**Rewriting the Female Gothic in the Antipodes: Fiona Kidman’s *Mandarin Summer***

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Fiona Kidman’s reputation as a major New Zealand novelist of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is secure, but what is less certain is her place in the international canon, as a woman novelist who has changed “‘the tradition,’” in Gayle Greene’s understanding of this important shift (1). In her 1991 book, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition*, Greene selected for mention and study four transatlantic women writers – Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood – whose ventures into metafiction have “challenge[d] the cultural and literary tradition they [have] inherit[ed]” (2). In parenthesis, Greene defines metafiction as “fiction that includes within itself commentary on its own narrative conventions” (1). Not surprisingly, Kidman did not make the cut here, nor for that matter did any Antipodean writer. The reasons may be entirely innocent. Kidman was still establishing herself as a writer; there was, and there still is, a poverty of scholarly and critical evaluation of her work; moreover the global reputation of the transatlantic writers that Greene named could not be gainsaid in the eighties. However, a quarter of a century later, with a prolific output in fiction, as well as in poetry, non-fiction and drama, behind her, with her national reputation and popularity assured, and with numerous honours to her credit, including being made Dame Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit in 1997 for her services to literature, the time may have come for sustained critical attention to her work, particularly with reference to her feminist challenges to fictional tradition.

Most of Kidman’s early *oeuvre*,from her first novel *A Breed of Women* (1978) to *True Stars* (1990), has performed the typical act of feminist intervention by remaking inherited genres, literary forms and texts in order to reverse their entrenched sexual politics. In *A Breed of Women* and *Paddy’s Puzzle* (1983), she interrogates and subverts the female bildungsroman’s traditional investment in the marriage plot; in *Mandarin Summer* (1981), the Female Gothic is evidently her target for revision. In *True Stars* (1990), she develops a curious mutation of the female detective genre to provide a vehicle for political fiction that is critical of the New Right reforms of the eighties. In *The Book of Secrets* (1987), arguably her most accomplished work, she relies on female fictional testimonies to recuperate female genealogies and histories, and thus moderates the patriarchal bias of official colonial history. The gendering of colonial historiography through fictional strategies also dominates her much later novel, *The Captive Wife* (2005). The unrelenting objective of her fictional labours appears to be the refiguration of an androcentric national imaginary so as to include female ancestries and subjectivities. Notwithstanding the shifts in genre, often at the centre of each of her fictions is a vulnerable female protagonist who evades capture by patriarchal agents through her assertiveness, intelligence, and resilience. This act of self-rescue typically provides the implicit occasion for the self-conscious genesis of her novels, through modes of metafictional framing or self-reflexive begetting. In *Mandarin Summer*, the primary subject of this essay, Kidman’s reinvention of the Gothic form relies upon *Jane Eyre* as her proto-text, transferred to an Antipodean setting, yet still endowed with the usual machinery that mobilizes the form – persistent victimization, lurking terror, demonic plots, and calculated criminality. In re-harnessing the form, Kidman’s metafictional innovations take feminism’s historic links to the Gothic away from the compromises of “victim feminism” that Diane Hoeveler has identified (2). Instead the Gothic is deployed by Kidman to expose a tactical battle in which female cognitive power triumphs over patriarchal plots, and subsumes them.

Although feminism infuses the social fervour of Kidman’s fiction to a remarkable degree, its intersection with racism serves as an adjunct consideration, beginning with a critique of the disparity in the remedies that compensatory politics have yielded to women and Māori. From her first novel, Kidman’s fiction has gradually enlarged its consideration of the problematic territory that links women and racial others in the context of white patriarchal dominance. In her initial attempts at representing feminism’s encounter with racism, she depends on female characters who, having been conditioned by white feminist sympathies, take a competitive rather than an allied approach in the face of the joint victimhood suffered by women and people of colour. In *A Breed of Women*, Harriet at the dawn of the 1960s contemplates the break-up of her marriage with her first husband Denny, a Māori, noting that “nobody, nobody at all ever saw them as anything but a Maori and a pakeha” (171).[[1]](#endnote-1) Hence, in the popular judgement about their break-up, she was deemed to be at fault for having “rejected a Maori” (171). On the other hand, his rejection of her, through his marital infidelities, went unexamined. The moral compensations for racial oppression dominated over those accorded to women for gender oppression, leading Harriet to the bitter conviction “that in the scale of oppression, it would be women whose claims were the largest, and who were the last to be considered” (172). In her third novel, *Paddy’s Puzzle*, compromise overrules competition, as the love between the white woman, Clara Bentley, and the black man, Ambrose, dislodges the possible strife that could exist between them, fanned by the potentialities of racism and sexism. However, it is in the intervening novel, *Mandarin Summer*, that Kidman first achieves a compromise between racial and gender politics. Nevertheless, she does not seem to resile from the position enlisted through Harriet’s point of view -- that the oppression of women is on a scale greater than that of racial oppression. In effect, feminization of the “other” comes to typify the treatment of the Jew in this novel’s depiction of the particular brand of nascent anti-Semitism spawned by the new settler colonialism in New Zealand in the aftermath of World War II. Kidman’s apparent suggestion that the oppression of women is more fundamental than other oppressions, which are but facsimiles of the treatment meted out to women, thus also selects the feminine as the most fundamental version of the Other. To this extent, Kidman’s position may invite comparison with Emmanuel Levinas’s conception of the “absolutely other” as “the *feminine*” (48).

Levinas, in “Time and the Other,” argues that the Other is understood as such not by “the Other’s character, or physiognomy, or psychology,” but by “the Other’s very alterity” (48). He exemplifies thus the perception of the Other: “The Other is, for example, the weak, the poor, ‘the widow and the orphan’, whereas I am the rich or the powerful” (48). Levinas then goes on to ask, “Does a situation exist where the alterity of the other appears in its purity?” He answers his own question thus: “I think the absolutely contrary contrary, […], the contrariety that permits its terms to remain absolutely other, is the *feminine.*” He substantiates this observation by the contention that “Sex is not some specific difference. It is situated beside the logical division into genera and species” (48). The alterity of the feminine defies reconstitution into a whole, because sexual division represents neither the potential convertibility of a contradiction, nor the “duality of two complementary things,” which “pre-suppose[s] a preexisting whole.” Hence, for Levinas, the feminine is a “mystery,” “a mode of being that consists in slipping away from the light” (49), and can be encountered only through “Eros” and not through the exercise of power (50-51). Indisputably, Levinas can ascribe this absolute alterity to the feminine only through a tacit acceptance that the knowing, theorizing subject is masculine. This reiterates Simone de Beauvoir’s argument against Levinas, as having slipped from an intention “to be objective” to “an assertion of masculine privilege” (De Beauvoir 16, n. 1). Cast thus by masculine privilege as the unspeaking, mysterious “other” of erotic contemplation, the feminine serves as the pure figure of the inaccessibly veiled, fundamental alterity that the other represents (49). But equally it may be argued that, as the prototype of the “other,” the feminine also becomes the exceptional recipient of the marks of oppression when power overcomes Eros, or is indifferent to it.

Kidman approaches the issue of feminine “otherness” from a standpoint that is diametrically opposed to that of Levinas. By seeking to recover a feminine subject position, she necessarily rejects the veiled mystification that shrouds women; secondly, the “othering” of the feminine in her depictions is the inevitable product of prevailing masculine projects for achieving female subjection. Thus for her the feminine gender’s alterity is totally discrepant with the Levinasian version of it as arising from an encounter with an “unknowable,” hidden, and ungraspable “alienation” borne by it (49-50). On the contrary, in Kidman’s works, women’s radical “otherness” is attributable to their visible place as victims on a scale of oppression that arguably exceeds most forms of social tyranny. Hence, in her novels, women fluctuate between being victims of male hostility, their subjectivity and autonomy threatened, and being the perceiving intelligences who, having survived the projects for their “othering,” penetrate the layers of social inequality to discover, and effectively challenge, a foundational misogyny, which serves as the archetype for all forms of oppression.

Levinas’s perspective on the feminine has its roots in a philosophical postulate about the utter and total unknowability of the “other,” so that the approach to the “other” needs to involve a responsiveness that is divested of all ambitions for power – a difficult project as attested by his own slippages. On the other hand, Kidman’s interpretation of women’s place is formed by a historical understanding of how power operates through the naming and isolation of the “other,” who at its base is female. Despite a similarity in their understandings of the original source of “othering” as allied to femininity, the masculinist philosophical idealism of one and the feminist material response to history of the other differentiate their responses to the feminine.

Inasmuch as the feminine is viewed as the archetypal source for the “other,” misogynist signifiers, as Kidman seems to suggest in *Mandarin Summer*, complete also the task of racist degradation. Consequently, the interrogation and jettisoning of inherited practices of gendered and racial othering cannot fully and logically occur except through the recovery of female agency. This justifies Kidman’s foray into re-inventions of the Gothic, the detective genre, and other literary modes, so as to achieve the recuperation of female subjectivity. The cognitive power and naming agency issuing from such recuperation also disestablish patriarchal monopoly over the position from where the erstwhile “others’ have been viewed.

Any interpretation of Kidman’s contribution to reframing the Gothic genre has to be situated within an understanding of how the Gothic as a genre has been harnessed towards feminist ends. Most critical studies linking women and the Gothic trace their critical genealogy to Ellen Moers’s chapter on the “Female Gothic” in her *Literary Women* (see Smith 8; Hoeveler xiv; Heiland 57-58; Milbank 121). Moers identified the defining characteristic of the Gothic as entailing “one definite auctorial intent: to scare”. Far from seeking “to reach down into the depths of the soul and purge it with pity and terror” in the way of tragedy, the Gothic’s reach is to the body, in the incitement and soliciting of “physiological reactions” prompted by fear (90). Aptly she reminds us that “the first Gothic novelists” were dubbed “Terrorists” (91), and that “monstrosities” and “perversities” comprised the special effects through which Gothic terror was realised (100-01). One of the directions of the Female Gothic, according to her, was set early on by Ann Radcliffe’s novels, in which “the central figure is a young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine” (91). A similar understanding of the Female Gothic tradition features in Alison Milbank’s commentary, which identifies the heroine as the victim of the “authoritative reach [of a] patriarch, abbot or despot,” who “usurps the great house, and threatens death or rape” (121). From all accounts, the gendered vulnerability of the female protagonist is fundamental to the unfolding of the Female Gothic narrative. Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace reflect this in their claim that “a body of critical work” has emerged that has its source in “Moers’ analysis of Female Gothic texts as a coded expression of women’s fears of entrapment within the domestic and within the female body”. However, they are doubtful as to whether the Female Gothic “constitutes a separate literary genre” rather than being “an umbrella term” that encompasses a number of variations such as “‘women’s Gothic’, ‘feminine Gothic’, ‘lesbian Gothic’, even ‘Gothic feminism’” (1). This essay uses the term “Female Gothic” in the inclusive sense in which they are inclined to regard it.

In her 1998 study of “Gothic Feminism,” in the work of the same title, Diane Hoeveler re-envisioned the manipulation of her femininity by the Gothic heroine, in her struggle, as a kind of feminist performativity. The typical scenario has the Gothic heroine triumph over her persecutors and adversaries, the members of an evil patriarchy, regaining in the process her disputed fortune (6-7). The Female Gothic thus becomes the stage for enacting modes of female resistance against the villainy of patriarchal power, leading to alternative models of family that dissolve the extremities of gender inequality (Hoeveler 6-7). Hoeveler considers that a “‘wise passiveness,’” interpreted as “a form of passive-aggression,” was the strategy recommended by “Radcliffe and her followers” for the Gothic heroine’s encounter with her adversaries, thus allowing her a victory that was moral as well as material (7).

Hoeveler names this particular mode of operation as “victim feminism” (7), which she subsequently rebrands as “gothic feminism,” whose psychological source, she claims, lies in the realization by women that the outer threats they face are paralleled by vulnerabilities and uncertainties they have absorbed on account of their gender:

What I am calling “gothic feminism” was born when women realised that they had a formidable external enemy – the raving, lustful, greedy patriarch – in addition to their own worst internal enemy, their consciousness of their own sexual difference perceived as a weakness rather than a strength. (10)

This consciousness of feminine weakness meets patriarchal brutality, Hoeveler argues, through “a highly codified form of conduct,” in which the protagonist uses her femininity as a “masquerade” for taming her adversaries (11), whose wrath she may have tempted through her own active curiosity (13). Thus an ostensibly passive demeanour “as an innocent and suffering victim” supplements and shelters her aggressive ventures (14). For Hoeveler, the Female Gothic performs the function of a “ group fantasy” for the culture it appeals to: “it convinces [women] that their safely proscribed rebellion will result in an improved home for both their mothers and themselves […] all the while justifying their acts […] by positioning themselves as innocent victims” (10).

Hoeveler’s reading extends the domestication of the gender battles that Maggie Kilgour had identified in the Female Gothic in the latter’s earlier 1995 study. Kilgour had seen the purpose of the Female Gothic as “an exposé of domesticity and the family,” aided by the Gothic’s capacity for defamiliarization: “[B]y cloaking familiar images of domesticity in gothic forms, it enables us to see that the home *is* a prison” (9). Kilgour’s observation points implicitly to the conditions that necessitate group fantasies of successful female rebellion, and suggests, not unlike Hoeveler, that the ultimate objective of the Female Gothic is the restoration of the social order (37), after having eliminated the demonic forces ranged against the victim.

Recent criticism from Melina Moore (2011), however, has stepped back from the notion of the conflictual domestic drama of the Female Gothic as shaping its feminism, in order to consider the genre as a vehicle for a feminism expressed through the authorship assumed by the female protagonist, taking Mary Shelley’s *Matilda* as her exemplum.[[2]](#endnote-2) Moore acknowledges Hoeveler’s location of *Matilda* within the “female gothic tradition” (208). Indeed Hoeveler reads the incestuous narrative of *Matilda* in terms of the Gothic victimization of women. She writes: “[T]he father produces his progeny only to consume it, feeding on his daughter as a vampire feeds on victims in order to sustain a perverse form of death-in-life” (182). However, the violence that Hoeveler attributes to the father – also described as “a ravening, lustful, perverse presence” (181) – overstates the involuntary nature of the incestuous fantasy that consumes the father as well as the daughter, who regards him as “the only being I was doomed to love” (Shelley 67). Moore’s analysis observes that the female narrator becomes able to “wield her pen” and find her voice “only in isolation,” following her father’s suicide and the withdrawal of her male poet friend. Moore cites various “recent feminist re-readings” to suggest that the heroine achieves empowerment and agency through her “ability to tell her own story,” and thus “to finally perform her own subjectivity” (208-09). This claim modifies victim feminism’s manipulation of weakness as a defensive ploy through its being reframed within a project for “female narrative autonomy” (214). The manifest reclamation of female subjectivity through writing thus functions as a self-reflexive rebuttal to the victimhood that is depicted in the narration. Through her authorial agency, Shelley’s female writer-protagonist, in a pre-Freudian move that anticipates some of Luce Irigaray’s post-Freudian criticism,[[3]](#endnote-3) stakes out important epistemic ground about the Oedipal fantasy that structures female desire and the father’s role in that fantasy, drawn out of her victimhood and self-imposed exile that the novella portrays. It thus lights the way for similar reworkings of the genre, where female authorship retroactively neutralizes victimhood, as it does in Kidman’s novel.

Nevertheless, Kidman’s re-invention of the Female Gothic in *Mandarin Summer* owes less to derivations from Radcliffe or Shelley, and more to Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*,as a textual antecedent, through the reiterated symbols of the incarcerated “mad” woman and the final conflagration that consumes the manor house. With the setting transferred to a blazing yet verdant summer in New Zealand’s Northland in the later 1940s, Kidman reworks the aesthetics of the Gothic. The “ruins, castles [and] monasteries” (Smith 4) of the traditional Gothic give way to the colonial abode whose hidden recesses serve as the synecdoche for insidious plots spun out of troubling secrets. Replete with the villainous patriarch, disguised by a commanding urbaneness, which sometimes betrays his lurking corruption, the novel summons *Jane Eyre* as literary ghost in order to refigure the meaning of female madness, to confirm the villainy of the master of the house without the obfuscations cast by romance, and to uncover the true target of the patriarchal plot as being the denial of female access to an independent, questing subjectivity.

Kidman’s novel thus belongs within a literary tradition of “self-conscious critical rewriting,” to use Andrew Smith’s apt phrase (8). He observes this to be a feature of the Female Gothic in the twentieth century and selects for mention the writings of Shirley Jackson, Angela Carter, and Toni Morrison. He argues that these rewritings of the Gothic form, far from embodying mere replications of previous “cultural debates,” engage in “rework[ing], develop[ing], and challeng[ing] them” (8). *Mandarin Summer* participates in the twentieth-century mutation of the Gothic by taking its place within the textual genealogy engendered by *Jane Eyre* through a return to the re-examination of the intersections between sexual and racial politics upon which it is founded. Of the “writing back” tradition *Jane Eyre* has given rise to, the editors of *A Breath of Fresh Eyre*, a collection of critical essays on literary texts descended from *Jane Eyre*, have this to say: “Indeed, few literary works have proved their capacity to act as sources of literary inspiration, to be constantly re-assembled, re-contextualised, re-imagined, re-written, so exuberantly as *Jane Eyre*” (11). The editors have not included *Mandarin Summer* among *Jane Eyre’s* vast progeny, but neither have studies of the New Zealand Gothic given it much extended attention, with the exception of Jenny Lawn’s essay, “Domesticating the Settler Gothic in New Zealand Literature”. Lawn also gives this novel a passing glance in “Warping the Familiar,” the introductory essay to the collection *Gothic NZ,* which she co-edited withMisha Kavka and Mary Paul (17). It rates a cursory mention in Alison Rudd’s study of the New Zealand Gothic (204, n. 2), but this is merely an acknowledgement made to an article by Lawn in which Kidman’s *Mandarin Summer* is cited. It is entirely overlooked by Ian Conrich in his critical survey, “New Zealand Gothic,” which is rather surprising, since his approach to the “different forms of the Gothic […] through variations in space and place” should have permitted its inclusion (394).

Kidman remakes *Jane Eyre* for the Antipodes, as Jean Rhys had done for the Caribbean in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), yet also harnesses at the same time the postmodern tendency towards metafictional narration. Both of these narrative migrations of *Jane Eyre* to postcolonial locations see in the original text political and cultural capitulations to imperialism and/ or patriarchy that need to be interrogated. An important facet of their geographical migration involves the part played by the postcolonial location in the cultural interrogation that is taking place. However, given the differences in their temporal contexts and in their constructions of “colonialism,” the term “postcolonial” may carry different nuances for these texts. The interrogation of the strategies and ethics of colonial acquisition through the commodification of black and female bodies as well as of the land, along with the exposure of the anxieties that motivate colonial lust in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, help to position this text securely within the dominant postcolonial paradigm of “writing back” to the imperial centre. On the other hand, Kidman’s novel dispenses with the historical weight of colonialism and relies instead on a fictional neo-colonialism whose perpetrators and victims alike are European settlers, differentiated by wealth, class, influence, and tenure of settlement. Paradoxically, the victims are the older settlers. The excision of historical colonialism does not necessarily amount to the disavowal of the original colonial violence against Māori, as Lawn argues (“Domesticating” 52; “Warping the Familiar” 17), as much as it allows for a recognition of colonialism’s mutating recurrence in substitute guises. However, the chronological and contextual shifts remove the text from being a work that interrogates historical imperialism.

***Mandarin Summer* and the Re-invention of Gothic Feminism**

The defining metaphor for the ostensible composition of *Mandarin Summer* contained in its Prologue, of piecing together a puzzle, disarmingly and unsuspiciously establishes the novel’s status as the visible signifier of a feminist cognitive victory over patriarchal villainy. The mature Emily Freeman’s authorial task of assembling the collective narrative of her family’s experiences from recollections of their time at Carlyle House during the summer of 1946, in taking the form of dealing with a puzzle whose pieces are primarily derived from her own memories, given in the first-person, and to a lesser extent those of her mother, in third-person narration, becomes at the same time the making of a statement about the triumphant survival of female subjectivity over the repressive onslaughts of patriarchy. The third member of Emily’s family, her father Luke, buried on the morning of the day she embarks on her fictional venture, a full thirty-five years after leaving Carlyle House, will have to have his point of view subsumed under that of her mother Constance: “as from this morning it is she who must speak for Luke” (Prologue n.pag.). More than this, her mother, on the day Emily commences her writing, provides the final “touches” and “intimate thoughts such as women share,” which not only completes Emily’s knowledge, but also serves as the galvanising impetus for her own authorial debut (Prologue n.pag.). The novel thus epitomises far more than the success of a singular act of female resistance against entrapment within a patriarchal episteme; it also embodies in its distribution of points of view between mother and daughter the evolution of the puzzle-solving process in the direction of a multi-generational female epistemic site. In its simultaneous decoding of the meaning of the neo-Gothic threats identified with Carlyle House and its patriarch, it destabilizes the patriarchal monopoly on knowledge and gains access to the secret plots through which patriarchal power is maintained.

Consequently, *Mandarin Summer’s* metafictional quality may rest on the exposure of those features of the novel contributing to its begetting from a female cognitive source. The authorial understanding that Emily brings to her narrative is a product of her having successfully outwitted, as a young girl, the projects of the patriarch, Frederick Barnsley, for restricting and controlling the female gaze, and in the process having defeated his plot to murder his wife. To this degree, the story she tells of her youthful transgressions at Carlyle House, leading to her penetration of its secrets, provides the manifest origins for her later authorship of this narrative. This self-begetting circularity, besides pointing self-reflexively to the novel’s female and feminist credentials, also signals an excessive vision proceeding from the transgressions, which subsumes and contains the patriarchal plot. Hence, the metafictional gestures register the fictional recuperation of the feminist subjectivity through which the interrogation and disarming of the patriarchal plot occurs. Encirclement seems to be the inevitable fictional ploy against a monological patriarchal system that sustains itself through a circular logic. In her essay “Cosi Fan Tutti,” Irigaray alludes to the circular logic through which patriarchal theory, specifically Lacanian theory, maintains its claim to exclusive authority over language through the denial of women’s existence as previous to such a language (88-89). Aware or not of Irigaray’s critique, Kidman responds to a similarly seemingly impregnable logical manoeuvre, exercised in the containment of the female subject within a patriarchal plot, by liberating the hidden, transgressive gaze of the female and allowing her to spin her encircling plot around it. Kidman’s narrative strategies in this regard resemble the “liberating circles” identified by Gayle Greene in the writing of some contemporary women writers (14). Particularly apposite in this context is Greene’s citation of Monique Wittig, who shifts the circle “away from a symbol of women’s sexuality to an emblem of women’s revolution against men” (16).

Kidman’s Gothic feminism in its counter-tactical measures thus departs from the Gothic’s historical investment in “victim feminism” through an activism that uses fiction to encircle, trap, expose and frustrate patriarchal criminality. Her metafiction, then, is implicated in a battle between competing plots, and victory depends on superior tactical knowledge. The postwar setting of the novel notwithstanding, reminders of the war are rife through the presence of the two survivors of the Jewish holocaust, the pianist Elva von Hart and her deaf-mute uncle Schwass, in the Barnsley household, as well as through the “game of strategies” played by Frederick Barnsley (49), and the mock inspection of imaginary troops by Colonel Roache, a neighbour (39). Carlyle House becomes the scene for certain entrenched cultural victories as well as for the continuation of various personal wars to shore up the advantages of those in power. The programmed servitude of Constance, Emily’s mother, and of Schwass, as cook and general factotum, respectively, make legible the lines of privilege and cultural disempowerment. Othered by a culturally enforced or acquired silence, their situations seem to indicate that white patriarchy’s victory over women and Jews is assured. In contrast to the woman reduced to drudgery is her antithesis, the idealized female, embodied in Elva, who is precariously elevated as a male trophy, but also as such is vulnerable to a withdrawal of preference and relocation to obscurity. Both Barnsley’s wife Lilian, playing up to the role of the incarcerated “mad” wife, and Elva, Barnsley’s mistress, who has displaced her, understand that a war is still on, yet have succumbed to the “divide and conquer” strategy by which it is conducted and which ensures their enmity (115, 125-26). Elva thinks that, since the Jews can no longer be targets for extermination in the post-Holocaust world, only a little “torture” is reserved for them; on the other hand, women have become the new universal “enemy,” in the aftermath of a war in which the designated enemy has been defeated (125). Kidman’s interpretation of “post” in the post-war period, then, has to be read in this light as involving a misnomer, since the war continues on other fronts.

The war against women is compounded by a refiguration of the topos of colonization, which renders the original settlers, represented by the Freemans, as servants of a new settler culture, established by “ex-China hands,” who attempt to replicate an anachronistic feudal aristocracy. The agonistic encounter between the older, recently oppressed settlers and the wealthy and powerful newcomers, who are recast in a formidably reactionary mould, may characterize, as Lawn has argued, “a phobic effort to maintain self-innocence” within the older settler psychology through the transference of guilt (48). The guilt for tyrannical cultural dominance having been shifted to a newly coined facsimile of the colonial family, whose anachronism is underlined through the revival of Gothic literary conventions, Kidman exonerates her female protagonist from the legacies of settler guilt. Emily, as narrator, declares her family’s complete ideological and historical estrangement from the Barnsleys:

We [Emily and her family] might have been the remnants of some bygone age. Yet what age did they [the Barnsleys] belong to? They seemed so colourful, so sophisticated, but now, looking back, I can see that they belonged in some even more remote and certainly ill-conceived period of colonial history than anything I might have inherited. (71)

By unsettling a homogenous paradigm of settler history and identity, a model of unified white privilege is also destabilized and dismantled, through the exposure of the internal cleavages that culminate in the “war” on women, with the Female Gothic as the vehicle for its representation.

Besides the reduction of Emily’s parents to servitude, Brigadier Barnsley under his ostensible seigneurial demeanour is also a colonial looter, having amassed a collection of figurines, ornaments, bowls, and vases made of precious and semi-precious stones such as jasper, amethyst, alabaster, and nephrite. Emily declares him to be “a thief […] not a common thief, a most uncommon one” (42). The appropriative ethic that rules the colonizing mentality manifests itself in his newly settled habitat through an aggressive acquisition of the most fertile land and access to an extraordinary share of the water supply to the detriment of other, more long-settled farmers. Barnsley actually offloads upon the unsuspecting and gullible Luke Freeman his unproductive land in return for all the capital Luke possesses. Colonialism is thus seen to harness to its aid the politics of class, if that serves its purposes more than the politics of race does. While the politics of class and race determine the male pecking order that establishes the patriarchal seigneur in his place, his victory is not assured until his mastery over women is achieved. Thus the intersection of colonialism with patriarchy completes the strategic picture of masculine dominance.

The feminist Gothic offers the narrative space in which the plot against women is unveiled, and then subverted, neutralized, or defeated. Emily, on her arrival at Carlyle House, at the age of almost twelve, poised at the brink of maturing into adolescence, becomes a target of masculine repression as well as, through her transgressions of explicit and implicit boundaries, being the intelligence through which the politics of patriarchal domination is transmitted. Her first night establishes her Gothic dread of the place, which yields to Emily’s giving rein to her exploratory instincts. Her room, with the door closed and “a heavy blind” drawn down over the window, becomes “a black and frightening hole” (15). Looming danger is suggested by her prescience that she “would have to be careful in Carlyle House” (16), and of there being “minetraps waiting to be sprung” (38). Nevertheless, she strays indefatigably, on her first morning, into forbidden territory, despite frightening setbacks. Her transgression is signalled through the forbidden fruit, the mandarin, which she consumes with great urgency and desire during her self-driven reconnaissance of the garden. Her act of wilful curiosity finds its fortuitous object in the strange and furtive behaviour of Dan Cape, Brigadier Barnsley’s male servant, in an apparent assignation with someone lurking in the bushes wearing mauve, and whose identity, as it turns out, is not insignificant to the plot.

The control of Emily’s gaze and her curiosity becomes a new objective for Barnsley, who not only imposes restrictions on the extent of her movements within his property, but also makes ominous threats against her capacity to see. Noting her discerning appreciation of his Chinese treasures during an escorted tour of his property on the same fateful morning, he observes with cruel disdain that “the Chinese used to poke out the eyes of people who saw too much” (42). Barnsley’s scarcely disguised hostility anticipates the later attempts by an unknown assailant on Emily’s life in a chilling replay of Gothic terror. This occurs during a walk in a wooded picnic spot, when she is briefly separated from her mother. In each case, it is the female gaze that is anathema to the enemy.

Equally threatening to Barnsley is the mother-daughter symbiosis. He tries to intercept the bond between Emily and her mother through a pretended preference for her, whom he elevates to a place at their breakfast table, so that her mother becomes victim to the indignity of waiting on her own daughter. He employs similar divisive tactics that sow hostility between his daughter Becky and his wife, as he secretly colludes with his daughter, the wearer of the mauve garment, in her taking Dan Cape as her lover, the man who had also been the recipient of her mother’s sexual favours in return for opium. By revealing Dan’s sexual transactions with her mother to Becky, Barnsley incites, as was to be expected, a jealous, murderous rage in the girl towards her own mother. This is the climax of an antipathy that Barnsley had nurtured in Becky by making her party to the callous and scornful treatment of Lilian; it evolves into Becky’s becoming a co-conspirator with her father in the planned murder of her mother. If Barnsley’s manoeuvres at destroying the mother-daughter bond triumph with his daughter, they most definitely fail with Emily. The novel’s ostensible mode of composition through information-sharing is proof of the persistence of the symbiotic and discursive bond between mother and daughter that Barnsley had tried to annihilate.

The other face of the “divide and conquer” tactic practised by Barnsley is provided by the instituted rivalry between wife and mistress, who are placed in adjoining quarters in Carlyle House. Lilian’s maniacal laughter, her incarcerated narcotic state, and her wordless communication through wall-tapping are placed in binary opposition to the beauty of Elva, her sublime music, and her evident desirability. Not surprisingly, Lawn has argued that Lilian “plays Bertha to Elva von Hart’s Jane Eyre” (53), except, one may observe, that Jane is not the exotic beauty that Elva is. More seriously, the mere citing of character replicas overlooks their metafictional function in Kidman’s rewriting of Brontë’s plot, which depends on an exposure of how the plot’s pivotal reliance on female rivalry is actually stage-managed by a patriarch to serve masculine interests. Hence, the character resemblances argue for the palimpsestic function that Brontë’s text performs as it is glimpsed through Kidman’s erasures and rewritings.

An important aspect of Kidman’s rewriting is the unsettling of the binary opposition between wife and mistress as well as the corresponding shifts in narrative identifications, achieved through the doubling of the direction of Emily’s gaze. Through the Janus-faced perspective that she develops, “look[ing] both ways at once” (141), in a move that is contrary to that of Brontë’s narrator, Jane Eyre, narrative equity is extended to the competing female protagonists in the Barnsley menagerie. Curious and resourceful, Emily manages to gain entrance into Lilian’s room, through having learned the voice code to which she would respond. The conversation that follows between the now frightened girl, ready to shy away, regretting her temerity, and the perceptive, ironically tempered Lilian, who would not allow her to withdraw, destabilizes the fiction of the “mad” woman and her silence. The older Emily, in her role as narrator, prefaces this account of the meeting with Lilian with the uncompromising assertion, “Lilian belongs to me” (106). This ownership corresponds to the unlocking of a fictional door in order to provide alternative meanings to “female madness”.

Chapters Eight and Thirteen contain the revealing meetings between Emily and Lilian in which the former’s entry into the penetralium of “female madness” also contributes to its demystification and to the decoding of its tactical function. The verbal code that Emily had learned from Schwass for getting Lilian to open her door, “Hoy Morn,” means “open the door” (111), and is the code for admission to opium dens in China, thus serving as a signal for Lilian’s specific brand of “madness,” her opium addiction. Despite this, Emily’s conversation with Lilian establishes the latter as an intelligent interlocutor, who has reclaimed and redefined the place of the “mad wife”. Unlike Bertha Mason, Lilian is not physically imprisoned by her husband. She has withdrawn to her room in protest against Barnsley for having installed Elva, his mistress, in their house, intending to use her self-imprisonment as leverage. Insofar as Lilian is involved in a tactical game against Barnsley, prompted by her desire for him, she intimates her claim to equality with him as a desiring subject.

However, the gender politics of Carlyle House precludes this position for women. Barnsley had married Lilian, a servant in his family’s household, after an initial display of indifference, when her sudden and unexpected inheritance of a fortune turned her in his eyes into an attractive prospect. He has marked her thus as a lucrative commodity. However, in withdrawing to her room at this late point in her marriage, Lilian may be seen as withdrawing from the patriarchal economy by clinging to the remnants of herself as a desiring subject. But her addiction renders the gesture ambiguous, as it shifts her between desiring agent and abject commodity: on the one hand, the drug falsely translates her to the “dreamtime” of reciprocated desire and sexual agency (178); on the other hand, it is a substance that degrades her mind and confirms her exile. The fact that her husband is only too eager to cultivate the drug to satisfy her addiction makes him complicit in her degradation and exile, and to that extent he holds the key to her prison and to her “madness”. But ultimately the origins of Lilian’s “madness” lie in herself – in her addiction and in the passion that has prompted it. Her subjective derangement and exile from the speech community, notwithstanding the clarity of her discursive exchanges with Emily, are symptomatic markers of the isolation of “madness”. But the source of this “madness” lies in an obsessive passion that is out of bounds; her passion for Barnsley is of this nature, transforming her tactical gestures of agency into self-defeating acts. From this perspective, “madness” is the price women pay for their abject, disproportionate self-surrender to unreciprocated love. However, there is no inevitability about this abjection, as suggested by the strange, temporary emergence of Lilian’s sane alter-ego who announces her ability to “stop” her addiction at “any time” (178).

In contrast to Lilian, who attempts to shift in some measure the transactional economy of patriarchy, Elva in many respects seems to conform to it. In return for sanctuary for herself and her uncle Schwass, Elva becomes Barnsley’s mistress. But it is through her reputation as a concert pianist, her brilliant playing of the piano, and her fidelity to her genius that she removes herself from entrapment by Barnsley. Her music defines a sublime, sacrosanct space outside Barnsley’s reach, even while it elevates her in his eyes to a trophy worth having. Emily calls this music “soul music,” which made her desire “to lift my arms and soar” (20). In this expansion and exaltation of her own being in response to Elva’s music, Emily testifies to a characteristic feature of the sublime as the enablement of human transcendence.

Running contrary to this notion of the sublime is the Burkean idea of the sublime as having its “source” in “terror,” “excit[ing] the ideas of pain, and danger” (Burke36). Andrew Smith, explaining Burke’s idea of the sublime, observes that behind it lies the idea of “an Old Testament God of punishment and damnation” before whom “the subject is diminished” (11). According to Smith, the Gothic’s use of terror as an imaginary effect responds to the Burkean notion of sublimity without necessarily copying it (12). In the context of Kidman’s rewriting of the Gothic in *Mandarin Summer*, terror of extreme magnitude lurks in the background in the genocide and ethnic cleansing expressed through the dehumanizing atrocities of the Holocaust from which Elva and Schwass are recent refugees. In the more benign setting of post-war Northland, an authoritarian power of lesser magnitude continues to exert its force through the terrorizing tactics used by patriarchy for establishing and policing its boundaries, and in the casual “relish” with which the patriarch Barnsley rehearses the “atrocities committed against Jews” (70). However, Elva’s music, with its genesis in and appeal to a sublimity reached through human transcendence and its communication of “moments of grace” (20), functions as a subversive aspirational force that unsettles the alternative form of sublimity whose sources are power and terror.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Emily’s experience of ascent through Elva’s music to transcendent, boundless elation may have some affinities with the Kantian idea of the sublime. Christine Battersby describes thus the cause and reach of the Kantian sublime:

the cause of the sublime is the empirical object, but the response is not just to the object but to the thought of a higher order – the supersensible […]. The Kantian sublime is bound up with ‘awe’, and with our response to the infinite or to the indefinitely great: to that which our senses cannot measure, manage or contain without a kind of shock. (75)

It is in nearly similar terms that Emily describes Elva’s playing, the quality of which exceeds the empirical event: “I could not forget that first rapturous awe she had inspired in me, or the lovely music that poured forth from her fingertips. […] She had a quality which made my heart stand still” (98). However, Battersby clarifies that “[i]n Kant we have not yet entered a discourse in which art objects are sublime: what is sublime is the natural world” (75). On the other hand, Kidman’s representation of the sublime through Elva’s music belongs without any self-conscious strain to a discourse that has assimilated already the aesthetic sublime. Even more notably, the creation and reception of this sublime rapture occurs through female subjects, which is an emphatic departure from the Kantian version of the sublime. Battersby observes that for Kant “women are debarred from any proper enjoyment of the sublime” (77). In the evocation of female sensibilities capable of creating and discerning sublime grandeur, Kidman shows female subjectivity as retaining a capacity for transcendence despite the machinations of Gothic terror. Emily thinks that a “magic aura” surrounds Elva (98).

Hence, the power that maintains Gothic terror is internally destabilized by the two women cast as opposites – Elva and Lilian. The sublime aesthetic performance of Elva functions in the novel as an implicit retort to the terrifying sublimity from which patriarchal power is supposedly derived. On the other hand, Lilian’s tactical quest for agency enacts silently an interrogation of the patriarchal economy’s pragmatic manoeuvres for power through the sexual commodification of women. In different ways, therefore, Elva’s music room and Lilian’s room serve as ambiguous places of female resistance that may prefigure *Mandarin Summer’s* more accomplished resistance to and containment of patriarchy.To this extent, the Janus-eyed vision of Emily that sees into the separate situations of Elva and Lilian schools her respectively in the need for an uncompromising fidelity to the transcendent capacities of one’s creative genius as well as in the importance of not undermining one’s tactical moves through the surrender of one’s integrity. Both of these are critical to defining the excessive feminist site embodied in Emily’s narrative.

Emily’s ability to extend the female gaze depends on her capacity to circumscribe within its range the contradictions, cleavages, and internecine conflicts within patriarchy. Thus not only is patriarchy’s monopoly over naming identities and cognitive sites unsettled, but it becomes itself the object of critical scrutiny. For instance, Emily’s narrative exposes the fragility of the rule of the father privileged by patriarchy, which meets its gravitational pull through the cleavages that open up between the name of the father and biological paternity. This theme is sounded at breakfast on Emily’s first day at Carlyle House when the radio announcer reports that the “boy who had been arrested in Czechoslovakia,” and thought to be “Hitler’s son, was now believed to be Bormann’s” (44). This sounds a proleptic note for the revelation of a widely-known secret later in the novel, namely, that Barnsley’s putative son Thomas, who bears his name, is actually the biological son of Grady Cape, his now-deceased employee, who is also the father of Dan Cape. Hence, patriarchy as an organization for the control of male inheritance has its treacherous underside in the orgasmic drives that can derail this outcome. Despite Lilian’s passionate love for Frederick Barnsley, in his absence she found a substitute lover in Grady Cape. Likewise Emily’s mother, the responsible and dignified Constance, intuits through her sight of the nearly undressed Thomas, and his bulging crotch, the mesmerizing pull of the dead Grady Cape over that of Frederick Barnsley, “for whom she had also lusted” (168). She concludes that “while the Barnsleys seemed to have all the outward attributes needed to win the feud, the Capes held subtle and matchless weapons” (168). The Barnsleys may have the power to name and define the outward sexual transactions, but the urgings of lust can always covertly or overtly unsettle these transactions. Frederick Barnsley accuses the Capes of being “casual feckless amoral people” who “have followed the Barnsleys wherever they have gone” (157). In effect, he is alluding to the inevitable and disconcerting asymmetrical twinning between the sexual economy and the sexual unconscious, reflected through the Barnsleys and Capes respectively.

The asymmetrical twinning extends to a further doubling within patriarchal paternity, where the father confuses his status as the daughter’s progenitor with that of being her symbolic lover. Effectively the father’s role in diverting the daughter’s sexual desires towards himself sows animosity between her and her mother and keeps her in thrall to him. Yet at the same time he manages to abide literally by the incest taboo by allowing a surrogate to take his place in copulation with the daughter. Barnsley’s place as Becky’s lover is taken by Dan Cape, with his complicity and tacit permission. He plays voyeur to their lovemaking; Lilian remarks with blunt accuracy: “[…] it suited you to have Dan Cape astride her. You might as well have dropped him on top of her yourself” (177). Barnsley’s role in his daughter’s seduction under cover of the incest taboo is symptomatic of the complicity that Irigaray perceives between the father’s law against incest and the seduction of the daughter: “The whole thing must be tidied up and whitewashed by the law. But, of course, if, under cover of the law, seduction can now be practiced at leisure, it seems equally urgent to question the *seduction function of law itself*” (*Speculum* 38). The seduction of the daughter severs the possibility of unbroken female matrilineal inheritances, and leads the way to conspiracies aimed at matricide, as demonstrated by the plotting of Barnsley and Becky that Emily overhears.

The “‘murder of the mother’” is one of “two key symbolic motifs” that Diana Wallace identifies as having “become central to the Female Gothic” (22), through her reading of Sophie Lee’s *The Recess* (1783), using the theoretical lens provided by Irigaray (33-34). The other key motif is the “recess,” which is construed as “a symbolic representation of the maternal” (35) as “womb and tomb” (22), signalling the locus of exile from history of matrilineal inheritances. The murder of the mother is the active accomplishment of that exile. In *Mandarin Summer*, the plot against the mother reaches beyond Lilian, taking in even the resourceful and enterprising Constance. Plied with alcohol and rendered gracelessly intoxicated by Barnsley after his party (134-35), obsessed by the “sexy” currents of Carlyle House, sexually mesmerized by Dan Cape (165), and lusting futilely after both the dead Grady Cape and Barnsley (168), as well as reduced helplessly to tears often (147), Constance is on the way to her own addictive entrapment in Carlyle House, like Lilian. The fire turns out to be her rescue, compelling her into action, and paving the way for her later contribution to her daughter’s account of events. She thus reverses the symbolic murder that was intended for her through her relegation to victimhood. To this extent, Constance is a tactical feminist like her daughter in a symbolic warfare that also has material ramifications for women. On the other hand, Kidman’s fictional redress of the matricidal incitements of Western patriarchy responds to a cultural symptom that has had a powerful historical grip upon the genre. But it also serves as a contemporary supplement to Irigaray’s theory about the foundations of patriarchy in maternal murder, upon which Wallace erects her analysis (34-36).

Also included within the sweep of the novel and more particularly of Emily’s gaze are patriarchy’s internal dissensions, formed by racial and class-based hierarchies. If Barnsley’s masculinity is enhanced and trebled or quadrupled by wealth, property, prestige and influence, Luke and Schwass are unmanned to the extent they lack these. Patriarchy is not the monolithic bastion and fortress of masculinity that it proclaims itself to be. Carlyle House may be an outpost of colonial patriarchy, but there Luke’s social inferiority, his dependence on Barnsley’s patronage, and his poverty contribute towards his partial emasculation, as demonstrated through Becky’s scornful jokes about him. More profound is Schwass’s abjection. In him are coalesced all those elements of feminine “othering” carried to extremity – silence, servitude, and effective invisibility. Added to these, his primary relationships are with women: he is a blood-relation of Elva; he brings Lilian her daily supply of opium; and he helps Constance in the kitchen. He embodies more completely than any of them the feminine position, thus giving weight to Kidman’s implicit contention that the feminine is the original “other”. Schwass, already “othered” by his race, bears in Carlyle House the signifiers of degraded femininity, which come to indicate the magnitude of his loss of status.

In Schwass, the feminine and the Jew coalesce in other ways, as he substitutes for the female holocaust victim of *Jane Eyre* in this rewritten post-World War II Gothic. The intended victim, in keeping with the binary configurations of the earlier novel, is Lilian, but the accidental victim is Schwass. It is Emily’s penetration of Barnsley’s plot against Lilian and her vigilance that help to save Lilian, with Luke’s help. Lifted to a metafictional plane, the novel, through its dependence on the Janus-eyed vision of Emily as narrator, refuses, in her rewriting of the text, the patriarchal ethic of playing off one woman against another. Emily has her eye on saving Lilian. This is yet another sense in which Lilian “belongs” to Emily, but unfortunately the scope of the younger Emily’s vision does not extend to Schwass, for whom she had not envisaged any danger.

**Conclusion**

In Kidman’s rewriting of the Gothic genre, women are rescued from patriarchal victimization and entrapment through the narrator’s penetration as a child into the patriarchal plot, but the sacrificial place occupied by the feminine remains intact. Schwass inadvertently slips into this place as hostage and victim. Through the holocaust that claims him, the sacrificial charge that sustains patriarchy is signalled. Anti-Semitism displaces misogyny in Frederick Barnsley’s contemptuous reception of Schwass’s death through the burning of Carlyle House that he had master-minded. Barnsley screams, “The stupid bastard old Jew,” and Emily reports that “there was no mistaking his contempt” (183). Not only is Lilian rescued in this scene, but so also is Elva, since Barnsley’s exposure of his anti-Semitism and the death of her uncle release her from all obligations to him. She walks away “without a backward glance” (183). Unlike *Jane Eyre*, which may be read as the successive entrapment of women by physical incarceration or through the tentacles of romance, *Mandarin Summer* saves its entrapped women. Further, it reverses the moral convenience that Rochester enjoys in *Jane Eyre* of being released from his marriage by the fortuitous self-immolation of his mad wife. Barnsley had deliberately arranged for the burning of Carlyle House and expected to pin it on his “mad” wife Lilian (164), and hoped to marry Elva as the triumphant culmination of his plot. But the plan misfires. These re-inventions by Kidman depend on her moving out of the earlier Gothic model of “victim feminism” with its ethic of partial complicity with patriarchy to a model of tactical feminism that is able to circumscribe within its visionary scope the machinations of patriarchy. But neither “victim feminism” nor “tactical feminism” can totally disestablish the place of the “feminine” to which new victims may be consigned.

1. **Notes**

   “Pakeha” is “a Maori term for the white inhabitants of New Zealand” (“The Word Pakeha,” McLintock, ed., *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. There are variant spellings for the title of Mary Shelley’s work. Moore spells it in her article as “Mathilda,” which is the spelling of the title in the “complete and final copy” of the manuscript (Clemit 1). But Clemit, the editor of volume 2 of *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, observes that “in her published remarks,” Mary Shelley referred to the work’s title as “Matilda” and “so this spelling is adopted” by her (2). Nevertheless on the title page of the novella, she retains the spelling “Mathilda”. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Irigaray, *Speculum* 38, where she suggests that the father’s law against incest may perform a “*seduction function*” through the fantasies it “organizes and arranges”. A fuller quotation of the relevant passage is provided later in this essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The notion of the sublime “as necessarily bound up with terror” finds reiteration in Lyotard’s idea of the postmodern sublime, exemplified through Auschwitz, about which Christine Battersby provides the following account: “For Lyotard, it is ‘Auschwitz’ that represents the hiatus within the narratives and ideals of Western modernity which give birth to his account of the postmodern sublime” (Battersby 86).

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