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Abstract: This study focuses on the figure of Ayesha, the immortal Queen of Henry Rider Haggard's *She: A History of Adventure*, to configure her authority as an echo of the New Woman, the proto-feminist figure of the early twentieth century. Such relation is partly harmed, however, by the fact that she was conceived by a male author and presented through a male narrator. In that regard, the text analyses how Holly, the narrator, is torn between utter devotion and fear, leading him to vainly attempt to omit Ayesha and other female figures from the narrative. Within this tension, the present work discusses the figure of Ayesha also in relation to nineteenth-century tropes and female stock characters. As a conclusion, we will be able to see how significant is to analyse female characters from a great variety of sources, not only from women's writings.

Keywords: Haggard, New Woman, fin de siècle, proto-feminism, male narrator, misogyny.

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Ayesha Unbound: The Construction of Female Power through Male Narrative in H. Rider Haggard's *She*

0. Introduction

She: A History of Adventure, a novel by Henry Rider Haggard (1856–1925), was first serialized between 1886 and 1887 and, from the first moment, it became a very prominent book among readers. This caused frustration to Haggard, who saw one of his earliest works became one of the most acclaimed ones along with *King Solomon's Mines*. But despite its

great popularity, *She* was not able to enter the literary canon, probably because H. Rider Haggard is remembered, as Henry Miller argues, as a “writer of boy’s books” (84). In spite of this fact, *She* became part of nineteenth-century collective consciousness, and the best example of this situation is represented by Doctor Sigmund Freud’s recommendation of the novel, commenting in *The Interpretation of Dreams* that *She* is a “strange book, but full of hidden meaning” (317) and also described a dream he had related to the final chapters of the novel (318).

She is an adventure novel set in Africa. The two main characters, Leo Vincey and Horace Holly, two English gentlemen, decide to explore Africa after reading several documents left by Leo’s father about an immortal woman that will teach them apropos the secret of life. After several misadventures during their journey, they finally are able to meet the woman, Ayesha, whom the natives call “*She-who-must-be-obeyed*”. Ayesha claims that Leo is her former lover, Kallikrates, reincarnated and after befriending Holly she decides to take both to *the pillar of life*, the place where she became immortal. But instead of turning his lover immortal, she enters the pillar a second time to show him that the procedure is safe and starts a process of reverse evolution. Such a process leads to her death and the two shocked gentlemen decide to come back without trying to enter the pillar of life.

This study will be centred in the figure of the all-powerful Ayesha to configure her authority as a New Woman, considering that she was conceived by a male author and described by a male narrator. In the first section of this work, the main characteristics of the text will be discussed in relation to other nineteenth-century novels to establish how *She* differs from other examples of the literary canon. In the second section, the disappearance of women will be analysed to understand the importance of Ayesha and how the male narrator is not able to omit her. After that, Ayesha’s relationship with the fantastic and real world would enable us to configure her personality against the male narrator and this section will be concluded by discussing how she interacts with other main characters of the novel. As a conclusion we will be able to see how significant is to analyse female characters from a great variety of sources, not only from women’s writings.

1. *She* and the Fin de Siècle

1.1. Africa and fantastic fiction.

Readers and critics can easily place *She* as a late Victorian novel due to its years of serialization. Moreover, the fact that it was serialized could easily explain why the novel became so famous among readers, as serialized publications were the main source of entertainment for entire middle class families. Simultaneously, considering that adventure novels could keep the readers in suspense for several months, they were also very profitable for writers and publishers. *She* may not look similar to other canonical works of the fin de siècle such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), by Oscar Wilde, but this difference results from its genuine disguise as far as the topics addressed in the novel fit the new decadent movement that was taking place in Great Britain. In particular, we can trace two concerns that are repeated in both novels: beauty and immortality. The disguise will be, then, the setting: most decadent novels take place in Great Britain to show how the Victorian morals are crumbling down, whereas *She* takes us to the heart of Africa, the place where the Other

lives and also an extension of the great British empire. Some historians have seen this change of setting as no more than late Victorian colonization and as some sort of imperialist propaganda for schoolboys, leaving Rider Haggard as a "defender of the flag" (Etherington 72). Although the study of imperialist imagery in the novel could be of great interest, this will not be the aim of the present work, given that it has been already studied extensively; nevertheless, it will be important to take into account the setting while we try to configure Ayesha's figure.

While reading the novel, one could easily find similarities with *Heart of Darkness* (1899), by Joseph Conrad, because both texts reflect an image of Africa that can be terrifying for the average English gentleman. But while Conrad keeps his novel more realistic, depicting the cruelty and rapacity of white colonizers, Haggard decides to enter the realm of the fantastic. Haggard, who was a professional writer, decided to earn money through thrilling adventure novels, and exploiting far away settings was not enough. The realistic Victorian novel was not to Haggard's liking, so he decided to use romance fictions to "answer the call of a weary public that yearns for books to make them forget, to refresh them, to occupy minds jaded with the toil and emptiness and vexation of our competitive existence" (Arata 182). Haggard's politics towards fantastic fiction could easily explain why this genre was a great best-seller in his times, but it will not help us to fully understand Ayesha's figure. If the romance fiction was made to "forget" and "refresh" how could it bring nightmares to prominent figures such as Sigmund Freud? To answer this question we will not follow what Haggard has to tell us about Ayesha; even though sometimes knowing an author's response to his own work might be interesting, in this case it will be useless for the further analysis of "*She-who-must-be-obeyed*" and her construction as a prominent nineteenth-century character. Therefore, the next sections of this work will analyse the impact of fantastic features on Ayesha instead of treating these features as an escape from realism, so that it will be impossible to get trapped in the labels "imperialist propaganda" and "schoolboy's romance fiction".

The importance of Africa as a faraway setting to protect the reader's world has been settled: traveling to the world of the Other is not always a real and tangible journey; while traveling to the unknown, the adventurer also encounters unknown faces within his own personality, very much in the fashion of *Heart of Darkness*, as previously mentioned (Etherington 73). But the unknown world is not enough to unleash the taboos and deepest fears of the individual since it is still too near home; Africa is remote, but it exists: it can come and haunt reality as the individual knows it. Romance fiction enters the scenario in this precise moment to diminish the power of the unknown; it is unknown but the individual considers it not real, thus not being menacing anymore. In this mirror of reality, or rather the reality that the reader apprehends, taboos can be unleashed, making Ayesha powerful again and not just refreshing romance fiction. The relation between the fantastic and the real will be later discussed in more depth when analysing the mobilization of the all-powerful Queen into other realms.

1.2. The feminine figure and male violence

During the fin de siècle new figures appeared while others consolidated such as the *femme fatale*, the fallen woman¹ and the New Woman, challenging what was the stereotypical vision of woman in the nineteenth century, the Angel in the House. To introduce this topic we will describe the two most important prototypes for Ayesha: the *femme fatale* and the New Woman. The *femme fatale* was not only popular in nineteenth century England but in France as well, since they named the concept that will be later used worldwide. But the *femme fatale* was not born in the nineteenth century. Because they were considered in France as “daughters of Eve” (Moran 226), we can see how this figure traces back to the Bible and is related to temptation and the corruption of men. Continuing with the biblical sources, it is important to mention Salomé, another clear *femme fatale* used by Wilde in his homonymous play, highlighting the fascination this figure had in the collective imagination of the fin de siècle. The New Woman, although menacing for men as well, is slightly different. Sara Grand was the first woman to use this term in an article in the 1894 issue of the North American Review to refer to a new generation of young women who opposed the patriarchal system by choosing more masculine clothes and by declining their mother-figure in the family (Grand 274-275) and who generally were well educated (Durán). To label Ayesha with one of these new categories could be considered an error; to limit the figure of *She-who-must-be-obeyed* will be to reduce her power in the narrative and also to not analyse properly her figure. Nevertheless, it is interesting to observe how Ayesha’s character takes what it is convenient for her in order to keep evolving, to remain immortal.

The most prominent forces than blend in Ayesha’s personality are easy to identify; she can be “an angelically chaste woman with monstrous powers”, as well as a “passionate woman with angelic charms” (Gilbert and Gubar 6). It is due to the “angelically chaste” and “angelic charms” that Ayesha is able to maintain somehow the portrayal of women that was already known to the public, which prompts her fictionality to fade away and makes appear in the wilderness of Africa the Victorian lady that was the source of the public’s devotion, for instance, Laura Fairlie from *The Woman in White* (1860) by Wilkie Collins. Although *She* and *The Woman in White* are very different novels, they share some similarities such as being published periodically and composed for the entertainment of the public. Similarly, though Ayesha and Laura Fairlie are very different, it is interesting to highlight the fact that both women are subject to a male narrator that keeps a semblance of truthfulness. In *The Woman in White*, the narrator tries to make his story believable, and Holly tries to achieve the same as well, but he encounters an obstacle: Ayesha. Female protagonists were often developed by female writers such as the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen, George Eliot, etc., hence they have a clear importance in the narrative. But although the significance of Ayesha is unquestionable –she names the whole novel– Holly tries to diminish her power.

The other side of Ayesha is the one unknown to readers, hence more fantastic. The “monstrous powers” previously mentioned are a fictionalization of the real powers that the New Woman had in society, and while they were not like Ayesha’s ‘magical’ powers, such as

¹ The “fallen woman” is a key trope in Victorian society due to the rise of prostitution in cities. Despite this fact, it will not be of interest towards Ayesha’s analysis as far as “fallen women” were those considered to have given in pleasure and who lived in sin (Lee), while Ayesha has remained a virgin. Also, they were usually criticized by society or sympathized by feminist groups, who tried to better their working conditions (Walkowitz 545).

the blast that left three white fingers in Ustane's hair (Rider Haggard 186), they had the potential of making a change in society. The term magical has been written between inverted commas as Ayesha denies the existence of magic and names it "fiction of ignorance" (Rider Haggard 140). In any case, the power of Ayesha will be further analysed when explaining her connection to nature. The "passionate woman" mentioned by Gilbert and Gubar is more difficult to categorize than the powers she has, as passion is usually associated with the concept of love by the general public. Ayesha has a passionate love for Kallikrates in consideration of the Oxford English dictionary's definition of passion as "any strong, controlling, or overpowering emotion, as desire, hate, fear, etc." ("Passion") The infatuation Ayesha displays in the novel keeps her waiting for his lover for centuries, but beyond the relationship with Kallikrates Ayesha's greatest passion is world domination, transforming her into an object of fear for the average Victorian gentleman, who sees how this *femme fatale* could ruin humankind. It is not difficult to understand how Ayesha could achieve this: by establishing her as a *femme fatale*, the reader could be able to identify her with other mythical figures such as the Greek Sirens, Helen of Troy, Delilah and the already mentioned Salomé. These women were known to have ruin the lives of men, so a *femme fatale* ruling as a queen would be able to ruin an entire (patriarchal) society.

To analyse Ayesha's development through the novel is very important to take into account how the narration is never made from the point of view of a woman, to the extent that even our narrator, Holly, claims that "[they] never had the advantage of a lady's opinion of Ayesha" (Rider Haggard 216). After this statement, he makes the attempt to predict women's thoughts regarding the topic: "but I think it is quite possible that she would have regarded the Queen with dislike, would have expressed her disapproval in some more or less pointed manner" (Rider Haggard 216). The omission of a female perspective and the fact that he is able to state the reaction based on preconceptions can be determined on how women were regarded in Victorian society:

Nineteenth-century scientists and thinkers, with rare exceptions, were busily engaged in providing that women were inferior to men. Women, it was alleged, had smaller brains than men, were much less intelligent, became more emotional and unstable in stressful situations, were flighty, weakly creatures, and so drearily on. In a crisis, it was asserted, one could always depend upon women to swoon or become otherwise helpless; they were hysterical and sickly creatures who suffered from the "vapors," with little judgment and less sense; they could not be entrusted with the handling of money; and as for the world outside, there they could be employed only at the most menial and routine tasks, as servants, nannies, or if they were adequately trained, as governesses. (Montagu 53)

Male narration rotated around these ideas and thus feminine characters were treated as fragile objects of admiration. The main reason of admiration was their beauty, as any other characteristic was not positive, and even this quality was menacing to men. Female beauty could be treated as the trigger of male desire that was considered, in general, "inherent and spontaneous" (Verhoeven 31). According to a *Westminster Review* of 1850,

although an aggressive attitude in courtship was essential in the process of courtship (Verhoeven 31), being led by your sexual impulses was not acceptable for men. They were considered to be superior to women in this aspect: "Doctors assumed that men were equipped with a set of defense mechanisms [towards satyriasis]², some of them innate, others a function of their social role. Women, in contrast, were at the mercy of their biological impulses and as a consequence more susceptible to nymphomania."³ (Verhoeven 34) In this way men create society, devaluating women and protecting themselves by believing in their own superiority and creating female figures with "mysterious or dangerous qualities", like their sexuality, that needed to be hunted and destroyed (Montagu 82).

This male active role versus female passivity was one of the main causes of the myth of male violence that will be reflected in Victorian narratives, sometimes more subtle than others as in the case of *She*. It is no coincidence that one year after the publication of the novel, the murders of Jack the Ripper took place, which could be regarded as the culmination of the myth of male violence. The events of 1888 have been said to "bore an uncanny resemblance to the literature of the fantastic" as well as to modern fantasy due to the element of transgression (Walkowitz 550). These events also exploited female terror and established a common vocabulary and iconography for the myth of male violence that was usually represented more subtly, but of equal significance to the discussion of Ayesha's figure. Jack the Ripper might have seemed like a gruesome parody of Haggard's adventurers learning the secret of life through women; while Holly and Leo entered Ayesha's world, the ripper slayed women extracting from their bodies one of the main feminine elements, the uterus (Gilbert and Gubar 47-48). Throughout the next section, this work will discuss the absence of women, and more specifically of Ayesha, during the novel and the violence in Holly's discourse. Even though it cannot be wholly compared with the physical violence of Jack the Ripper's murders, it is interesting to observe how Haggard's novel segregates both genders as the murders did with the social space in Great Britain.

2. Ayesha's presence in the narrative

2.1. The vanishing of women

When a reader starts *She* the first preconceived thought in his/her mind would be the importance of women in the novel thanks to the female pronoun that names the whole narrative. But instead of dealing with a prominent "She" from the very beginning –surely a female protagonist– the Queen Ayesha does not appear until chapter twelve and will not unveil her face until chapter thirteen. This fact could be just to preserve the mystery as long as possible. It is important to remember that the novel was serialized, so revealing the Queen's identity too early could trigger the reader's loss of interest. As Holly and Leo become hunters towards the mysterious woman that will show them the mystery of life, the woman could be considered their goal, a trophy; hence if they reach the goal too early in the

² Defined in the Oxford English dictionary as "Excessively great venereal desire in the male" ("satyriasis").

³ Defined in the Oxford English dictionary as "Uncontrollable or excessive sexual desire, spec. in a woman." ("nymphomania").

narrative there would be no speculations on her identity and no suspense. But Ayesha's disappearance from the novel is not the only one and probably not the most deliberate. In chapter two, Holly claims that "I would have no woman to lord it over me about the child, and steal his affections from me. The boy was old enough to do without female assistance" (Rider Haggard 26) and then he proceeds to hire a male caretaker for the young Leo. If Leo was old enough to manage without a woman, why is it necessary a male caretaker for him? The motherly figure is eliminated, opting instead for a male relationship very frequent in Victorian society, which was male dominated and whose public spaces, like public schools and clubs (Sinha 35), were designed for males, facilitating this sort of bonds. Although the gender of the caretaker of Leo is portrayed as trivial and the male is chosen for the reinforcement of a male society, the prejudices Holly holds against women are especially prominent at the beginning of the novel.

After the introduction, the first thing the reader is presented to is Horace Holly's ugliness; his physical appearance is similar to a monkey but Holly praises his own strength and intelligence. Afterwards, he describes his relationship with women, stating how they "hated the sight of [him]" and even that once a woman "call [him] a 'monster'" (Rider Haggard 17), as if trying to tell the reader that, despite his ugliness and animal appearance, women were not able to recall his positive aspects. He changes the topic after these statements to introduce Leo's father, so it is impossible to asseverate his opinion on women reacting to his ugliness; nevertheless, it is interesting to recall how the end of the chapter revolves around Leo's father, while the death of the mother while giving birth is barely mentioned. It is almost unreasonable to trust Holly's narration because Leo's father leaves a memory of the mother behind in chapter three, a photo under the title "my beloved wife" (Rider Haggard 33), so it is not likely to think that Leo's father would not have mentioned his beloved wife while talking about his son and his custody. To give so little importance to the motherly figure can be a sign of Holly's misogyny: he could have explained how men did not care so much about his appearance as women, but he prefers to focus on women's views of him as a "monster" without mentioning the perspective of other men about him. This focus on women may indicate that Holly is trying to look for female approbation and, when it does not take place, Holly flees from his insecurities by eliminating women from the narrative, especially the figure that gives life, a mother, in this case Leo's.

After eliminating women from Leo's infancy, however, it is impossible to erase from the narrative the figure of Amenartas. As Kallikrates' wife, she fled from Ayesha to save her live and the life of the child she was carrying. The first thing Leo encounters in the chest left by his father is a letter by him following Victorian conventions and leading his son to not believe the story as it may be "an idle fable, originating in the first place in a woman's disordered brain" (Rider Haggard 35). As has been previously mentioned, women were not to trust with important tasks, and Leo's father follows this trail of thought. To reinforce male order, not only does Leo receive the letter when he has reached manhood, but the presence of women is blatantly omitted. The genealogy is focused on the male ancestors of the family, giving a disproportionate amount of information to connect, not only the Vincey family but manhood in general, with truthfulness and history.

Amenartas is not the only woman who is almost omitted not only from the narrative but from history as well. Similarly, though Ayesha appears in the narration and has a voice, she is not incorporated into history due to her seclusion in the caves of Kôr. This enclosure makes Ayesha oblivious to history and thus fitting the Victorian perspective of women due to her distance to important historical events (Murphy 757). Holly plays an important role when talking to the queen, who seems to focus only in the development of Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Hebrews and Arabs, not asking for further information regarding, for example, Great Britain, where her visitors come from: "Is there still a Greece? [...] So! The Hebrews, are they yet at Jerusalem? [...] Herod! I know not Herod" (Rider Haggard 136-137). But Ayesha's interest in the ancient world is not the only transgression she makes towards the linear history proposed by patriarchy: she cannot die, hence she refuses to follow the linear order of life very much in the fashion of the New Woman and her refusal to follow the gender rules imposed by patriarchy (Murphy 763).

Hence, Ayesha's passivity does not come from her character but rather from her seclusion. She is not important to history because she has not taken part of it. Much in the fashion of *Sleeping Beauty*, Ayesha is awakened by love and the arrival of her lover. Even Holly acknowledges her awakening as something dangerous:

Ayesha locked up in her living tomb, waiting from age to age for the coming of her lover, worked but a small change in the order of the World. But Ayesha strong and happy in her love, clothed with immortal youth, godlike beauty and power, and the wisdom of the centuries, would have revolutionized society, and even perchance have changed the destinies of Mankind (Rider Haggard 258)

The woman asleep would resemble the dead woman, who was frequently represented not only in novels and poems but in paintings as well, for instance, by pre-Raphaelite painters such as John Everett Millais and his painting "Ophelia", which portrayed the homonymous Shakespeare's character drowned. The fact that male artists started to represent beautiful dead women more frequently could be explained by Edgar Allan Poe's famous quote in *The Philosophy of Composition*: "'And when,' I said, 'is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?' From what I have already explained at some length the answer here also is obvious- 'When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world.'" (Poe 201) The dead woman is the most poetic motif in the world as she is the peak of femininity for men: she becomes an object of display with no power to change the world or to oppose the order proposed by men. Then, it could be said that sleep or death for a woman can be "an antidote for her revolutionary potential" (Auerbach 42), and that is how Holly sees it: he is able to acknowledge that Ayesha does not follow the established order and that he will not manage to omit her as he did with Leo's mother.

2.2. Ayesha's mobilization between the realistic and the fantastic narrative

This work has already discussed why Holly is not able to suppress Ayesha from the narrative as she does not follow the natural order of life and represents a potential danger for him,

hence she is the only one able to decide when to not take part in the story. Now we will discuss how Ayesha moves between the two different narratives found in the novel: the realistic and the fantastic. As mentioned in the first part of this article, *She* is a romance novel with fantastic elements that were usually treated to devalue the novel; these fantastic elements are mainly Ayesha's magical powers considering that the journey towards Kôr, a fictional location, is thoroughly described very much like the descriptions found in travel literature and explorer's narratives.

The first thing Holly, as a narrator, does to convince the reader of the accuracy of the story is the meticulous description of the Vincey's genealogy, even attaching old documents in the third chapter "The Shard of Amenartas." The reader may not be able to read them, but it creates a sense of veracity. After that, Holly describes the journey thoroughly to encourage the reader to believe his story although the setting has changed from the familiar England to the exotic Africa. But not only does Holly take his time to describe the landscapes, he also gives up on his civilized ways to describe the encounter of the group with two lions; a description that "steps beyond the discourse of the natural scientist and tip over into a graphic enjoyment of the violence of Mother Nature" (Sinha 33). The lioness is easily killed by Leo, giving power to the English gentlemen who seem to be able to control the female wilderness, but before they can confront their equal, the male lion is killed by a crocodile. Instead of stepping aside and leaving the horrendous scene, the English gentlemen decide to stay and watch how the lion is tore apart:

The crocodile, whose head seemed to be a mass of gore, had got the lion's body in his iron jaws just above the hips, and was squeezing him and shaking him to and fro [...] The lion's head fell forward on the crocodile's back, and with an awful groan he died, and the crocodile, after standing for a minute motionless, slowly rolled over on to his side, his jaws still fixed across the carcasses of the lion, which we afterwards found he had bitten almost in halves. (Rider Haggard 69)

Giving away a little bit of their civilized ways to contemplate this gory sight does not bother Holly's conscience, and he even claims it to be a "wonderful and shocking sight, and one that I supposed few men have seen." (Rider Haggard 69) Both Holly and Leo are in Africa to hunt for the true story of the queen described by Amenartas, therefore, they become hunters, and to reach their destination they must conquer their environment first. They must describe nature, but they also have to take part in its cruelty by hunting the lioness and afterwards contemplating the death of the lion.

On the other hand, Ayesha, whose powers and immortality could be considered magical features, blurs the distinction between fiction and reality that Holly is trying to establish through his discourse. Even after Ayesha unveils herself in front of Holly and has a long conversation with him, he tries desperately to understand the secret behind her longevity through logic, giving a sense of otherness to her magic when he claims it to be "all the hocus-pocus that in Europe goes by the name of the supernatural." (Rider Haggard 146) By giving it such a ridiculous name and afterwards stating that Europeans give it a more scientific or accurate name, Holly is ridiculing and invalidating Ayesha's discourse.

The first encounter between Holly and Ayesha contains one of the most important statements made by Ayesha throughout the whole novel, as it describes accurately her relation towards nature and her so-called magic. After the queen shows the figure of Leo to Holly in her magic waters he cries out that it was magic, to which she responds: "Nay, nay; oh, Holly, it is no magic; that is a fiction of ignorance. There is no such thing as magic, though there is such a thing as a knowledge of the secrets of Nature" (Rider Haggard 140). This work has already established that Holly and Leo, the English gentlemen, go to Africa as hunters, trying to recreate the landscapes through discourse and taking part in what they consider to be the violence of Mother Nature. Yet Holly distrusts Ayesha's powers and even after discovering her little room dedicated to science, he is unable to recognize her as a scientist due to her primitive origin. That is the great difference between them: while Holly needs to organize the new world he is experiencing in Africa through his British conventions, Ayesha has a cooperative relationship with nature, since she willingly submits herself to nature and through experimentation reaches knowledge and, thus, immortality (Gold 312). She does not look for nature's secrets actively but rather she benefits from what nature has to offer. In contrast, Holly tries to understand nature using reason and common sense. And it is after this knowledge has been acquired that she becomes an active component that could change society. Her power can be seen in how Ayesha does not only change Leo, a passive character, but also Holly, a highly misogynous narrator, and that is why it could be understood that there are no boundaries to her charms. Ayesha's quest for knowledge resembles the New Woman's attitude towards knowledge; we have already discussed how Ayesha does not follow the patriarchal order when, thanks to her knowledge, she gained immortality. Having attained both, she now remains in celibacy and does not profess an interest in reproduction, like the women in the late 19th century and beginning of the 20th century who preferred education and emancipation over marriage and motherhood.

2.3. Ayesha versus the Other: Ustane, Leo and Holly as instruments towards the creation of a myth.

Despite the fact that Ayesha's relationship with nature is one of the most important to analyse, Holly's narrative is not able to understand the complex bond Ayesha has been able to establish with nature, and for the English gentleman is almost impossible to describe it using words. Holly is unable to depict the way Ayesha acquires knowledge through nature as for him is just magic, and he is so mesmerized by it that his attempts to understand nature through reason fail. Even Ayesha is unable to explain this in detail, as she keeps referring to how in nature there is only change, not death, but the manner in which she submits herself to nature remains a mystery. Hence, the final section of this article will deal with her attitude towards the other main characters of the novel: the narration will try to describe the queen's interaction with another woman and with the two protagonists, and how these relations are used to build her personality.

This work has already mentioned one of the most important women described in the novel, Amenartas, who is almost omitted from the narrative by the misogynous narrator Holly, who was also unable to omit another female character: Ustane. When the English expedition finally finds the Amahagger tribe, they are surprised by the condition of equality

that women of the tribe hold in relation with men, and in the tribe a woman kisses Leo in the customs of the land; if Leo accepts the kiss and kisses her back, they would be married. The woman who kisses Leo is called Ustane and although Holly accepts that she accompanies them in their journey, he does not seem to recognize the importance of her character. Ustane, like Ayesha, is an active character who is able to choose, while Leo remains passive. Both women choose him, yet he is unable to resist both of them, although in Ayesha's case it is not surprising given her supernatural beauty. It has been already mentioned that neither the narrative nor the characters have a female perspective of the ongoing events and the queen herself, based on Holly's subjective narration, but Ustane and Ayesha meet and confront each other in the novel. Curiously, Ustane will not criticize the queen once she has met her, even though the queen declares her intentions to gain Leo's affection.

When Ustane talks about Ayesha for the first time she cannot give judgment, "it was rumoured also that she was immortal, and had power over all things, but she, Ustane, could say nothing of it" (Rider Haggard 87). Nevertheless, she is able to transmit to the English gentlemen the most popular rumours about the queen: "What she believed was that the Queen chose a husband from time to time, and as soon as a female child was born this husband, who was never again seen, was put to death. Then the female child grew up and took the place of the Queen when its mother died, and had been buried in the great caves." (Rider Haggard 87) Although Holly and Leo might consider Ustane to be a primitive woman, she is able to give a reasonable explanation to the mystery of Ayesha's immortality, instead of claiming it to be magic and impossible as Holly does. And not only she attempts to give a logical explanation of the mystery, but she is the only character in the novel that confronts Ayesha, who eventually kills her for not following her orders. The act of killing Ustane could be considered Ayesha's violent jealousy. The queen does not show solidarity towards another brave woman, as there is no sisterhood in the novel, yet for Ayesha Ustane is not only a sexual rival but a threat to her empire: Leo is not just a love interest, but rather the queen's possession.

When Ayesha meets Leo and realizes that he is the reincarnation of her beloved Kallikrates she forces Ustane to leave him as she claims that "no other woman shall dwell in my Lord's thoughts; my empire shall be all my own." (Rider Haggard 183) Ayesha demonstrates to be an active character like Ustane by claiming Leo as her own, and although the English gentlemen went to Africa as hunters, in the end they found themselves to be hunted by the queen. Thanks to Ustane's boldness we can perceive the cruelty in the character of Ayesha, who first states that she does not rule her people by force, but by terror and that "[her] empire is that of the imagination." (Rider Haggard 161) She does not only scare her people but is true to her word by killing Ustane when she refuses to leave Leo. Ayesha mixes love and politics when his Lord's thoughts are presented as equal to her empire, and she must be violent and cruel in both aspects of her life to control them so that there would be no possibility of her being overthrown. She controls even the imagination of her subjects, if they are terrorized there is no possibility of rebellion, very much like a fascist leader.

Between these two powerful women who choose their destiny and die for their decisions, the two English gentlemen are unable to act as active agents and let destiny take

hold of their lives: Holly, as a scholar, decides to follow ancient documents although they do not seem a reliable source of information and Leo, the love interest of Ayesha, is absent most of the time from the narrative, and when he appears he is unable to be true to his word. When Ayesha kills Ustane he calls the queen 'murdress' and refuses to see her, but in the moment he lays eyes on her he is once more unable to resist to her charms. Gender roles are reversed when Ayesha controls the situation while Leo becomes an object of display resembling "many fictional Victorian girls" (Gold A67) whose only importance in fiction was being the object of love for the protagonist. The roles are reversed because Leo was the hunter in first place, displaying his masculinity when he kills a lioness, and although he does not kill Ayesha, he could have subdued her with his own beauty. Leo's appearance is of great importance to Holly, who describes it extensively in the first chapters of the novel yet Leo does not use it to subdue Ayesha. Leo loses his will, and this fact is of great importance as it shows the weakness of the English gentlemen against the queen, as they do not represent any kind of threat to her. As Ayesha acknowledges nature and thus is able to submit herself to it and benefit from it, she is also aware of the importance of beauty: "Beauty is like the lighting; it is lovely, but it destroys" (Rider Haggard 144). Leo's beauty does not surprise the queen, so it is not able to destroy her.

Finally, even the misogynous narrator will be controlled by Ayesha, and his narration will be subject to his devotion towards the queen. After Holly and Ayesha's first encounter the queen is reluctant to unveil herself: "If I show thee my face, perchance thou wouldst perish miserably also; perchance thou wouldst eat out thy heart in impotent desire; for know I am not for thee –I am for no man, save one, who hath been, but is not yet." (Rider Haggard 142) By forbidding the sight of Ayesha's face, she might resemble the Greek serpent-woman Medusa. In such interpretation, while Perseus was warned not to look at Medusa's face and was protected from doing so by Athena's shield, Holly looks into the queen's eyes and is forced to love her (Auerbach 8) even though he describes her beauty as 'evil'. When he falls in love inevitably with Ayesha, Holly will put an end to his status of hunter to become a prey for the queen, who does not show any interest in him.

3. Conclusion: Ayesha's death and immortality

To conclude this work it is very important to establish that after analysing how Ayesha is described by a male narrator the most prominent features to be taken into account are those which highlight a resemblance to the figure of the New Woman, which was gaining more significance with the arrival of the 20th century but that was usually relegated to women's writings rather than appearing in male narratives. Despite the aforementioned similarities, in the end Ayesha is not the typical New Woman due to several reasons. The fact that she appears in a romance novel written by a man, whose unreliable narrator is also a misogynist cannot but harm such relation. Likewise, Ayesha is not a standard British New Woman, since she is neither young nor has received a feminist education due to her confinement through the centuries in the caves of Kôr.

The male narrator of *She*, Holly, eliminates women from Leo's life deliberately and as this paper has already established, he even eliminates any veracity found in Amenartas' story just because she is a woman and, therefore, she cannot be entrusted with important

tasks, as it happened to women in Victorian society. Ayesha suffers the same erasure from history as Amenartas because she has been enclosed in the caves, yet at the same time this allows her to escape the linear and patriarchal order that history has defended and maintained. This fact relates her to the New Woman who does not want to follow the patriarchal order either. Other frequent topic in nineteenth century art, not only in literature, was the dead or asleep woman, who Ayesha also resembles until she is awoken by the coming of her lover. Once the queen is active she have the power to change society.

The refusal to follow patriarchal order is not the only characteristic of the New Woman present in Ayesha. The queen's thirst for knowledge and her interest in politics rather than in marriage and child-bearing make her very different from the prototypical women in the nineteenth-century novel and connect Ayesha to the new feminist movement of the twentieth-century. Queen Ayesha's personality is not only visible in her cooperative relationship with nature but also in her relationship with the other main characters of the novel. She does not profess sisterhood towards the other strong female character of the novel, Ustane. Ayesha connects love with politics, thus Leo is part of her property and Ustane a mere usurper. Leo, as the reincarnation of Kallikrates, is transformed from a hunter to an object of display, reversing the gender roles in the novel when Ayesha starts making the decisions, like a nineteenth-century male protagonist. Finally Ayesha's power is most clearly observed in the misogynous narrator, Holly, who changes from hunter to prey of the queen, being submitted to her will and her beauty.

A male narrative will try to diminish a powerful woman such as Ayesha, as we have seen, similarly to how women are omitted from history and narratives. Although, she is even ridiculed because of his supernatural powers, in the end she stands out as the most important character of the novel leaving the protagonists mourning her death. It is interesting to take into account that, although the male author is able to eliminate the danger she represents, it is not the male Victorian heroes who defeat her but she dies by her own will. Moreover, even after her death her power and influence remains: "Having once looked Ayesha in the eyes, we could not forget her for ever and ever while memory and identity remained" (Rider Haggard 262). Thus, the power of the New Woman cannot be easily eliminated as she does make a change in the other characters.

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