

RETHINKING THE WORLD: MOTHERS AND PROSTITUTES IN MICHEL FABER'S *THE CRIMSON PETAL AND THE WHITE* (2002)¹

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Rethinking the World: Mothers and Prostitutes in Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and The White* (2002)

Abstract: Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) is an attempt to deal with the issue of prostitution and rescue work in London in the 1870s. The two protagonists, William Rackham (a middle-class respectable man) and Sugar (an intelligent prostitute) become involved in a relationship where she becomes his daughter's governess. The issue of maternity becomes central in the novel as Sugar's own childhood was one of suffering and trauma.

As a Neo-Victorian project, this novel tries to bring to light the violence exerted against children in the context of Victorian London. Following Judith Butler's theories of gender violence, resilience and resistance, this article aims to discuss issues of the Victorian neglected other and contemporary concerns about the suffering of children as the victims of trauma. Also, the novel tries to demonstrate that restoration and healing are possible through female agency.

Keywords: mothers, prostitutes, neo-Victorian, trauma, gender violence, resilience, resistance, healing.

Repensando el mundo: madres y prostitutas en *The Crimson Petal and The White* (2002) de Michel Faber

Resumen: La novela de Michel Faber *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) aborda la temática de la prostitución en el Londres de 1870. Los dos protagonistas, William Rackham (un hombre respectable de clase media) y Sugar (una prostituta inteligente) entablan una relación al convertirse ella en la institutriz de la hija de él. La maternidad es también un tema central en la obra, dado que la infancia de Sugar está marcada por el sufrimiento y el trauma.

Como proyecto neovictoriano, la novela intenta arrojar luz sobre la violencia que se ejerce contra los niños y las niñas en el contexto del Londres victoriano. Según las teorías de Judith Butler en relación a la violencia de género, la resiliencia y la resistencia, este artículo se propone analizar temáticas vinculadas a la otredad en la época victoriana y al sufrimiento de los niños y las niñas que han sido expuestos a situaciones traumáticas. Asimismo, la novela se propone demostrar que superar el trauma es posible a través de la agencia femenina.

Keywords: madres, prostitutas, neovictoriano, trauma, violencia de género, resiliencia, resistencia, sanación.

Michel Faber's most acclaimed and best-seller novel *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) is an attempt to deal with the issue of prostitution and rescue work in

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London in the 1870s. The East End is an area where, away from the fashionable and respectable sites of the metropolis, drunkards, thieves, immigrants and prostitutes loiter around in depraved houses of accommodation and taverns. The two protagonists, William Rackham –a middle-class respectable man and heir to Rackham perfumeries–, and Sugar –an intelligent prostitute who is writing a book to take revenge on the abuses she has suffered at the hands of men– become involved in a relationship where desire and companionship intermingle to question issues of morality and class at the heart of Victorian England. Sugar becomes Rackham’s kept mistress and then his daughter Sophie’s governess, establishing a relationship of friendship with his mentally ill wife Agnes.

The issue of maternity becomes central in the novel as Sugar’s own childhood was one of suffering and trauma. She herself becomes a kind of surrogate mother when she takes Sophie with her and tries to give the child a proper and caring atmosphere. Governments face today issues of social injustices in connection with the sexual exploitation and violence exerted against children who do not deserve the category of human. However, in the case of the novel, healing after conflict is possible thanks to resilience and revenge at Sugar’s hands. She takes control of the situation when she runs away with Rackham’s daughter and releases his wife Agnes from the bondage of seclusion in a mental asylum.

As a Neo-Victorian project, this novel tries to bring to light the violence exerted against children in the context of Victorian London where the helplessness of the innocent victims of lust and debauchery is shown. The aim is not only to rescue the destitute, but also to find the way to show sympathy for the suffering of “the other”. Similarly, the novel’s commitment to the Neo-Victorian agenda represents an attempt at the restoration

of justice for those neglected by past and present communities and whose suffering does not deserve any political consideration. Following Judith Butler's theories of gender violence, resilience and resistance, this paper aims to discuss issues of the Victorian neglected other and contemporary concerns about the suffering of children as the victims of sexual exploitation and abuse. Despite the perpetuation of western systems of government and sovereignty across time and different locations, the story displays the possibility of healing and recovery through agency in the female protagonist.

The Crimson Petal and the White (2002) is a text is firmly established in the tradition of Neo-Victorianism as historical fiction. As such, it bears witness to the traumas of the past and makes use of different Neo-Victorian genres and tropes like the Gothic, memory and traces of former times and the restitution of those neglected by history and denied the status of human through social justice and retaliation. As Marie-Luise Kohlke puts it, "Neo-Victorian" can be defined "as term, as genre, as 'new' discipline, as cultural happening, as socio-political critique, as reinvigorated historical consciousness, as memory work, as critical interface between the present and past". (2008: 1) As she tries to explain, the nineteenth century is a forerunner of all or most of our present day traumas, the majority of which need commemorating or working-through. These include "social ills, such as disease, crime, and sexual exploitation", all of them present in the text object of my discussion (Kohlke 2008: 7). All this forms part of the Neo-Victorian agenda of revisiting, revising and rewriting the past, avoiding the nostalgic approach to a golden era and going beyond to engage with a project of adaptation and appropriation that highlights contemporary concerns and anxieties, attempting to make sense of our current realities. As a postmodern trend, Neo-Victorianism questions notions like hierarchy, legitimacy and authority while simultaneously denouncing and rectifying certain historical wrongs

which also characterize our modernity (Bowler and Cox 2009/2010: 3-5). On many occasions, children are the bearers of these wrongs in the form of trauma and social ills, and this is the case with some of the characters in *The Crimson Petal and the White*.

The conditions of the poor and the dispossessed are not that different in the nineteenth if we compare them with those of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. *The Crimson Petal and the White* describes in many of its passages how the lives of the working poor were; recurrent images of children who were the victims of destitution or who were entrapped in networks of prostitution are present in the story to remind us of a shameful reality that haunts both our past and our present. The words of Faber echo the controversy about white slavery in the last decades of the nineteenth century when W.T. Stead published a series of articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* entitled “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” in the summer of 1885. He denounced the traffic in young girls who were deflowered by perverse aristocrats and sold at the London markets of vice. They were sometimes lured into prostitution under the false promise of clothes and a job and a roof by a madam who then kept them in brothels so that they could not escape; in other instances, they were sold by their own parents or guardians to be deflowered and then work as prostitutes. The social uproar that this situation provoked led to the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act which raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen for children (Bartley 2000: 171-173). The trade in children was a common feature of Victorian London: “Not a week goes by that *The Times* doesn’t print reports of a well-dressed child being lured into an alleyway by a kindly-looking matron, then ‘skinned’ – stripped of its boots and clothes– and left for dead” (Faber 2002: 817). Nonetheless, the traffic in children for the purposes of prostitution, in armed conflicts and for the selling of organs still persists nowadays.

The novel denounces that the action taken then as now regarding forced prostitution and gender violence is not enough. In the Victorian period, charities proliferated to reform and help working-class people who were the victims of poverty and depravation. In particular, the Society for the Rescue of Young Women and Children, also known as the Rescue Society, was founded in 1853 by Daniel Cooper to protect women and children against prostitution, establishing several homes in London. Its aims were “the reformation of openly immoral women, and the guardianship of young girls exposed to danger”. (Charity Organization Society draft report, 21 April 1885) In the story’s subplot, the female protagonist, Mrs. Emmeline Fox, is an active member of this organisation, but the novel questions the role of charities in the reform and rescue work of women and children. Her faith in future generations of men and women who do not look the other way in front of “the outrageous disclosures of human misery” leads her to believe in humanity “outraged into action” (Faber 2002: 208). This future is our present; however, what is being done is not enough, and the metaphor of the London inferno is representative of the inhuman condition in which the lives of the destitute slip away: “The streets of Shoreditch are rich veins of Godless destitution, true, but devilishly difficult to penetrate: the residents are hostile, and most doors slam shut at the approach of a Rescuer” (Faber 2002: 583). Thus, nineteenth century lower-class districts and spaces become culturally neglected sites of memory where reification and alienation are reminders of a history of the past which is also the history of the present (Perticaroli 2011: 119-120).

The protagonist of the novel, Sugar, is a nineteen-year-old prostitute who has been in the trade for five years. Her age of initiation is an early one, making the existence of child prostitution in Victorian times evident. She works in a brothel in Silver Street under

the auspices of a Mrs. Castaway, who is in fact her mother. Sugar writes her thoughts and feelings in a novel she is preparing about her own life:

Her story chronicles the life of a young prostitute with waist-length red hair and hazel eyes, working in the same house as her own mother, a forbidding creature called Mrs. Jettison. [...] It's the story of a naked, weeping child rolled into a ball under a blood-stained blanket, cursing the universe. It's a tale of embraces charged with hatred and kisses laced with disgust, of practiced submission and the secret longing for revenge. It's an inventory of brutish men, a jostling queue of human refuse [...] all waiting for their turn to root out the last surviving morsel of innocence and devour it. (Faber 2002: 228)

Mrs. Jettison is in fact Mrs. Castaway, Sugar's mother, and if we have a close look at Sugar's words, it is the story of a little girl who has been forced to work in prostitution by her own mother as a child of thirteen and who is full of hatred for those men who have robbed her of her innocence. The role of families and particularly of mothers in the sexual exploitation of their daughters was also put forward by W.T. Stead in his articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 1885 as they sold their own daughters and were responsible for teaching their children about physiology and moral sexuality. Child prostitution became a serious social concern in the Victorian period arising the fear of the sexualisation of children. He believed that many of these children were born to families where immorality was common and depravity and vice were present in their everyday lives (Romero Ruiz 2011: 40-41). Sugar's biography is a desperate cry of someone who has lived through trauma the early years of her existence:

*My name is Sugar – or if it isn't, I know no better.
I am what you would call a Fallen Woman, but I assure you I did not fall –
I was pushed. Vile man, eternal Adam, I indict you!*
(Faber 2002: 336, the text Italics)

It can be perceived that in *The Crimson Petal and the White* texts and memories offer themselves for the reader to decode and analyse them as traces of the past. The importance of *the trace* becomes an outstanding feature of the neo-Victorian genre and particularly of this novel, where the relevance of mysteries, secrets, traumas and most oppressive aspects comes to the fore in the form of autobiographical writing, or conceptual archives left for future generations. Resorting to haunting and spectrality, Arias and Pulham define *the trace* as a neo-Victorian trope which consists in the appearance of the Victorian age in contemporary literature “unlocking occluded secrets, silences and mysteries which return and reappear in a series of spectral/textual traces.” (“Introduction” xx; their Italics) These texts are there to be received and reinterpreted and, in this way, they gain “a multiple temporality, linking past and present and potentially extending into the future” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 26).

At the same time, making this confession can be therapeutic for Sugar as well as for all the victims of sexual violence and abuse. The sexual exploitation of women and children and the use of violence to subjugate the victims of human trafficking and transnational prostitution resonate here as the sad features of our contemporaneity. Similarly, child sexual abuse is a frequent phenomenon today, and it is a dramatic experience which needs healing after the huge physical and psychological devastation that the younger ones suffer once they have been the victims of this too much common crime. Even in adulthood they need to find “a way of fighting the feelings of worthlessness and shame so many child abuse survivors experience” (Hinsliff). It is quite striking that despite the number of cases this toxic legacy of child abuse hardly receives any attention from the part of authorities, being a taboo to a certain extent.

The situation she suffers makes Sugar's existence traumatic and memories of a childhood where the lack of maternal care was conspicuous come to her mind. Recurrent images and words from her infancy visit her memories of the past like when her mother says to her "'You needn't shiver any more,' [...] 'A kind gentleman has come to keep you warm'" (Faber 2002: 523) or "*Oh, don't snivel so [...] You don't know what suffering is*" (Faber 2002: 725, the text *Italics*). All these words reflect situations in her infancy that have had devastating effects for Sugar.

With a mother who is her own madam and does not behave as such and an endless list of men of all kinds and various tastes regarding sexual practices, she feels the drama of a life marked by sexual exploitation and abuse as forms of gender violence. Mrs. Castaway was known for procuring girls for gentlemen so that they could deflower them, and she did the same with her own daughter. Sugar's streams of thought bear witness to this childhood trauma in the following excerpt:

Virgin, suggests a phantom prompter in Sugar's head, a sly devil with the voice of Mrs. Castaway. *Virgin*.
 'Ah...' (she looks around for inspiration) 'widow'.
Kept intact especially for you, sir.
 'Door.'
Whore. (Faber 2002: 532)

Sugar was not treated differently from the other girls in the brothel by her own mother. However, the act of remembering can be painful for the traumatised subject since it implies the reopening of his/her wound, and, in this sense, LaCapra's concept of *hauntology* becomes extremely relevant. Victims of trauma feel that there is something which haunts them as individuals for the rest of their lives (1999: 700). This is also known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as victims of child abuse usually have a

completely pervasive and rigid negative belief about themselves, and suffer from various psychological and psychiatric disorders that have been recently recognised by the World Health Organisation. Mrs. Castaway's instances of cruelty against Sugar haunt her throughout her life and leave scars in her soul. This happens even when she has a new life far away from Silver Street. Her mother's lack of maternal instinct makes of her a victim of a social and political system where children are deprived of their human condition. Sadly enough, this system mirrors contemporary cultures where many little ones are still suffering dispossession:

Ever since then, there has been something of the nightmare about Mrs. Castaway, and her humanity has grown obscure. Sugar strains to recall a Mrs. Castaway further removed in time, a mother less vinegary and more nourishing, a historical figure called simply 'Mother' who tucked her in at night and never mentioned where money came from. (Faber 2002: 283)

Children are still the victims of sexual exploitation and commodification, especially with the proliferation of human trafficking for the purposes of prostitution; also, they are the victims of sexual abuse on too many occasions. Because of this, they become defenceless individuals whose lives and deaths do not always deserve public mourning. Judith Butler's theories about mourning and violence become indispensable for the interpretation of Neo-Victorian texts like this one. Her meditations on human vulnerability to others and acknowledgement of shared interdependency runs counter with the violent and totalitarian defense of sovereignty and the suppression of dissent. Butler addresses the concept of the human, a status granted to some and denied to others, and wonders who counts as such and what makes for a life to be grievable. In every society there are individuals who are relegated to the status of non-subjects because of sexual, racial, ethnic or religious discrimination, and as a result the lives and deaths of

those who are not worth public mourning become erased from history for the preservation of regimes of sovereignty and governmentality (Butler 2006: 19-49). This happens to the children of the disposed and to the children whose past is one of sexual violence and abuse.

However, both poverty and depravity are inextricably associated with violence and lack of humanity. The victims of gender violence often suffer physical aggressions that on many occasions end up in the deaths of the sufferers. This notion is echoed in *The Crimson Petal and the White* when Sugar thinks to herself “don’t prostitutes die at the hands of their men all the time? Only last week, according to Amy, a woman was found headless and ‘interfered with’ on Hampstead Heath...” (Faber 2002: 264) or when she believes that “Maybe all the dead whores were clandestinely dumped in the Thames. One thing was certain: they didn’t have funerals” (Faber 2002: 694). The lives of certain groups of people do not have any value and their deaths do not deserve any grief or public commemoration:

The commotion in Bow Street is over, more or less. The dense pack of onlookers is dispersing from the scene of the incident. Two policemen are carrying a stretcher between them, in which sags a human-sized shape snugly wrapped in a white sheet. Carefully, but mindful of the obstruction they’re causing to traffic, they load their flaccid burden into a canopied cart, and wave a signal of send-off. [...] *Old starvelings drop dead in London every day of the week. Drunkards fall under the wheels of carriages. It wasn’t the strawberry-seller. She’s snoring in her bed, with two shillings under her pillow.* (Faber 2002: 398, the text italics)

This passage is very telling as to what extent our past and present cultures ignore the suffering of particular groups of individuals whose destinies are not relevant to systems of thought or ideologies of power. And this is also part of the Neo-Victorian project, to raise awareness about the incongruence of progress and civilization in relation to the

erasure of subjectivity for those whose humanity is denied due to a process of “othering”. Sadly enough, dehumanization affects children as much as adults.

The nightmare of Sugar’s infancy makes her long for a family and finds one in Mr. Rackham’s household when she becomes Sophie’s governess. She becomes to her the mother she never had, and in this way reasserts her identity and exerts agency, thus counterbalancing the process of “othering” she has been enduring. However, when there is violence and we become vulnerable, there is also resistance which opposes precarity. In this sense and in Butler’s words, “Feminism is a crucial part of these networks of solidarity and resistance precisely because feminist critique destabilises those institutions that depend on the reproduction of inequality and injustice” and “inflict violence on women and gender minorities” (2016: 20). Sugar offers resistance by taking the control of Sophie’s education and care, destabilising the patriarchal authority of Mr. Rackham.

Being a mother becomes her way of taking revenge on her past and the means for retaliation: “Without knowing why, Sugar suddenly longs to crawl into bed with Sophie, to hug her tight and be hugged in return, to kiss Sophie’s face and hair, then clasp the child’s head against her bosom and rock her gently until they are both asleep” (Faber, 2002: 687). She enjoys her role as a mother, but, at the same time, she receives the love of her “adopted” child who “embraces her as she did yesterday, except that this time, to Sugar’s astonishment, she strokes and pats her governess’s hair in an infantile approximation of a mother’s tenderness” (Faber 2002: 798). Having the child’s love back, Sugar can find some soothing and healing for the scars of a past without a real mother.

Faber finishes his novel with the narrator addressing the reader once more in the following words: “Let them toil, let them grab, let them disappear in obscurity, you

haven't time to see any more" (2002: 830), emphasising the lack of humanity of the destitute. As a way of conclusion, I would like to highlight again the role of Neo-Victorian fiction as a catalyst of both past and present day traumas. The main aim of literary representations of the Victorian era is to call the attention of contemporary readers to the past traumas that haunt our contemporary communities, following LaCapra's notion of *hauntology*. We are inheritors of the violence and crimes committed against particular groups of people who have been neglected and erased from history because of political or socio-cultural regimes of power which classify them as "deviant" and "the other".

This is the case with *The Crimson Petal and the White* where the re-writing of the Victorian past provides the means to call attention towards situations of injustice and lack of humanity towards certain social groups, and in particular towards children. For that purpose, the use of tropes like spectrality or the use of the trace in the form of written documents left for future generations provide the most adequate setting for the recreation of past traumas like prostitution and white slavery. These find their contemporary reflection in the persistence of the trade which has acquired a trans-national dimension in the form of human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation. These criminal activities are accompanied by violence and the erasure of the individual's identity and agency, and it is in this context that we can evoke Judith Butler's theories about mourning and violence. Following her words, we can call for action so that human vulnerability is not taken for granted in particular groups or individuals and political authorities and social agents get involved in the restoration of their human status. This is also part of the Neo-Victorian project and finds its reflection in Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*.

These precarious situations still persist today and this is especially relevant in the case of the sexual exploitation of the little ones who bear the traces of their childhood

trauma for the rest of their lives. This trauma can be overcome to a certain point by the showing of sympathy for those who are the victims of commodification on sexual grounds. Children are most vulnerable, and the protagonist Sugar tries to counterbalance her own history of degradation and deprivation with her new role as a caring mother. In this way, she re-asserts her identity and exerts agency, finding healing and restoration in her new adopted role. The novel is therefore calling for the construction of a revisionist history of progress in connection with motherhood through a narrative of transgression that reflects current situations of sexual violence and abuse. Neo-Victorian texts speak about present and past traumas and become engaged in the process of restoration and healing.

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