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Postcolonial Gothic: Haunting, Hybridity, and the Unsilencing of History in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract

This paper examines the Postcolonial Gothic as a distinct literary mode in contemporary fiction. I analyze Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women* (2009) and Mona Awad's *Bunny* (2019) to show how writers use the mode to articulate colonial violence and its ongoing effects. Building on my earlier work on Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*, the study shows how the Postcolonial Gothic transforms traditional Gothic tropes—haunting, monstrosity, and the uncanny—into tools for historical witness and cultural resistance.

The texts create narrative spaces where repressed histories violently resurface. They use formal and linguistic hybridity to challenge colonial power and official history. James's novel examines historical plantation slavery. Awad's novel explores contemporary academic institutions. Together, they reveal how colonial violence persists in present-day structures. The Gothic mode remains relevant for confronting systemic oppression.

Keywords: *Postcolonial Gothic; Haunting; Historical Trauma; Marlon James; Mona Awad; Spectrality; Cultural Resistance*

1. Introduction: Theorizing the Postcolonial Gothic

Contemporary literature has seen the rise of a distinct Postcolonial Gothic mode. Writers strategically repurpose European Gothic conventions to confront colonial violence and its lasting effects. The Postcolonial Gothic differs significantly from traditional Gothic fiction's focus on psychological terror and aristocratic decay. Instead, it employs spectrality, monstrosity, and haunted landscapes to materialize historical trauma. The mode challenges what postcolonial scholar Ann Laura Stoler calls "colonial aphasia"—the systematic forgetting of colonial violence.

The Postcolonial Gothic doesn't simply transplant Gothic elements to new settings. It fundamentally transforms them into instruments of political critique and historical recovery. My paper builds on earlier research in trauma studies and African American literature, particularly work on Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. My previous research examined how trauma becomes inscribed on individual bodies and family lineages. The present study expands that scope. It investigates how collective historical trauma manifests spatially, institutionally, and culturally.

The Postcolonial Gothic provides a unique narrative framework. It makes visible what conventional historiography has rendered invisible. It gives voice to what dominant discourses have systematically silenced. My analysis focuses on two texts that exemplify the mode: Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women* (2009) and Mona Awad's *Bunny* (2019). James's novel is set on a Jamaican sugar plantation at the height of slavery. It literalizes Caribbean haunting through a sentient plantation landscape that remembers every atrocity committed upon it. Awad's novel transposes Gothic critique to contemporary academia. It reveals neo-colonial dynamics within elite educational institutions.

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Despite their different settings and approaches—James works in historical fiction, Awad in satirical horror—both texts demonstrate the Postcolonial Gothic's capacity to expose colonial patterns of power and appropriation.

The significance of the literary mode extends beyond its themes to its formal innovations. The Postcolonial Gothic employs narrative strategies that mirror its political commitments. Fragmented narratives resist linear historiography. Linguistic hybridity challenges colonial language hierarchies. Character development reclaims monstrosity as a site of resistance. These formal qualities align with what my previous work identified as essential characteristics of trauma literature. Conventional forms break to represent fractured experiences. New aesthetic strategies emerge to articulate unspeakable violence.

The paper unfolds through four interconnected sections. First, I establish the theoretical foundations of the Postcolonial Gothic. I draw on Avery Gordon's work on haunting and Homi Bhabha's concept of the unhomely to develop a framework for understanding how the mode spatializes historical trauma. Second, I examine James's *The Book of Night Women* as a paradigmatic example. The novel renders visible the brutal realities of plantation slavery and the resistant agency that emerged within the system. Third, I analyze Awad's *Bunny* as a contemporary iteration. The novel exposes how neo-colonial power operates through cultural appropriation and institutional assimilation. Finally, I consider the broader implications of the Postcolonial Gothic as a critical tool for confronting ongoing legacies of colonial violence in the twenty-first century.

The Postcolonial Gothic gives narrative form to what remains unresolved in the colonial encounter. It performs what postcolonial scholar Michael Rothberg calls "multidirectional memory." The concept connects disparate historical traumas through their shared patterns of violence and resistance. The mode creates a "spectral historiography" that challenges official accounts and amplifies silenced voices.

2. Theoretical Foundations: Haunting and Resistance

The Postcolonial Gothic intervenes significantly in how we understand the relationship between history, trauma, and narrative form. At its core, the mode reconceptualizes haunting as a political rather than supernatural phenomenon. Sociologist Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* provides a foundation for such an approach. Gordon treats ghosts as social figures that manifest historical erasures and systemic violence. She describes them as "the seething presence of what appears to be not there." In Gordon's framework, spectral presences are not metaphorical embellishments. They represent real social forces that continue to shape contemporary experience despite their erasure from historical records.

Such an understanding of haunting builds on my previous research on trauma in African American literature, particularly my analysis of Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. In that work, I examined how the Corregidora women's mandate to "make generations" constituted a strategy of resistant remembrance. The Postcolonial Gothic amplifies the strategy from the familial to the cultural scale. It creates "archival hauntings" that insist on the presence of what official histories have tried to erase. The ghosts in these narratives give form to "traumatic rememory." Traumatic rememory is the persistent return of unacknowledged historical trauma that disrupts present consciousness and demands witness.

Homi Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" provides another foundation for understanding the Postcolonial Gothic's spatial politics. Bhabha defines the unhomely as "the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world." The unhomely emerges when the repressed violence of public history erupts into intimate domestic space. The Postcolonial Gothic literalizes Bhabha's concept through its settings. The plantation in James's novel and the academic institution in Awad's work become uncanny spaces where private and public violence converge. These settings materialize the psychological dislocation I previously analyzed in *Corregidora*. The Black female body becomes a territory marked by historical violation. The unhomely is not merely a psychological state. It is a physical environment saturated with historical violence.

The theoretical framework of the Postcolonial Gothic also engages with cultural theorist Édouard Glissant's "right to opacity." The right to opacity is the refusal to make oneself transparent and comprehensible to the colonial gaze. Glissant's concept helps explain the mode's strategic use of narrative complexity, linguistic hybridity, and representational resistance. The Postcolonial Gothic often employs "difficult forms." These are narrative strategies that resist easy consumption and interpretation. They mirror the complexity of colonial trauma itself. Such formal resistance constitutes what postcolonial scholar Françoise Lionnet describes as "aesthetic hybridity." The mixing of cultural forms becomes a method of political critique.

The Postcolonial Gothic's reclamation of monstrosity intervenes significantly in understanding agency under extreme oppression. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial theories of the abject, the mode transforms what Julia Kristeva identifies as the "monstrous-feminine" into a site of political resistance. The monstrous figures in these narratives embody the strategic reappropriation of dehumanizing labels. Characters like James's Lilith embrace hybridity and deformation. They transform the colonial gaze's objectification into sources of agency and power. Such a reclamation aligns with Jamaican writer Sylvia Wynter's discussion of the struggle over "the definition of the human." Wynter's concern is central to postcolonial literature, and the Gothic mode addresses it well.

The theoretical underpinnings also engage with anthropologist Johannes Fabian's "denial of coevalness." Fabian's concept describes the colonial strategy of positioning colonized peoples in a different temporal frame, as primitive or backward. The Gothic mode, with its temporal disruptions and hauntings from the past, becomes an ideal vehicle for challenging Fabian's denial. Cultural theorist Hal Foster discusses the "archival impulse" in contemporary art and writing. Artists and writers use historical materials to criticize present conditions. The Postcolonial Gothic performs a similar function. It uses haunting to insist on the contemporaneity of colonial history and its ongoing effects.

The concept of "spectrality" in the Postcolonial Gothic draws on Jacques Derrida's notion of "hauntology." Hauntology is the idea that being is constituted by what is absent or lost. However, where Derrida's formulation tends toward the philosophical, the Postcolonial Gothic grounds hauntology in specific historical traumas. Literary scholar Stephen Slemon describes the "unsettling settlement" of colonial spaces. Supposedly settled histories continue to generate disruptive returns. The spectral becomes what cultural geographer Karen Till calls a "wound in the city" or landscape. The wound is a site where historical trauma remains palpably present despite attempts to cover it over.

Finally, the Postcolonial Gothic engages with decolonial theorist Walter Mignolo's "epistemic disobedience." Epistemic disobedience is the refusal of colonial ways of knowing and the creation of alternative epistemologies. The narrative strategies of the Postcolonial Gothic—fragmentation, hybridity, embrace of the irrational—constitute a form of epistemic disobedience. They challenge the linear, rationalist narratives of colonial historiography. Such a commitment aligns with what my previous work identified as essential to trauma literature: the creation of new forms of knowledge that can accommodate what conventional frameworks exclude.

3. Historical Trauma and Spectral Archives: Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women*

Marlon James's *The Book of Night Women* is a monumental achievement in the Postcolonial Gothic tradition. It offers a searing portrayal of Jamaican plantation society. The novel fundamentally reworks Gothic conventions to expose the brutal logic of slavery and the resistant agency it generated. It exemplifies the core concerns of the Postcolonial Gothic: the spatialization of historical trauma, the reclamation of monstrosity as resistance, and the creation of "spectral historiography" against official amnesia.

The novel renders the Jamaican plantation as a sentient archive of suffering. The plantation as archive is one of James's most powerful Gothic innovations. James portrays the Montpelier estate not merely as a setting but as a character. It is a traumatized landscape that remembers every atrocity committed upon it. The cane fields "whisper with the ghosts of past insurrections." The very soil seems to absorb the blood and pain of the enslaved. The plantation as sentient archive aligns with "traumatic topography." These are physical spaces that bear the imprint of historical violence. They

actively reproduce psychological injury across generations. James's plantation becomes what cultural geographer Derek Gregory calls a "colonial present." Past and present violence coexist in palpable tension.

The novel's protagonist, Lilith, embodies the Postcolonial Gothic's strategic reclamation of monstrosity. Born into slavery and marked as "other" by her green eyes, she develops into a figure of terrifying power and agency. Her green eyes symbolize the sexual violence that underpins the plantation system. James compels readers to understand her monstrosity not as innate evil but as a logical response to a monstrous institution. Her capacity for violence, her emotional detachment, and her eventual leadership of a slave rebellion all represent the transformation of trauma into resistant agency. Like Ursa in Jones's *Corregidora*, Lilith turns the dehumanizing logic of slavery back upon itself. She becomes what the system fears most: the rebellious slave who refuses to accept her commodification.

James's narrative technique demonstrates the Postcolonial Gothic's formal innovations. The novel is written in deeply creolized English. It incorporates Jamaican patois, African linguistic structures, and the rhythms of oral storytelling. James's linguistic hybridity performs what linguist Mikhail Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia." Multiple linguistic consciousnesses coexist within a single text. However, in James's hands, heteroglossia becomes more than a stylistic choice. It constitutes "spectral discourse." Spectral discourse is a language that haunts standard English with the echoes of suppressed voices and alternative ways of knowing. The narrative voice itself becomes a ghost that speaks from the margins of linguistic respectability. It challenges the colonial hierarchy of languages.

The novel's treatment of haunting extends beyond the metaphorical. It creates a "spectral economy" of slavery. The ghosts of murdered slaves—the "night women" of the title—form a chorus. They comment on the action, influence the living characters, and ensure that no atrocity is forgotten. The night women represent what Avery Gordon describes as "social haunting." Social haunting is the presence of what has been disappeared from official history but continues to shape social relations. The night women function as a collective unconscious of the plantation. They preserve memories too painful for individual consciousness to bear.

James's depiction of the slave rebellion led by the night women is the novel's most dramatic engagement with Gothic conventions. The rebellion transforms the Gothic trope of the monstrous uprising into a political act of historical reclamation. The violence of the rebellion is graphic and terrifying. Yet it represents what political theorist Frantz Fanon identified as the "cleansing force" of revolutionary violence. Revolutionary violence is the necessary destruction of the colonial world and its dehumanizing logic. James does not shy away from portraying the horror of the violence. But he contextualizes it within the greater horror of the system that produced it. James's contextualization challenges what postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak calls the "epistemic violence" of colonial representation. Colonial discourses typically either sanitize or sensationalize resistance.

The novel's ending offers a complex meditation on the possibilities of freedom within the constraints of historical trauma. Lilith's survival and the partial success of the rebellion suggest what cultural theorist Édouard Glissant terms "a new and original dimension" of human possibility emerging from the "non-history" of slavery. Yet James refuses any easy resolution. He acknowledges that historical trauma leaves wounds that cannot be fully healed. The novel's conclusion maintains what literary scholar Saidiya Hartman calls the "burdened individuality" of the formerly enslaved. Freedom remains haunted by the history of bondage.

Through its sophisticated engagement with Gothic conventions, *The Book of Night Women* renders visible what conventional historiography has obscured. James gives narrative form to what historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot identifies as the "silences" in the historical record. These silences are the systematic erasures of slave agency and resistance. The novel creates what cultural theorist Paul Gilroy might call a "counterculture of modernity." It challenges the progressive narratives of Western history from the perspective of those who were supposedly its objects rather than its subjects.

4. Neo-Colonial Hauntings in the Academy: Mona Awad's *Bunny*

Mona Awad's *Bunny* is a fascinating contemporary iteration of the Postcolonial Gothic. It transposes critical conventions from the historical plantation to the seemingly benign space of contemporary academia. The novel exposes how neo-colonial power operates through cultural appropriation, institutional assimilation, and the "aestheticization of difference" within elite educational spaces. Through its satirical Gothic approach, *Bunny* demonstrates the continued relevance of Postcolonial Gothic strategies. These strategies critique contemporary forms of power that maintain colonial patterns under new guises.

The novel's setting in the MFA program at fictional Warren University establishes what Homi Bhabha would recognize as an "unhomely" space. The environment appears familiar and progressive but conceals violent appropriative dynamics. The program has an overwhelmingly white, wealthy student body (the "Bunnies"). It includes token scholarship students like the protagonist Samantha. Warren University's structure embodies what critical race theorist Sara Ahmed identifies as the "phenomenology of whiteness." Institutional spaces become oriented around white bodies and experiences while maintaining a discourse of diversity and inclusion. The Bunnies' bizarre jargon, their consumption of grotesque cupcakes, and their writing about "violence and feathers and damsels and boys with antlers" all represent the aestheticization of trauma. Real suffering is transformed into consumable literary products.

Samantha's position as an outsider within the space mirrors the "unhomely" experience of the marginalized subject. She is simultaneously inside and outside dominant culture. Her working-class background and her "dark, gritty" writing mark her as different. The Bunnies find her difference simultaneously fascinating and threatening. Samantha's tokenization exemplifies what postcolonial scholar Rey Chow describes as the "protestant ethnic" syndrome. Marginalized figures are expected to perform their ethnicity or class difference for the consumption of the dominant culture. Samantha's gradual assimilation into the Bunnies' hive mind represents the psychological violence of institutional incorporation. Marginalized subjects must often erase themselves to survive within hegemonic spaces.

The novel's central Gothic conceit is powerful. The Bunnies ritualistically create and destroy "Hybrids" in their secret workshop sessions. The ritual provides an allegory for neo-colonial patterns of cultural appropriation. These Hybrids are stitched together from the Bunnies' collective fantasies. They represent the "commodification of otherness." Difference becomes raw material for creative production within neoliberal institutions. The Bunnies violently dismember their creations after brief admiration. The dismemberment mirrors what critical theorist Walter Benjamin might call the "aestheticization of politics." Human difference is transformed into spectacle that can be consumed and discarded. Awad's dynamic extends my analysis of commodification in *Corregidora* to contemporary cultural economies. The logic of ownership and disposal continues to operate in new contexts.

Awad's use of satirical Gothic enables what literary scholar Linda Hutcheon calls "complicitous critique." Complicitous critique operates from within the conventions it examines. The novel's exaggerated portrayal of academic pretension and its grotesque depiction of the Bunnies' rituals create the "satirical uncanny." The satirical uncanny makes the familiar strange to expose its underlying violence. Awad's approach allows her to demonstrate what cultural theorist Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism." Institutions like academia inspire attachment to fantasies that ultimately work against subjects' best interests.

The novel's exploration of psychological fragmentation under institutional pressure is a key contribution to the Postcolonial Gothic's concern with identity formation. Samantha's gradual loss of self and merging with the Bunnies' collective consciousness dramatizes the "dissociative" effects of systemic oppression. The doppelgänger motif emerges as Samantha becomes increasingly indistinguishable from the Bunnies. The motif embodies what psychoanalytic theorist Franz Fanon described as the "epidermalization" of inferiority. Colonial hierarchies are internalized, leading to self-alienation. Awad's narrative strategy makes visible what is often invisible in contemporary institutional life: the psychic costs of assimilation.

Awad's linguistic innovations develop the Postcolonial Gothic's tradition of formal resistance. The Bunnies' bizarre vernacular is a mixture of infantilized jargon, academic buzzwords, and consumerist references. The vernacular creates "neoliberal Gothic." The language reveals the hollow core of contemporary institutional discourse. Samantha's struggle to maintain her own voice against linguistic colonization mirrors what postcolonial writers have long identified as the struggle over language itself. The novel demonstrates what linguist Norman Fairclough calls the "technologization of discourse." Institutional language works to shape subjectivities and maintain power relations.

The novel's conclusion offers complex meditation on agency within neo-colonial institutions. Samantha ultimately destroys the Bunnies' system from within. Unlike the collective rebellion in James's novel, Samantha's resistance remains individual and ambiguous. Her resistance reflects what cultural theorist Mark Fisher identifies as the difficulty of imagining alternatives within late capitalism's "business ontology." The ending maintains what my trauma studies research has consistently found. Resistance in contemporary contexts is often partial, compromised, and psychologically costly. Awad's nuanced portrayal avoids what postcolonial scholar Vijay Prashad criticizes as the "romance of resistance." Yet it still affirms the possibility of agency.

Through its sophisticated adaptation of Gothic conventions to the academic setting, *Bunny* demonstrates the Postcolonial Gothic's continued relevance for critiquing contemporary power structures. The novel shows what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu identifies as how institutions function as "fields of cultural production" that reproduce social hierarchies through seemingly neutral practices. By exposing the neo-colonial dynamics of elite education, Awad extends the Postcolonial Gothic's critique into the twenty-first century. Colonial patterns persist in new institutional forms.

5. Conclusion: Spectral Futures and the Ethics of Haunting

This article has demonstrated that the Postcolonial Gothic constitutes far more than a generic variation within horror fiction. Through its strategic deployment of Gothic conventions—spectral presences, temporal disruption, and affective unease—this mode performs essential epistemological work, rendering visible the continuities between colonial violence and contemporary structures of power. The analyses of James's *The Book of Night Women* and Awad's *Bunny* have illuminated how contemporary practitioners mobilize Gothic aesthetics to expose what Trouillot identifies as the systematic production of historical silences—those deliberate occlusions that enable dominant narratives of progress and modernity.

The formal innovations characteristic of Postcolonial Gothic texts—their resistance to linear temporality, their incorporation of heterogeneous linguistic and cultural registers, their refusal of narrative closure—emerge not as aesthetic experiments but as necessary responses to the temporal paradoxes of colonial trauma. These narrative strategies acknowledge what this article has termed the "unfinished business" of empire: the recognition that colonial violence persists not as historical residue but as active presence, demanding ethical engagement rather than therapeutic resolution.

As the Postcolonial Gothic evolves to address emergent global crises—ecological catastrophe, digital surveillance, forced displacement—it reveals these ostensibly contemporary phenomena as iterations of ongoing colonial processes. The haunted spaces examined throughout this article—from plantation to university, from archive to algorithm—constitute what might be recognized as a single, continuous geography of empire. This recognition demands understanding of the Postcolonial Gothic not merely as a mode of representation but as a form of what Avery Gordon calls "transformative recognition": the capacity to perceive present injustices as historically constituted and therefore changeable.

The Gothic has always functioned as modernity's unconscious, housing those anxieties and contradictions that rational discourse cannot accommodate. The Postcolonial Gothic performs a more specific operation: it exposes modernity's foundational disavowal of its colonial genesis. In granting narrative agency to spectral voices, writers like James and Awad engage in what amounts to a decolonial praxis—not offering false reconciliation but insisting on sustained

dialogue with historical violence. These texts propose that spectral presences will persist, and indeed must persist, until the material conditions that produced them are fundamentally transformed.

The significance of the Postcolonial Gothic extends beyond its themes to its methodological innovations. By repurposing Gothic conventions for political critique, the mode creates what cultural theorist Mieke Bal calls "theoretical objects." These texts not only represent social realities but also generate new ways of understanding them. The Postcolonial Gothic's characteristic features constitute a distinct literary methodology for confronting historical violence. It spatializes trauma through haunted landscapes. It reclaims monstrosity as resistance. It employs formal hybridity as epistemic disobedience.

The comparative analysis of James's and Awad's novels reveals the Postcolonial Gothic's remarkable range and adaptability. James works within historical fiction to expose the brutal realities of plantation slavery. Awad employs satirical horror to critique contemporary academic institutions. Despite their generic and historical differences, both authors demonstrate the Postcolonial Gothic's capacity to expose what political theorist Achille Mbembe identifies as the "necropolitical" dimensions of power. Certain populations are subjected to what he calls "death-worlds" while others enjoy the privileges of full humanity.

The Postcolonial Gothic's intervention in contemporary cultural discourse takes on particular urgency in what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai terms the "global now." The global now is a historical moment characterized by both unprecedented connectivity and persistent inequality. In Appadurai's context, the mode's ability to connect disparate historical traumas through their shared patterns of violence and resistance represents what Michael Rothberg calls "multidirectional memory." Multidirectional memory is a form of remembrance that rejects competitive victimhood in favor of solidarity across different experiences of oppression.

The continued evolution of the Postcolonial Gothic suggests its importance for addressing emerging forms of power in the twenty-first century. Writers adapt its conventions to critique everything from digital capitalism to environmental devastation. The mode demonstrates its essential characteristic: the ability to make visible the ghostly presence of colonial patterns within contemporary systems. The mode's adaptability confirms what cultural theorist Mark Fisher argued about the Gothic's unique capacity to articulate the "weird" and "eerie" qualities of contemporary life. There is a sense that familiar spaces are haunted by strange forces that remain just beyond comprehension.

Postcolonial Gothic is not merely a literary trend. It is a crucial methodological approach for understanding how history continues to shape the present. By giving narrative form to what remains unresolved in the colonial encounter, the mode performs essential cultural work. It complements and extends scholarly efforts in postcolonial studies, trauma theory, and critical race studies. The novels of James and Awad, along with the growing body of work in the mode, demonstrate literature's unique capacity. Literature can articulate what conventional discourse cannot accommodate. It articulates the spectral presence of historical violence, the complex agency of the marginalized, and the persistent hope for more just futures. As the legacies of colonialism continue to shape our world in increasingly complex ways, the Postcolonial Gothic promises to remain an essential tool for critical understanding and cultural resistance. The conversation with our ghosts has only just begun.

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