The Colonial Feminine in Pat Murphy's "His Vegetable Wife"

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In Pat Murphy‟s "His Vegetable Wife," the farmer Fynn plants a Vegetable Wife. In time, the seedling grows into a feminized plant, complete with a curvaceous body, breasts, pubic hair and nipples. But though the plant is called a wife, and identified as *she*, she has no more power over her own body than Fynn‟s cimmeg crops—cash crops. Yet unlike cimmeg, her value to Fynn resides not in her exchange value, but in her use value as a sexual object: a disposable, inexpensive, home-grown concubine.

But as Fynn‟s Vegetable Wife ripens and he begins to use her, his expectations change. He wants an emotional response from her, though he is titillated by her passivity and lack of expression. He grows lustful and then violent as his Vegetable Wife resists his sexual advances. Soon he binds her to the frame of his dome dwelling and begins to keep her under constant surveillance. Her struggles for freedom inflame him sexually and he sexually assaults her, later remonstrating her for crying. After all, he says, "you are my wife. It can‟t be that bad." Later, he discovers that "she seemed to react only to violence, to immediate threats."[1] He beats her bloody, repeatedly assaulting her, finally attempting to kill her in a fit of rage and jealousy.

Fynn perceives the Vegetable Wife as inferior—both as a female and as a colonial subject. Woman is nothing more than a flawed man: emotional, unreasonable, irrational. She is ruled entirely by erratic passions. The colonized subject is atavistic—primitive and superstitious—and like a woman, is ruled by emotions and characterized by an incapacity for logical thought, animalistic drives. Both are in need of a firm hand to „husband‟ them—in the same way a farmer husbands his land and livestock. A farmer takes firm possession of his property, manipulating and altering it, torturing and wooing it, to suit his economic needs. Farmers take what is wild and unproductive, and civilize it. Their reward is personal wealth and power, as well gaining cultural capital and a stronger position on the hegemonic power pyramid.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has written of the experience of the female subaltern in her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In the essay, Spivak argues that "if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow."[2] The female subaltern is objectified both as a female and as a colonial subject—an inextricable doubling of oppression that is far more acute in its domination than the experience of the subaltern male. In fact in this story, the Vegetable Husband does not exist—it is an oxymoron. A husband—a force of domination, ownership and imperialism—cannot be Vegetable, unlike a woman, a wife. Murphy‟s "His Vegetable Wife" emphasizes the duology of the Vegetable Wife‟s oppression. In the capacity of a colonial subject, the Vegetable Wife is commodified. Fynn views her as a conquered subject of his farm "empire," and

therefore she become an asset to the business, like a tractor or fertilizer, to be used or disposed of as he sees fit. From the first, the language Murphy uses in describing the Vegetable Wife is the same as that applied to colonial subjects. She is merely a plant, lacking emotion, lacking civilized qualities. She is an object to be used and profited from, an infant to be fed and watered, a "wild thing" to be kept from harming itself.[3] In the capacity of wife, she is objectified. By definition, she is nothing more than a pliant, sexual receptacle for her husband‟s desires. This is the purpose for which she is grown. When she eventually ceases to be capable of that role—as when fruit trees no longer produce adequately and must be torn out and planted with new trees--when the Vegetable Wife no longer fulfills her ontological role, she must be discarded, in the same way men have traditionally discarded older/uglier wives in favor of new, sexier models.

In either capacity—indigenous subject or wife—she has no legal or moral standing or recourse. Such a concept would be as inconceivable and ludicrous to Fynn as granting such rights to his pillow, toothbrush, or toaster, or perhaps a better comparison would be his celery, broccoli or cabbage. This then, is the position of the colonized woman: she is the subaltern who cannot speak; she is raped, but unraped. Yet even as "His Vegetable Wife" dramatizes the doubled oppression of the colonized woman, it also demonstrates that the Vegetable Wife is not powerless. She is Other, with a power that is unnoticed and unacknowledged and tremendously subversive. Mimicry is a double-edged sword, and the Vegetable Wife, as the colonized woman, responds with the strength of her dual heritage.

Cultivating the Empire

A vegetable is by definition, a consumable. It is the edible product of a plant; in some cases, it is the plant itself. It is to be cultivated until ripe, and then eventually eaten, whether by the farmer or the consumer. A vegetable is a passive thing, lacking consciousness, incapable of thought or feeling. The term is often used pejoratively to refer to a human in a comatose state: she‟s a vegetable. Medically, when someone has slipped into a coma and lost cognitive brain function, she will be diagnosed as being in a vegetative state. A simplified explanation is that the person loses higher cerebral brain powers, but the brain stem continues to function—breathing and circulation continue without aid. However, despite the seeming of consciousness—sleep cycles, grinding teeth, blinking, and so forth—the patient is generally believed to be „brain dead,‟ though there is argument in the medical community about whether the patient is truly „brain dead‟ or whether the condition is reversible. The dispute becomes particularly thorny when the question arises as to whether the patient is beyond recovery, and should therefore be taken off life-support. The hidden issue driving the question is whether there is any value to a life lived, in the slang term, as a „vegetable.‟ The presumption is not. For a vegetable is unthinking, unreasoning,

and in fact, many believe that the inhabiting soul is likely departed from the husk of the body. The point I am getting to here, is that a body decreed „vegetable" is in fact an object that has been reduced to a subhuman category.

This is Fynn"s perception. He believes his Vegetable Wife to be "only a plant, she felt no pain." He knows this, not because of observation, which would have challenged that perception, but because "the instructions had said so."[4] These instructions represent the articulation of colonial hegemony that insists on positioning the indigenous Other as a commodity whose value lies soley in its use to the Empire. The instructions on the package not only describe how to manage that use, but their insistence that the Vegetable Wife feels no pain, suggests an ambivalence in situating the indigenous Other as inhuman, resulting in an effort to discount empirical evidence to the contrary.

This ambivalence is dramatized by Fynn. He does not entirely believe that his Vegetable Wife lacks all consciousness, for indeed, he feels guilt when he fondles her and breaks leaves and must convince himself that the guilt is unfounded.[5] As she grows and develops feminine qualities—waist, breasts, pubic hair—he begins to think of her as a person, referring to her as a „she," rather than as an inhuman thing: "the seedling" or "the wife." He recognizes her discomfort with his touch as an urge to escape, and responds by tying her up and devising a system of surveillance. When he sexually assaults her the first time, she cries, a reactive response to a horrifying stimulus, and one that would be expected from a woman and not from an unconscious plant. Her tears "woke compassion in him" and he attempts to reason with her: "come now . . . you are my wife. It can"t be that bad."[6]

In her well-known essay "The Unspeakable Limits of Rape: Colonial Violence and Counter-Insurgency," Jenny Sharpe argues that in the film version of E.M. Forester"s *Passage to India*, "a masculinist reading of the mystery of the cave [Adele"s presumed rape] . . . is based on the „common knowledge" that frigid women suffer from sexual hysteria and that unattractive women desire to be raped"[7] It is this „common knowledge" combined with the legal right of ownership inherent in the designation of „wife" that allows Fynn to presume that he can use his Vegetable Wife"s body as he desires, with or without her consent. Fynn"s behavior reflects the misogynist belief that a wife belongs totally to her husband without any rights of her own. According to Anne McClintock in her seminal work *Imperial Leather*, "Women are the earth that is to be discovered, entered, named, inseminated, and above all, owned."[8] Thus it is impossible for a husband to rape his wife, since she is reduced to property and therefore has no right of refusal. While it is true that a woman can be raped (in the context of damage done and loss of value to another man"s property),[9] a husband cannot rape his wife.

Fynn"s selection of the Vegetable Wife rather than the Maiden or Bride indicates that his intent is not only to satisfy himself sexually, but to establish himself *a priori* as the absolute authority in this relationship, as well as the property owner. A maiden or bride might resist copulation. Neither of two has

been subject to a man‟s touch. Both might expect kindness and consideration--a kind of wooing. A wife, on the other hand, is expected to have been indoctrinated into her role and to accept her husband‟s dominance and power over her body. Which is to say, she has already been made docile; she is domesticated and trained. In selecting a wife, Fynn is not selecting a companion, but a creature—not even a pet—who will succumb to the uses he intends for her body, no matter how violent or distasteful to her.

Simone Beauvoir writes that in the act of sex, particularly the first time, the woman is "overpowered, forced to compliance, conquered . . . . [She] lies in the posture of defeat; worse, the man rides her as he would an animal subject to bit and reins"[10] And in fact, by hobbling his Vegetable Wife around the ankle, Fynn equates her with a horse or cow. When he rapes her, the description is eerily akin to Beauvoir‟s: "When he tried to embrace her, she did not respond except to push at his shoulders . . . . Excitement washed over him, and he pushed her back on the hard ground, his mouth seeking her breast . . . his hand parting her legs." When he is through, he rolls off her and she is left "in the dust."[11] The conjunction of wife and animal begins to get at the real position of the colonized woman represented by the Vegetable Wife. Not merely is she feminized and therefore robbed of the rights to her body, but she is also colonized.

Typically, the colonizer feminizes the colonial project—both the land and indigenous peoples. McClintock notes that "the world is feminized and spatially spread for male exploration, then reassembled and deployed in the interests of massive imperial power," and that "the feminizing of terra incognita was, from the outset, a strategy of violent containment."[12] With the colonizer serving the paternal role of father and disciplinarian, the indigenous peoples were hierarchized according to imperialistic notions of gender value. According to imperial hegemony, „natives‟ were inevitably barbaric, degenerate, irrational—uncivilized. These qualities were the same qualities associated with women. McClintock, discussing the British Empire, states that "racial scientists and, later, eugenicists, saw women as the inherently atavistic, living archive of the primitive archaic."[13] The colonizers then set a hierarchy of „native‟ value, with men at the top, followed by mothers.[14] This does not make economic sense, since childless women contribute heavily to the labor force of colonized territories. However it does reflect the hegemony that perceives women as flawed men, whose value resides in their services as wives and mothers, and who, even in a colonial context where all indigenous peoples are positioned as degenerate, are perceived as more corrupt, primitive, and debased, than the men of their race.

Given this hierarchy, the Vegetable Wife resides in the substrata—the least of the subaltern ranks. She is neither male nor mother. Nor does she work. The „crop‟ she has to offer is her sexuality. She has no other economic contribution to make. Nor is she unique—she comes from a packet of seeds.

Any man who wanted her could simply grow another. Her only worth as a female, or as a colonized subject, exists in her use value as a concubine to Fynn.

To return to Sharpe‟s argument, she contends that the official discourse of colonization "erases colonial women‟s agency."[15] She argues that this discourse removes the colonized subject from the category of rapeable. A colonial subject is no more rapeable than a wife by her husband. She, or even he, is not entitled to any protections of law, culture or morality. The discourse does not permit a concept of rape in association with „natives.‟ Because they are defined as feminine and subhuman, their assigned role in the hierarchy is essentially tools, livestock, or vermin, depending on the needs of the empire.

In colonization of Australia, the British declared the continent uninhabited—terra nullius--allowing the aborigine peoples to be categorized as nonhuman, or subhuman—vermin. In aligning the discourse to suit the imperial agenda, colonizers were encouraged by bounties to eradicate the vermin, without endangering their moral superiority, simply by reducing the inhabitants to the equivalent of filthy cockroaches.

Sharpe contends that the signifying function of the colonial native cannot be permitted to undermine the imperial discourse. By inscribing the genocide of the aboriginal peoples of Australia as an act of heroism, the British affirm the imperial hegemony as patriotic, moral, and inevitable. Similarly, the brutal, nonconsensual act of sex with a colonial subject is not rape, but instead it is the symbolic representation of the colonizer overcoming the violent barbarity of the „native‟ and inserting into „her‟ the seed of civilization. That she resists is only to be expected—civilization comes at a price. If she proves fertile ground, then those seeds will grow, cultivated by the colonizer—the farmer. Thus rape is not rape, but a moral battle against degeneracy and barbarism. The colonizer is not only justified, but he is venerated, for the performance of this dangerous and difficult duty. The ideological justification of imperial hegemony remains intact.

Mimicry and the Power of the Other

Fynn‟s fields are surrounded by the tall native grasses. They besiege his self-described farm empire, "a vast expanse of swaying stalks."[16] The image hints at a threat, recalling the sense of malice Marlow feels as he travels into the African interior in *The Heart of Darkness*, and reminding the reader that Fynn is essentially alone amongst a horde of unfriendly „natives‟ who have ample reason to hate him: "[Fynn] had enjoyed hacking down the grass that had surrounded the living dome, churning its roots beneath the mechanical tiller, planting the straight rows of cimmeg."[17] His power of authority and rule resides in his machinery—the weaponry of creating a farm empire, of carving civilization out of the wilds. Fynn is confident in his superiority and control.

Yet despite his pride in his empire, despite his feeling of mechanical and moral strength and ownership, he finds the surrounding grasses unsettling. They make him nervous and annoyed: "The soft sound of the wind in the grasses

irritated Fynn; he thought it sounded like people whispering secrets."[18] It is the same sound the wind makes in his Vegetable Wife"s hair the first time he attacks her. And later, when he attempts to strangle her, his goal is to "stop the whispers that he heard, the secrets that were everywhere."[19]

As the story progresses, Fynn loses sight of the fact that the Vegetable Wife is Other:

> She was not quite what he expected in a wife. She did not understand language. She did not speak language. She paid little attention to him unless he forced her to look at him, to see him. He tried being pleasant to her—bringing her flowers from the fields and refilling her basing with cool clean water. She took no notice. . . . She seemed to react only to violence, to immediate threats. When he made love to her, she struggled to escape, and sometimes she cried . . . . After a time, her crying came to excite him—any response was better than no response.[20]

In this passage, it becomes clear that Fynn"s expectations have moved beyond the merely sexual to the emotional. He wants her to like him, to care about him, to appreciate him. When she does not respond appropriately, he begins a program of violence beyond that which he has already set in motion with his repeated sexual attacks. He beats her with a belt until she"s bloody with sap. He begins to brood on her recalcitrance, positing her with "all the women who had ever left him."[21]

Homi Bhabha argues that "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*."[22] The colonial subject is encouraged to believe he can attain equality with the colonizer, if only he becomes sufficiently civilized. But in fact, the colonial subject can never achieve equality because he will never be "the same." Specifically, he will always be physically identifiable as Other, either by skin color, facial features, or in the case of the Vegetable Wife, she is a plant. There is a deeply fracturing anxiety in the colonial hegemony revolving around the concern that a colonized subject could ever „pass" as equal, and thereby „infect" the imperial culture through what Stephen Arata has called reverse colonization.[23] In examining Bram Stoker"s *Dracula*, Arata says that Dracula is frightening because he infects his victims with his atavism, marked by passion, lewdness, blood-hunger and violence. He "imperils not simply his victims" personal identities, but also their cultural, political, and racial selves. Horror arises not because Dracula destroys bodies, but because he appropriates and transforms them. Having yielded to his assault, one literally „goes native" . . . ."[24]

This is the danger of mimicry. It is a powerful technique of colonization. The colonial subject is indoctrinated into hegemony, becoming complicit in his own domination. He seeks to belong, to conform, to earn his way to equality. In doing so, he defuses his own threat. But mimicry can also be a form of resistance when the colonized subject pretends to conform. Fynn conducts surveillance of his Vegetable Wife, situating her by a window or near the door where he can watch her during the day, and checking her bindings to be sure they are secure. But when he begins to consider her a woman, a wife—albeit a recalcitrant one—he loses sight of the fact that she is still Other. He becomes infected with the notion that she has humanity. Ironically, this grants her little power, as she is still subject to the ideological conception that a woman is her husband‟s property. Thus he continues to beat and assault her with impunity.

Fynn has convinced himself that his Vegetable Wife is what the seed package claims she is: a „native‟ whose menace has been eliminated. He is fooled into believing that because she appears to be domesticated and powerless, she must therefore be so. But in fact, the Vegetable Wife is symbolic of the danger of mimicry to the colonial power—that she is only wearing the seeming of subjection. And she may not be the only one. Recall that Fynn‟s farm empire is surrounded by the tall native grasses that whisper secrets. What secrets? Plots of rebellion? Truths that defy imperial hegemony?

In the end, Fynn attempts to strangle his Vegetable Wife, forgetting that she is a plant, and not a woman. Her body, while appearing human, almost the „same but not quite,‟ is still a plant. She is no more strangleable than she is rapeable. In an ironic manifestation of the deadly power of „native‟ mimicry, the Vegetable Wife copies Fynn‟s actions: "she lifted her hands and put them to his throat, applying slow steady pressure. He struggled drunkenly, but she clung to him until his struggles stopped."[25]

She kills him, not out of any hatred for his abuse, or even because she desires to escape. She kills him because his behavior has demonstrated that he is sick, barbaric, and uncivilized. In another ironic mimicry of imperial hegemony, just as Fynn performed a symbolic seeding of the barbaric lands with civilization through sexual violence against his Vegetable Wife, so she plans to "plant the man, as she had seen him plant seeds. She would stand with her ankles in the mud and the wind in her hair and she would see what grew."[26] And in fact, we can predict that Fynn will not grow, but will decay, the victim of his own misogynist and imperialist arrogant blindness. His rotting flesh will be the evidence that he did not provide fertile ground for civilization—he was too corrupt. But eventually his body—imperialist hegemony—will break down to unrecognizable elements, and those elements will provide the fertilizer for more „native‟ plants to grow, and eventually retake the farm empire.

Carrots, Radishes and Murder

In this story, what we see is the inherent corruption and weakness of imperialism. It is inconceivable to Fynn that his Vegetable Wife might be anything more than what the seed package says she is, what the colonialist hegemony says „native" women are. The fact that she is a colonial subject and a woman ontologically defines her as weak and helpless. Fynn cannot imagine that she could be dangerous because he believes her very nature is powerlessness and vulnerability. He is stronger physically, by virtue of his superior mechanical technology, and by his white masculinity. He is confident in his abuse of her, bolstered by the imperial hegemony that justifies his behavior and existence, as well as her general lack of resistance.

In the end, however, she kills him easily. But the final question remains: Can a plant commit murder? When the government agent returns to investigate why Fynn has failed to harvest his cimmeg fields, he will find Fynn"s decaying carcass planted knee-deep in the ground, maggots burrowing into his flesh and the stink unbearable. The government agent will be horrified and will call for investigators to uncover who committed such a brutal act. He will once again admire the Vegetable Wife, her "naked skin glistening in the sun, smooth and clear and inviting."[27] Once again he will think she is beautiful, and perhaps even think—what a waste, that she be left here when the farmer is dead. He will pack her in his copter and sign off on the investigation, notifying the local authorities to be on the lookout for a murderer, a strong man who could strangle the farmer and bury him upright. Then he will take the Vegetable Wife home. And there the wind will blow through her hair and there will be whispers and secrets and a sharing of information and the quiet resistance will spread.

And so the government agent, the representative of the larger hegemony, will make the same mistake as Fynn. He will be fooled by the Vegetable Wife"s seeming. Because to even entertain the notion that she might have murdered Fynn would be ludicrous. The idea confers too much power on a being that is by her very nature, incompetent and powerless. Everyone knows this. It is the Truth.

The Vegetable Wife is unrapeable because she exists outside the category. Similarly, she exists outside the category of murderer, because she is too weak to make such an act possible. And thus she makes mimicry work for her, disguising her menace, and subverting the imperialist hegemony that is incapable of recognizing the threat she embodies.

End Notes

1. Pat Murphy, "His Vegetable Wife," in *The Norton Book of Science Fiction*, ed. Ursula K. Le Guin and Brian Atterbery (New York: Norton, 1993) 630-631.
2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia UP) 83.
3. P. Murphy, "His Vegetable Wife," 631

4. Ibid., 629 and 631
5. Ibid., 629
6. Ibid., 630
7. Jenny Sharpe, "The Unspeakable Limits of Rape: Colonial Violence and Counter-Insurgency," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia UP) 223.
8. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 31.
9. On the exchange of women within a patriarchal culture, see Luce Irigaray"s chapter on "Women on the Market." Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One,* trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell UP, 1985; 1st edition, France: Editions de Minuit, 1977), 170.
10. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952) 385.
11. P. Murphy, "His Vegetable Wife," 630
12. A. McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 23 and 24
13. Ibid., 41
14. G. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", 82
15. J. Sharpe, "Unspeakable Limits of Rape," 238
16. P. Murphy, "His Vegetable Wife," 628
17. Ibid., 628
18. Ibid., 628
19. Ibid., 632
20. Ibid., 631
21. Ibid., 631
22. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994) 86.
23. Stephen, Arata, "The Occidental Tourist: Dracula and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization," *Victorian Studies* 33 no. 4 (1990): 621-645.
24. Ibid., 630
25. P. Murphy, "His Vegetable Wife," 632
26. Ibid., 632
27. Ibid., 631

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Sharpe, Jenny. "The Unspeakable Limits of Rape: Colonial Violence and Counter-Insurgency." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York: Columbia UP, 221.

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