

Adriana Raducanu, *Speaking the Language of the Night: Aspects of the Gothic in Selected Contemporary Novels*. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin: Peter Lang, 2014. 206 pp. ISBN 978-3-631-62803-4.

Revived in the 1980s and gaining prominence over the next thirty years with a slew of important critical works and at least two journals (*Gothic Studies* and less directly, *Horror Studies*) devoted chiefly to the genre, Gothic studies has recently undergone a vital shift from its focus hitherto on Anglo-American narratives to a more global perspective, a movement that some scholars have labelled Global Gothic. It is within this context that Raducanu's intriguing study comes into view. *Speaking the Language of the Night* is an important contribution to a growing field of inquiry that seeks to expand the critical parameters and our understanding of the Gothic. For Raducanu, the Gothic is more than a category corresponding to a canon of English and American narratives, but also a poetics that articulate extreme experiences in ways that can potentially leave the reader viscerally affected. It is, to use a different phrasing, an aesthetical performance that gives voice to what would otherwise be unspeakable or unspoken, and thus is not a feature specific to any one national literature, but to all writings. To substantiate her claim, Raducanu sets out to analyse a selection of narratives that are distinctly unrelated – at least within academia – to the Gothic by nevertheless deploying a variety of conceptual frameworks developed by Gothic scholarship to inform her interpretation.

Speaking the Language of the Night is divided into six chapters, with a separate introduction that promotes a realignment of the Gothic to global concerns and outlines the project's critical direction. In the ensuing chapters, the works of six broadly postcolonial writers are respectively discussed. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is the focus of chapter one, where Raducanu investigates the familiar Gothic trope of metamorphosis that renders the body abject, which the narrative expresses through its main protagonist. Raducanu then shifts her consideration of transformation from within to that from without in the next chapter devoted to the works of Nobel Prize winner, Herta Müller, specifically *The Land of Green Plums* and *The Appointment*. The horror that underscores the self's relationship to an oppressive and apparently invincible State, and the physical and psychological strain on the former that is engendered by this relationship, is productively explored here and given a genuinely Gothic flavour that serves to highlight the terror living under Communism. These first two chapters may be read as juxtaposing pieces that clarify the significance of transformation as either empowering when it is usually from within, however grotesque the end result may be, or debilitating when from without, because it represents the self's reduction by a force that, although real, is nevertheless immaterial and thus cannot be named.

The next two novels that Raducanu engages together in chapter three are Gregory David Robert's *Shantaram* and Orhan Pamuk's (another Nobel Prize recipient) *The Black Book*. In a strikingly original feat of comparative reading, Raducanu aligns these texts to what is known as "urban Gothic," and argues her case along the lines of the aesthetical premise particular to this subgenre, such as character types and narrative preoccupations. Accordingly, Robert and Pamuk's novels, with their array of dubious characters, their representation of a seedy cosmopolitan underworld, and their clever narrative misdirections, are tasked, in Raducanu's analysis, to bear a pseudo-Victorian atmosphere (because the urban Gothic is often associated with late Victorian gothic novels) that nevertheless does not rob them of their distinct cultural specificity. A focal point of discussion here is the porosity between self and other that leads to the confusion of identities, and to this end, Raducanu turns to the gothic motif of the double to mount her argument. This motif also helps her segue neatly into the next chapter devoted to Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, which deals with the contentious subject of human cloning. Departing from most scholarship of the novel that is also largely negative, Raducanu's treatment is surprisingly sympathetic given the otherwise "impure" aesthetics she appropriates to read this work.

Salman Rushdie's *Shame* and Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* constitute the primary concerns of chapters five and six respectively. As *Shame* has been read as Gothic by a few other scholars, Raducanu distinguishes her argument by locating the sublime in the child-monster character central to the story, and the significance of its operation in the narrative. The last chapter engages Desai's novel in what Raducanu calls an "intertextual dialogue" (Raducanu 166) with Brontë's well-known Gothic novel to evidence the Gothic's exertion over and influence on the imagination of postcolonial literature.

As someone who shares a similar interest in globalising the Gothic, I am admittedly biased towards Raducanu's assertions, which I found insightful and refreshing. There are, however, some aspects of her analysis that, in my view, could be further improved; as it stands now, while her discussion is undoubtedly interesting, it lacks persuasion and may potentially undermine her claim that the Gothic is articulated in these texts. I will mention just two. The first involves her choice of texts. Here, my issue is not with her selection (and she does provide strong reasons for each text's inclusion), but the lack of a compelling explanation that addresses their presence *as a collective* and how these texts are interrelated. Müller, for example, is clearly the odd one out, but while her inclusion is emphatically defended by Raducanu, her link to the other writers – all of whom are clearly postcolonial – is not explained. As a result, the book reads more like a collection of essays rather than a unified work. The absence of a conclusion to this study serves to further reinforce this drawback. The second concerns her argumentative approach, whose shortcomings are

incidentally tied to her use of concepts. Raducanu's conceptual turn is often guided by motifs in the narratives that are proximate to those in Gothic literature; in other words, concepts developed in Gothic studies to examine the genre's panoply of set motifs are then appropriated by Raducanu to study parallel motifs in her selected texts. While this is a perfectly acceptable strategy to interpret literature, it must also be tempered by sensitivity towards socio-cultural preoccupations that may inscribe a Gothic motif in a non-Gothic, non-Anglo-American work with a different significance. Raducanu's approach often fails to consider this dimension, thus resulting in perspectives that are uncomplicated and hence, lacks nuance. This limitation is further exacerbated by her eclectic but casual approach to concepts. Raducanu frequently goes beyond concepts directly connected to the motif under discussion, but supplement her reading framework with a wide range of others drawn from different (often poststructuralist) theories. This not only potentially clutters her discussion with too many digressions (although Raducanu is always careful to relate concepts back to her point), but, possibly because she lacks space to deal with them more extensively, renders her conceptual framing overly neat and uncomplicated, as if these concepts are unproblematic and thus do not require interrogation. In many cases, and apart from chapter five (which is also, to me, the most compelling), it seems as if the author is merely attaching concepts to ideas instead of critically engaging them in a concentrated dialogue with each other, or letting the texts speak to the concepts to possibly reconfigure the latter. It would be better for the author to deliberate on fewer concepts so that she can deepen her engagement with them and explore the possibility of taking them to new directions, yet always informed by her texts.

Nevertheless, a couple of unmistakable laudable results are observable from Raducanu's consistent identification of the Gothic in her selected texts; the first is a series of innovative and fascinating readings, especially with regards to parts that manifest ambiguity and/or discomfiture, and the second is a provocative demonstration of how the Gothic can be rethought as an imperative aesthetic feature found in *any* literature dealing with extreme experiences and conditions. The force of her interpretations is further fuelled by her writing style that is crisp and straight to the point – a style often lacking in much scholarship in literature, whose tendency is often towards unnecessarily turgid and jargon-filled discourse. These are the strengths that help balance out the drawbacks I mentioned above and ultimately tilt the book towards exemplary scholarship. As a first book, *Speaking the Language of the Night* is impressive in its vision and interpretive originality, which encourage me to look forward to more of its author's scholarship in the coming years.

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