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Constructing 'the Other' in *Our Hideous Progeny*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the construction of "the Other" in C.E. McGill's gothic novel, *Our Hideous Progeny*, a spin-off of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The paper examines how the novel challenges the marginalisation of women, queer identities, and colonised people within the 19th-century scientific and social structures through the critical lenses of feminist theory, queer studies, and postcolonial discourse. In the novel, Mary Sutherland is a queer and intellectually ambitious protagonist who is consistently positioned as an outsider due to her rejection of traditional femininity and scientific pursuits. Additionally, the paper interrogates novel's depiction of the racialised othering ingrained in British imperial science that perpetuates the divide between who is seen as "civilised" and who is reduced to "the other". The monstrous progeny, which is both scientifically engineered and ethically ambiguous, functions as a metaphorical 'Other', trapped in a liminal space that is difficult to define. Drawing on theoretical insights from Edward Said, Judith Butler, Homi Bhabha, Simone de Beauvoir, and others, this paper analyses how McGill uses the figure of "the Other" to expose and resist structures of exclusion and to envision new spaces for belonging and recognition.

Keywords : Otherness, Gothic Literature, Feminism, Post-colonialism, Gender and Science, C.E. McGill, *Our Hideous Progeny*

Introduction:

C.E. McGill is a contemporary Scottish author and a recent graduate of NC State University. They write speculative and historical fiction. They are the author of various short stories such as "Things to Bring, Things to Burn, Things Best Left Behind", "Sapphire, Dagger, Hall", and "Passengers". In their first debut novel, *Our Hideous Progeny*, they revisit the classic *Frankenstein* to blend historical fiction with elements of feminism, queerness, and gothic storytelling. In their author's note, McGill dedicates this book to

the angry women, the threatening women, the solitary and the abhorred; women with cold hearts and sharp tongues, who play with fire and fall in love with monsters; women who love

women, women who didn't know they were women at first but know better now, those who thought they were women at first but know better now. We shall be monsters, you and I (McGill, *Our Hideous Progeny* 390).

Our Hideous Progeny is a spin-off of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, set around 50 years after the events of the original book and centred around Victor Frankenstein's great niece, Mary (née Frankenstein) Sutherland. It is set in the 1850s in Britain, a time and place brimming with scientific discoveries and debates. Mary and her husband, Henry, are palaeontologists struggling to make names for themselves in the scientific societies of London. They lack the money and connections, and Henry continues to make poorer decisions against Mary's advice. Mary discovers a collection of letters belonging to her great-uncle Victor Frankenstein, which detail the disturbing experiment that ultimately led to his downfall in *Frankenstein*. Sensing an opportunity to finally achieve the recognition she thinks they deserve, she convinces Henry to bring a scientifically accurate fossil back to life, a Plesiosaurus. Their work brings Mary into contact with Henry's reclusive sister Maisie and into conflict with Finlay Clarke, a snobbish and misogynistic rival scientist who she shares a past with. In the end, Mary releases the creature into the sea and embarks on a journey with Maisie as Mary Frankenstein. In *Our Hideous Progeny*, McGill offers a compelling examination of the exclusion and ambition of women, queer people and other minorities in both historical and contemporary contexts. They intricately weave the themes of 'otherness' and 'monsters' into the narrative through various intersecting lenses – including scientific, gendered, and colonial perspectives.

The term "Other" is popular in cultural and literary studies. Jacques Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, defines 'the other' as that which cannot be assimilated into the self, a presence that disrupts any sense of completeness. Otherness refers to the qualities and traits associated with individuals or groups perceived as being outside the dominant social norm. These traits can include differences based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or any other social identity marker. Othering is closely associated with power and knowledge. When we "other" another group, we accentuate their perceived weaknesses to make ourselves appear stronger or superior. It indicates a hierarchy and serves to maintain the power where it already exists. Only the dominant group is in a position to impose the value of its particularity or identity and devalue the particularity of others (their otherness) while imposing corresponding discriminatory measures. Gayatri Spivak argues that dominated out-groups are classified as Others precisely because they are subject to the dominant in-group's categories and practices and because they are unable to determine their own norms and articulate their own voice. Such groups cease to be Others when they manage to break free from the oppression forced upon them by the dominant groups by speaking up and establishing a positive, autonomous identity.

Women have been time and again regarded as "passive, quasi-natural objects, objectified as the other and made property by the male subject" (Richardson 13). Simone de Beauvoir, in the introduction to *The Second Sex,* summarises this status quo as "he is the Subject, he is the Absolute –she is the Other" (16). Work has traditionally been separated into two areas: the domestic work at home represented by women and the work in public, outside the house, represented by men. In the time period that the novel is set in, it was especially the case that women were not their own persons but rather lived dispersed among the males, "attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men –fathers or husbands" (18). In Our Hideous Progeny, Maisie is Mary's ailing, unmarried sister-in-law who is largely dismissed by the majority of her society. She says, "That's what they all think, anyway. No husband, no children, no father – I *must* want to die." (McGill, *Our Hideous Progeny* 200). The powerless position of single women is further accentuated when readers learn that, despite inheriting a substantial amount from her father, any additional withdrawal of her funds, apart from a yearly allowance that Maisie could freely spend, required the permission of either her husband or her lawyer. Victorian women severely lacked financial autonomy. Another example of this is Mary, whose husband had ownership of the house that she had inherited from her grandmother, even if they lived apart. The fact that infidelity constituted the sole grounds for divorce, and only under exceedingly rare circumstances, was yet another indication of the lack of liberty experienced by women.

In Our Hideous Progeny, McGill crafts a protagonist who has always defied the Victorian standards for women. "Sit still, speak softly, don't ball your fists" (McGill, *Our Hideous Progeny* 22) are the type of admonishments with which young girls were brought up. Mary struggles with the expectations placed on her by her gender and social class and is often unable to stop herself from calling out injustices that she comes across. As a woman who felt herself more "naturally" inclined to science than to motherhood, wanting to be a scientist when it wasn't considered as an option for women, who was harsh and angry rather than gentle, and who would eventually leave her husband for another woman, Mary was always treated as an anomaly, 'the other'. Her quotes from the book demonstrate this.

Ladies are often criticized for being childish, I find – but it is hard not to be, when one's life is so wholly in the hands of another. (34)The difference between a proper young lady and a beastly little thing was that ladies were never angry; they took their moods and wove them into lace, stuffed them into pillows. They learned to hold their tongue. But I have always been a beastly little thing at heart, it seems. (22).It was not just her unfeminine ways which made her the 'other' but also her decision to be a scientist as a woman. Much like the creature she creates, Mary is also a perversion of all that the society believes nature supposedly intended her to be. McGill states that her intention was that

Mary would be not just Frankenstein's heir, but his creation's as well, an amalgam of monster and scientist both. Like Victor, Mary is ambitious, driven, arrogant; like the

monster, she is an outsider, prejudged for things she cannot control, vacillating between self-loathing and rage at the unfair hand the world has dealt her. (McGill, "An Unnatural Body").

Mary is named not only for Mary Shelley but also for Mary Anning, a famous fossil dealer and palaeontologist, and Mary Sommerville, a Scottish scientist, astronomer, and mathematician. Both these women of science are also referenced in the book more overtly as Mary Sutherland's idols and inspiration. In her author's note, McGill shares that while reading a contemporary biography of Mary Somerville, the 'Queen of Science' of the 19th century, she noticed that many friends and peers of hers described her as a humble and generous woman who never let her scientific hobbies get in the way of being a wife and mother. This made her realise that for the Victorians, Somerville had already fulfilled the prerequisites of being a woman – marriage and children – and so, as long as she was both brilliant and non-threatening, she was 'allowed to gain recognition in the world of science. This raises the question of how a female scientist who didn't fulfil these requirements and who wasn't connected and financially secure would fare at that time.

Women have been systematically excluded from or rather marginalised in doing serious science. Well into the twentieth century, women scientists were perceived as "atypical", both as women and as scientists. Even in today's society, there are ongoing debates regarding whether women are biologically capable of excelling in top-level science and whether, when they engage in scientific endeavours, they approach it differently from men. As Londa Schiebinger discusses in *Has Feminism Changed Science?* that science has historically defined itself in opposition to femininity, constructing the female scientist as an anomaly rather than an accepted participant in knowledge production.

The only geological education available to women in nineteenth-century England was informal, through private tuitions, books or public lectures at the Royal Institution, and so "some of the ladies were very blue and well-informed, reading Mrs. Somerville and frequenting the Royal Institution" (Thackeray 1847). Even admission to these lectures was a challenge, with lectures on other sciences like zoology being labelled as 'sensitive, inappropriate topics for women" (*Our Hideous Progeny* 93). However, access to a full geological education via universities, public libraries or membership in scientific societies was largely denied to women. Women in general were not taken seriously in their scientific interests, and their intellectual contributions were systematically erased. As science in Britain became more professionalised by the 1850s, women, who were still considered scientific amateurs, found it more difficult to get their research recognised and published.

Marilyn Bailey Ogilvie talks about female scientists who worked together with their husbands on projects that "some husband-wife collaborative efforts took the form of the husband-creator, wife-executor mould, in which the wife was highly regarded by the scientific community and by her husband partially because of her willingness to accept a

subordinate role" (105). In the scientific gathering that Mary attends, she notes how the geologists' wives who traipse across glaciers and glens with their husbands on expeditions, speak different languages and contributed equally still play more of a secretarial or 'helping' role. Mary and her husband, Henry, also worked together, writing papers and later the experiment to bring a fossil to life. But for the most part, her contributions went unnoticed, all of it being in Henry's name. The fact that Mary was unable to access research material on her own, as she was made to feel unwelcome, an outsider in university and science society reading rooms, even though women weren't 'officially' debarred from them, is another example of the othering of female scientists in the science world. Mary says,I illustrated and edited, corrected and organized, wrote and rewrote, and for my troubles I occasionally saw my name in a magazine or the back of a book: many thanks to M. Sutherland for the illustrations. (I imagine many assumed the M. stood for Monsieur.) But it was enough. (McGill, *Our Hideous Progeny* 42)

There are many similar cases of thoughtless discrimination where men refuse to see women as serious, original and independent scientists. In 1836, the palaeontologist Etheldred Benett, who had just published a catalogue of her fossil collection, complained in a letter:
I had two letters the same day from the British Museum one thanking me for fossils as Miss Benett the other for my book as Etheldred Benett Esqre though I gave the Book into the hands of one of the Librarians and told him that it was written by myself, so you see that scientific people in general have a very low opinion of the abilities of my sex. (letter to Samuel Woodward 12 April 1836, quoted after Torrens et al. 2000, p. 64)

Mary's repeated struggles to have her ideas taken seriously in male-dominated fields of science are McGill's way of critiquing the systemic dismissal of female scientists in history. Mary's proposal to the vice president of the Geological Society regarding the admission of female fellows is laughed at as, "We do not need dilettantes, madam (McGill, *Our Hideous Progeny* 115). When Mary and Henry, and Finlay Clarke have concluded the creature and are preparing to present it before their peers, the only names nominated are those of Henry and Clarke, even though Mary was the biggest contributor to the entire undertaking. Neither is she able to read their paper , nor is she mentioned as one of its authors. She is pushed out with excuses of her nomination being a superfluous exercise and is mocked for her indignation. Through Mary, McGill foregrounds the many female scientists who were deprived of the opportunity to present their own papers because it was considered inappropriate for a lady to exhibit herself in such a manner. One such example is Barbara Hastings, Marchioness of Hastings, who , though she was able to present a short paper on her spectacular fossil finds under her own name in the geology session at the 1847 Oxford meeting of the BAAS, had to have the paper read by the session's secretary on her behalf (Kölbl-Ebert 8).

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McGill also explores the burden placed upon women who attempt to navigate male-dominated intellectual spaces. The women scientists were expected to be hard workers full of humility and civility, without a hint of pride.

Margaret Bryan started her first book with a denial of originality or genius and an apology if the book showed any "imbecility of my judgement". She felt the need to explain that the book was written for her students, but that friends had persuaded her to publish it. Conscious of the assumption that truth was "enfeebled by female attire" she expected to be judged harshly by some, but hoped others would be fair-minded towards her attempts. Nevertheless, success in her venture led her to further publication. In *Lectures on Natural Philosophy*, she was less abject, yet still fairly grovelling, in her apology. (Watts 57)

Mary was opposed to such forced intellectual modesty expected from women scientists. Her anger at being forced to give up on the recognition due to her for her work burst out in

I should not have to be decent,' I hissed. 'I should not have to be nice … I should not have to wait and grovel and plead and crush and cut away at myself until I'm small enough to fit at the margins, in the footnotes! (McGill, *Our Hideous Progeny* 287)

She is enraged at the rules that consider having pride to be a sin in women. The female scientists are deprived of opportunities to prove themselves, mocked for their assertion of selves, that they are capable of achieving great things and are worthy of better treatment. Mary has spent years consoling herself that recognition and applause were for the more prideful men, because society praises quiet and self sufficient dignity in women. When Henry accuses her of ruining their work for her pride, she erupts in anger from years of trying to make herself small enough to fit the expected mold of a woman.

Had I pride? Ofcourse; for what else was I to have, when hard work and humility and civility yielded naught? I had resigned myself, now, to the fact that I would never have money - never enough of it, at least, to change the workings of the world. I had longed for so many years to be recognized, remembered. (McGill 368)

She recognises and, in some cases, resents her husband's male privilege. While she is ambitious, she tries to understand and subscribe to certain standards of propriety. For if she makes one mistake or offends the wrong people or crosses some invisible standard set by them in the scientific and intellectual spheres, she will be excluded, and the blame for her indiscretion will be attributed to her gender or to her " low" birth. Meanwhile, Henry can disgrace himself before the Geological Society, delivering an undignified lecture targeting a fellow scientist, and wasn't completely ostracised for it. He could still have more chances. Mary observes this

What must it be like … to have one's flaws and misdeeds attributed not to one's sex, or the manner of one's birth, but to one's character alone? I should like that, I think; to make an utter fool of myself, and be regarded not as a bad example of womanhood, but merely a bad example. (McGill 90)

Apart from nonconformity to traditional femininity, Mary's queerness further exacerbates her position as "the other". In a society where heterosexuality between men and women is the norm, the term "Other" denotes all those queer individuals, like lesbians, gays, bisexuals, etc., who have been marginalised by society as "sexually deviant" from the standards of binary-gender heterosexuality. Mary, who feels attracted to women, is thus made an outsider even among other marginalised women, adding another layer to her struggle for recognition and belonging. The childhood encounter with her former friend and crush, Catherine, who was repulsed by Mary's attempt to kiss, leaves a lasting mark. In the book, Mary refers to herself as a "freakish specimen" and hides her attraction to women lest it lead to social exclusion. What was wrong was that I had wanted it. That must have been what she [Catherine] had seen in me that day as she pulled away,shock and revulsion on her face; it was the intent of it. (McGill 210)

Society norms decide the correct behaviour and makes people like Mary ashamed of their feelings. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* discusses that those who fail to perform gender in the expected ways are punished, rendered invisible, or cast out as unnatural. Fear of rejection on such grounds seems to move her to accept Henry's offer of marriage, a last chance at a socially acceptable relationship and opportunity to show the world that she was "not a failure; that [she] was worthy, and wanted, and grown."(McGill 203) It is also the reason that she constantly holds herself back when it comes to her love for Maisie and has kept herself deprived of female companionship for so long.

The creature in the book, too, acts as a literal and symbolic 'other', an oddity. Finlay's revulsion of it and plans of exploitation mirror the real-world's fears of the unfamiliar and perception of 'the others' as a tool to be used for personal gains. The creature's existence becomes an extension of Mary's identity, a living manifestation of her transgression against societal expectations. "A monster is simply something…irregular, isn't it? Something strange?.....And I've always thought you a little strange." (McGill,*Our Hideous Progeny* 371) The Creature and Mary's identities are shown to be deeply intertwined, with Mary often being referred to as a " freakish specimen". She loved and accepted the creature, and felt a kinship to it unlike Finlay Clarke and Henry. The creature's awfulness and horrifying features that disgusted others was the very thing that made it appear beautiful, glorious to Mary. Its entrapment in the square of water in the boathouse resonated with her feelings of being held prisoner in a marriage that denies her dignity and respect. When Mary frees the creature to roam the open seas till its inevitable end, she also frees herself, the release a parallel to her own eventual sea sojourn with Maisie. The very last line of the book when she

states “That I am” in response to being fondly referred to as a “peculiar creature” by Maisie shows her eventual acceptance of her otherness.

Another manner of ‘othering’ in the novel is on the basis of race, ethnicity and economic class. The novel shows how society alienates anyone who does not suit its taste. Edward Said proposed the idea of “the Oriental Other” in his work *Orientalism (1978).*
The construction of identity - for identity, whether of Orient or Occident, France or Britain, while obviously a repository of distinct collective experiences, *is* finally a construction - involves establishing opposites and “others” whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from "us". Each age and society re-creates its “Others. (Said 332)

Colonialism constructed a fabricated dichotomy between the Western Self and the non-Western Other. Homi Bhabha in “Of Mimicry and Man” argues that the "Other" is not a fixed, essentialised being but rather a manufactured and dynamic figure influenced by the processes of colonialism and its stereotypes. The racist, colonial mindset is reflected in Finlay Clarke and Captain Strachey’s conversation where they complain about the inconvenience of overseeing the colonised Indian workers digging bridges and laying pipes who spoke little English. Their white superiority complex makes them ignorant to the fact that, of course, the colonised people wouldn’t make learning the coloniser’s language their priority or even wish to learn it in the five years since the annexation of their territory. Their biased views aren’t limited to Indians. They also refer to the Irish, the Gauls and the Iberians as “lower peoples of Europe” who ended up with the worst traits of several races combined. Through their characters, McGill attempts to show the bigoted beliefs of British men in that time period.

Mary’s mentor, Jehangir Jamsetjee, is heavily inspired by Ardaseer Cursetjee Wadia, an eminent Parsi naval engineer and the first Indian to be elected a Fellow of the Royal Society. In *Orientalism*, Said also analyses how the Western writers and scholars have historically constructed the Orient as a romanticised, exotic, and often negative "Other" in contrast to the rational, progressive West. Mary states how Mr. Jamsetjee’s Parsi faith is accepted by imperialist Britishers because they view it as “nothing more than an exotic party trick, powerless to affect England’s own good and moral citizens” (McGill, *Our Hideous Progeny* 165). Despite all his many achievements in various fields of scientific study, Mr. Jamsetjee still faced racism and prejudices from his British peers in the scientific society that prided itself on being enlightened. One such encounter is when a young geographer addressed Mr. Jamsetjee, what he believed to be a compliment,

Each of the races has their own strengths, of course! … But it is the white race that is naturally the most advanced in terms of culture and intelligence … the more rational peoples tend to have thin noses, strong brows, and so on. I can see that you have quite an aquiline nose, Mr. Jamsetjee . . . Have you thought you might perhaps have European

ancestry? I suspect that many of the individuals who have been able to overcome the natural obstacles of their race and improve themselves to the extent that they rival even the greatest minds of Britain must be- (McGill,*Our Hideous Progeny* 79)

The structures that concentrate power towards the dominant in-groups over the othered groups ensured that Mr. Jamsetjee couldn't even fight back. Because that man was the nephew of the East India Company supervisor who could report his defending himself as "uncivilised" behaviour, and the Company could terminate their contracts with his family business. He has to walk the tightrope of not irritating the wrong man and smile in the face of racial insults because retaliating would confirm the societal prejudices that follow him through life, that he is a savage. This precarious position is highlighted in his advice to Mary, "This country … this empire … is a ship, Miss Brown. It is hard enough to stage a mutiny from the deck, but if one starts in the water, well … One cannot afford principles if one is trying not to drown" (McGill 81).

Connections are important too and part of the social hierarchy that dictates the accessibility of knowledge and power. Mr. Jamsetjee, being the 'other', is pushed out, his grant from the Royal Society revoked, in favour of a less deserving British scientist who knew someone on the committee. Clarke and Captain Strachey, while discussing his project, dismiss him as a "bumbling fool" , deliberately mispronouncing his name as "Jamboree" while mocking his research objective without fully understanding it, confident in their racial superiority.

The novel also highlights how economic constraints create an 'other' of the 'have-nots' who are unable to access the same resources and knowledge as the 'haves'. It is the proletariat or working class that is made the 'other' by the bourgeoisie or owners of capital. This is true for the scientific world that characters in the novel navigate. "Science was a game of money and connections" (McGill 41-42). It was difficult for people with limited resources like Mary and her husband to compete with well-off scientists who were able to fund expeditions, collect rare specimens and study them at leisure, and build their scientific reputations, not forced to make a meagre living from magazine writing. It was the reason why people like Mr. Jamsetjee who's dependent on the society grant, had to smile in the face of prejudice and another in a long list of reasons why women scientists like Mary had to work together with her husband, for they lacked monetary independence. The condescension by the moneyed scientists towards "lower classes" is apparent in how Mary was considered a "lowly, worthless thing" due to circumstances of her birth or was made to feel "a step behind, a world apart" for her dowdy dresses and provincial manners. (McGill 77). Rightly, Raymond Williams asserts in *Culture and Society* that class distinctions have always played a crucial role in determining who controls knowledge and who remains in the shadows of history. Through these demonstrations, the novel critiques the hypocrisy and biases of the intellectual spheres of nineteenth-century England.

McGill, through their characters, deftly weaves together the themes of otherness into the narrative and highlights the experience of those marginalised by gender, race, sexuality and class. Mary's queerness, scientific ambition, and class background mark her as 'the other' in a society that favours conformity and patriarchy. Mr. Jamsetjee's experience as 'the other' demonstrates the colonial and socio-economic prejudices faced by those like him in 19th-century England. By blending gothic tradition with feminist and postcolonial critique, *Our Hideous Progeny* asserts that the true monstrosity lies not in the difference between the 'natural' and the 'aberrant' but in a society that fears and suppresses those it deems anomalous as 'the other'. In reclaiming their personal and intellectual spaces, McGill's characters reclaim agency, voice, and self-definition. Drawing on the theories of otherness by Derrida, Spivak, de Beauvoir, Said, and Butler, this paper substantiates the ways in which *Our Hideous Progeny* presents different constructions of 'the other' and the systems established by the dominant groups that oppress those they deem as 'others'.

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