use of terms such as "seest", "beheld", "show" etc., while describing the inscriptions to him, suggesting as if it is she enabling Holly to see or know them (133-34). Ayesha claims that it is through her understanding of the secrets of nature that she can prolong her life, while at the same time she denies to explain these secrets to Holly lest she should "overcome" Holly with what may be a "great mystery" for him to understand. This claim points at the limitation of Holly's imagination and his power to visualize her mystery. She further suggests that she may "never speak thereof again" about her learning of nature's mysteries, hinting that it is only through her that Holly can gain this knowledge of nature that she possesses. This stance of Ayesha to keep her knowledge limited to herself is a political move on her part to maintain the status quo (113).

The masculine gaze under the patriarchal structure of society carries the disciplinary stance under which its object as feminine other, if not always as a woman, is judged, criticized, and recreated according to the patriarchal will. The purpose of this paper has been to recognize the possibility of resistance to the masculine gaze that tends to claim its ownership and domination over its object. It also tried to equate the masculine gaze in its possessive characteristics with the imperial gaze that tends to own or colonize all that it could survey. The idea was also to trace any stance of reverse gaze to strengthen the feminine aspect of Mulvey's dichotomy of the active and passive in the economy of gaze. In such circumstances, the resistance to the masculine gaze and a feminine reverse gaze acquires a political position and becomes possible through the ambitious will to claim the positions of power. bell hooks argues that "an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze" is produced when the "right to



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gaze” is repressed (463). To further build upon her argument, it can be argued that the traditional object of masculine gaze can reshape the ways of seeing and being seen by acquiring the position of the active spectator with a critical gaze towards their stereotypical position as a spectacle.

Notes

1. See Stauffer 17-18.
2. For more on the themes of European naturalists’ accounts of exploration during the eighteenth century, see Pratt 197-217.
3. Kallikrates was a priest of Isis and ancient ancestor to Leo, who was murdered at the hands of Ayesha herself more than two millennia ago, Haggard, *She* 19.
4. For more on this, see Stott 69-89, Driss 164-188 .
5. See François Boucher (1769).
6. See Libby 1-14, Murphy 747-772.
7. For more on the political significance of seeing and being-seen in colonial Nigeria during the late nineteenth century, see Apter 564-596.

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