

THE POLITICS OF RE-PRESENTING *VANITY FAIR*:  
MIRA NAIR'S BECKY SHARP

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W.M. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* offered his readers a relentless critique of Victorian society through the portrayal of Becky Sharp's adventures. Thackeray's intertextual dialogue with other Victorian texts materialises in the masculinisation of Becky Sharp, necessary for her to attain the power she aims for within Victorian identity politics. Ultimately, Becky's 'masculine' wish for power is punished and she is pushed to the periphery of Victorian society. This paper addresses the reading of Thackeray's character that Mira Nair offers early 21st century audiences. The paper will examine the dialogical interchange established between the Victorian text and postmodern notions of subjectivity and the extent to which this dialogue emerges in a re-presentation which feminises Becky. By flattening Becky's sharp masculine ends, Nair's production seeks integration, restoring her from the periphery of Victorian mainstream discourses on identity to the centre. Mira Nair takes a kind, comfortable look at Thackeray's character, negotiating her will to climb the social ladder with her role as mother, for example. Contemporary con-texts inform Nair's reading of Thackeray's novel in an intertextual game which proves critically productive.

Keywords: Fiction; Adaptation; Film; Victorian literature; Feminist; Post-colonial

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LAS POLÍTICAS DE LA RE-PRESENTACIÓN EN LA FERIA DE LAS VANIDADES:  
BECKY SHARP EN LA PRODUCCIÓN DE MIRA NAIR.

La feria de las vanidades, de W.M. Thackeray, ofrece a sus lectores una crítica feroz de la sociedad Victoriana a través del retrato de las aventuras de Becky Sharp. La novela construye a Becky como una mujer 'masculina', habilitándola para que pueda conseguir lo que se propone dentro de las políticas de la identidad de la era Victoriana. Pero este deseo 'masculino' de poder de Becky es castigado en la novela, y ella es relegada a la periferia de la sociedad Victoriana. Este trabajo estudia la lectura que Mira Nair ofrece a la audiencia del siglo XXI de este personaje de Thackeray. EL trabajo examinará el intercambio dialógico establecido entre el texto victoriano y las nociones de subjetividad postmodernas, así como la manera en que este diálogo emerge en una re-presentación que afemina a la propia Becky. Al feminizar a Becky, la obra de Nair busca la integración, restaurarla desde la periferia de los discursos dominantes de identidad victorianos al centro. Los con-textos contemporáneos permeabilizan la lectura que Nair hace de Thackeray en un juego intertextual que demuestra ser críticamente productivo.

Palabras clave: Narrativa; Adaptación; Cine; Literatura victoriana; Feminismo; Post-colonial

### 1. Representation, masculinity, abjection.

The instinct of imitation is implanted in man from  
childhood, one difference between him and other animals  
being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and  
through imitation learns his earliest lessons

(Aristotle, *Poetics*: Sec. IV)

As the critical production of the first decade of the present century has revealed, the study of the politics of representation is still a central concern for the postmodern scholar, the aesthetic artefact being considered a critically productive terrain where discourses of power are undoubtedly at work. Furthermore, representation has come to be seen as inseparable from interpretation, and that, as is now widely accepted, is an unavoidably political activity.<sup>1</sup>

In her latest book on the subject, *The Theory of Adaptation*, postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon's starting point that adaptations are "deliberate, announced, and extended revisitations of prior works" (Hutcheon 2006: xiv) leads her to argue that "art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories" (2006: 2). Hutcheon, following the most recent work in the field of adaptation, makes the point that adaptation may be repetition, though repetition without replication (2006: 7), and develops the idea further by arguing that there are many different possible intentions in the act of adaptation.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in his seminal work on adaptation, Brian McFarlane already discusses what he refers to as "Fidelity criticism" (1996: 8) and points to the need to find other ways to approach the subject. He even argues that adaptation may be perhaps a "desirable - even inevitable - process in a rich culture" (1996: 10) to conclude that "there are many kinds of relations which may exist between film and literature, and fidelity is only one -and rarely the most exciting" (1996: 11). The critical debate around adaptation has proved very effective in recent years. Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (2005: 8), for example, speak of the need to rescue the film adaptation as a form of criticism or reading of the novel. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (2007: 3) go a step further when they argue that they want to look at literary texts not as primary sources but as intertexts, in an attempt to free adaptation from one to one comparisons with their literary source. Finally, Thomas Leitch makes the crucial point that "texts remain alive only to the extent that they can be rewritten", adding also that "to experience a text in all its power requires each reader to rewrite it" (2007: 12).

Hutcheon's specific study of adaptation may be read as continuation of her critical work on postmodernism, where she had already argued that a dominant postmodern concern is the fact that entities such as capitalism, patriarchy and liberal humanism, for

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper of the same title delivered at the 3<sup>rd</sup> *International Association of Adaptation Studies Conference* held in Lampeter, Wales, in August 2008, as well as on the paper 'Monstrous Women: The Female Masculine in Victorian Fiction', delivered at the *Monsters and the Monstrous Conference* held in Oxford in September 2009.

<sup>2</sup> The discussion on the relations between literature and film has been going on since Bluestone's 1971 *Novels into Films*. Other critics such as Giddings, Selbey and Wensley (1990), Cartmell and Whelehan (1999), Naremore (2000), Stam (2000), Lothe (2000) have also contributed to a critical debate that has proved very fruitful.

instance, which we unthinkingly experience as 'natural', are in fact 'cultural' (Hutcheon 1989: 2). This is so, since they are unavoidably mediated by representation. Representation becomes self-conscious, in so far as it acknowledges its existence as such, that is, as interpreting its referent, not as offering direct and immediate access to it (Hutcheon 1989: 32). Hutcheon develops her point further and also states that all cultural forms of representation are ideologically grounded and cannot avoid involvement with social and political relations and apparatuses (Hutcheon 1989: 3). Furthermore, culture, in Hutcheon's terms, is the effect of representations, not their source, and postmodernism is specifically concerned with the ideological values and interests that inform any representation. Since, according to Russell, we can only know the world through "a network of socially established meaning systems, the discourses of our culture" (1980: 183), a study of representations, Hutcheon states, becomes an "exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past" (Hutcheon 1989: 7). Subjectivity is represented from here on as something in process, never as fixed, autonomous and outside history. And it is always, in Hutcheon's argument, a gendered subjectivity, rooted also in class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation (Hutcheon 1989: 37). The construction of gender is assumed as both the effect and the excess of representation (de Lauretis 1987: 3), particularly since it can no longer be considered politically neutral and theoretically innocent. And so, dissecting the politics of representation along these lines necessarily implies "an interrogation into the way the repetition inherent in cultural imagery ... has the particular ideological function of presenting and positioning 'feminine' or 'masculine' subjectivity as stable and fixed" (Gagnon 1987: 116). In this way, social systems of power which validate and authorize some images of women instead of others will be questioned and not condoned. Ultimately, Hutcheon affirms, feminist theory coincides with the complicit critique of postmodernism in its recent self-positioning both inside and outside dominant ideologies, using representation both to reveal misrepresentation and to offer new possibilities (Hutcheon 1989: 22).

The study of adaptations of canonical novels may certainly be critically productive by drawing on Hutcheon's critique. As the other recent studies in the field have shown, and in line with Hutcheon's argument so far, the study of film adaptations of novels is a most interesting critical exercise when it reaches beyond the study of fidelity and explores the dialogical (Bakhtin) / intertextual (Kristeva) nature of the relation between the two texts. It is undeniable that the study of adaptation draws attention to the politics of representation in the works considered and so, it may also be argued, it reveals one of the central postmodern concerns as has been shown so far. Furthermore, in the case of *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray already shows himself to be aware of representation as inherent to mankind (see the above quotation from Aristotle) and repeatedly blurs the borders that separate reality from fiction, so that fiction somehow becomes reality and reality is seen as fiction. In this sense, it is worth remembering here that, if in the preface to the novel Thackeray wrote: "As the Manager of the Performance sits before the curtain on the boards, and looks into the Fair, a feeling of profound melancholy comes over him in his survey of the bustling place" (1981: 33), he closes his work with "let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out"

(1981: 797). As Christoph Lindner suggests, “the prologue to *Vanity Fair* possesses an unmistakably carnivalesque air” (2002: 568). Lindner goes on to argue that Thackeray invites the reader to think about the novel as a ‘Performance’, positing himself as stage manager with the performance and the players belonging to the public-square world of the fair. In this manner, all the ingredients of the Bakhtinian carnival world are present: “Thackeray’s foreword to *Vanity Fair* asks us to understand society in the novel as carnivalesque performance, spectacle, and exhibition” (Lindner 2002: 568). However, Thackeray’s representation of the carnivalesque shares little of Bakhtin’s general optimism, possibly as its object is the representation of the material world of an emerging consumer culture: “in *Vanity Fair* the carnival now meets the commodity” (Lindner 2002: 569). “All the world is a stage”, Shakespeare wrote.<sup>3</sup> Thackeray definitely agrees with him.

Judith Halberstam (2002: 355-75) argues that masculinity is the social, cultural and political expression of maleness. Her point is that masculinity, as a cultural construction, is not restricted to the male body, as it has commonly been understood, but may find expression in the female too, in what she terms the female masculine. The study of female masculinity, she goes on to state, is critically productive in so far as it may afford us a new understanding of how masculinity is constructed in discourse. Masculinity, Halberstam states, “inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege” (2002: 356).<sup>4</sup> The female masculine challenges this cultural construction and so it is, in Hutcheon’s terms, “a sign of misidentification and maladjustment, as a longing to be and to have a power that is always out of reach” (2006: 360).

Patriarchal discourse has traditionally constructed the female masculine as monstrous. Indeed, we could apply Kristeva’s notion of *abjection* to Halberstam’s concept of the female masculine. Kristeva terms abjection “that which does not ‘respect borders, positions, rules’, that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’” (Creed 1993: 8). Abjection works within society, separating out the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject. Creed agrees with Kristeva when she argues that the abject must be excluded from life, from society, from the place of the living subject. It must be placed on the other side of a border which is imaginary but crucial, since it separates the self from all that which threatens it. However, the abject must ironically be tolerated, since while it threatens to destroy life, at one and the same time it also helps to define life. Abjection fascinates desire but must be repelled for fear of self-annihilation. Further, Creed goes on to conclude, this is necessary for the subject to take up his place in relation to the symbolic (1993: 9). Ultimately, that which

<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like it* (2/7):

All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages.

<sup>4</sup> If, for instance, adolescence for boys represents a rite of passage and an ascension to some version of social power, for girls, adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment and repression (Halberstam 2002: 358).

crosses or threatens to cross this imaginary border is always ambiguous, an inherent condition of the abject. In this sense, Kristeva (1987: 207) argues that the best of modern literature (Dostoyevsky, Proust and others) explores the place of the abject, a place where boundaries begin to break down, and where we are confronted with an archaic space before such linguistic binaries as self-other or subject-object.

## 2. Monstrous masculine Becky

Thackeray published *Vanity Fair* in 1848, at a time in which the feminine ideal was centred on the popular Victorian image of "the angel in the house", who was expected to be devoted and submissive to her husband, definitely a con-text (Barker and Hulme, in Drakakis 1985: 236) within which a reading of the author's masterpiece proves critically productive.<sup>5</sup> The angel was passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious and, above all, pure and asexual. The phrase *angel in the house* originated in the title of an immensely popular poem by Coventry Patmore, in which he holds his angel-wife up as a model for all women: "Man must be pleased, but him to please / Is woman's pleasure".<sup>6</sup> The ideal woman of the time should be modest and reserved; she should watch her words and not come forward. At the same time, she should not reveal a strong personality and must always be obedient and submissive. The feminine ideal evolves around matrimony and motherhood, and so women at the end of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century were taught to 'be liked', to answer men's expectations of them. The only end of a woman's life in nineteenth-century society was marriage and motherhood, and single women were marginalised and scorned. Everything they had been taught had one purpose, getting a husband. Women were pressed to hunt for husbands, though they had to be subtle about it and never make the matter obvious, making true what Adrienne Rich would a century later verbalise in the following terms: "... the most [women] can do is teach their daughters the tricks of surviving in the patriarchy by pleasing, and attaching themselves to powerful and economically viable men" (1979: 91).

The essence of femininity, as argued by many moralists, novelists and scholars of the time was sacrifice, devotion to the male and to the family, a notion that could of course only develop in marriage and maternity, family and the home, concepts which were deeply rooted in the bourgeois, patriarchal morality of the century. Women (middle and high class) were not allowed to have a profession, only exceptionally that of governess, headmistress or housekeeper, if their financial circumstances should force them into it. Once married, the majority of women of the middle and upper classes spent most of their lives at home. With the rise of welfare and material comfort these

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Lisa Jadwin argues that "Thackeray was writing *Vanity Fair* at a time of revolutionary unrest in Europe and feminist agitation in England, when, despite a decade of hard-won political and intellectual gains, British women found themselves increasingly defined as avatars of silence, submission, and domestic servitude. Victorian 'femininity' required women to impersonate passivity and helplessness, and by definition prevented them from voicing discontent. Consequently female double-discourse became the *lingua franca* of Victorian women" (1992: 667)

<sup>6</sup> The poem by Coventry Patmore was originally published in 1854 and revised through 1862.

women were often leisured (they had servants) so they were offered few challenges and no opportunities for personal development. More often than not, they became prey to idleness and felt trapped in lives which sometimes felt meaningless. At the same time, the education received as well as the roles in which they were trapped, left them with feelings of frustration and fear of any kind of change in their lives for which they were little or not prepared at all. And so, women formed the bulk of the reading public in the nineteenth century, becoming voracious novel readers, somehow proving Catherine Belsey's argument that narratives are spaces where desires might be safely explored, since stories are powerful ways to imagine alternatives and explore possibilities: "Stories are about desire" (1994: 208).<sup>7</sup>

The 'angel in the house' ideal was repeatedly challenged by the nineteenth-century woman writer. From Austen to Woolf, the nineteenth century woman novelist often explored the complexities behind this model to reveal its contradictions, subvert the ideal and explore alternatives. It is revealing, in this connection, that the year before the publication of Thackeray's novel, Charlotte Brontë had published her female *Bildungsroman* *Jane Eyre* (1847), much acclaimed by Thackeray and evidently another con-text to be considered when reading *Vanity Fair*. In this sense, Richard A. Kaye reads the character of Becky as a re-writing of Jane, making the point that Thackeray sets up Becky as her foil many times in the novel and drawing on the similarities between them as "strong-minded women who threaten conventional Victorian notions of femininity in their rise from orphaned obscurity to considerable social status" (1995: 727).

In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray presents his readers with two female characters, Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, two sides of the same coin. Becky is an orphan whilst her friend Amelia is born into the high Victorian urban middle classes. The writer uses these two female characters to explore and parody the complexities of the Victorian ideal of womanhood. Amelia Sedley is a personification of the angel in the house. She is weak, dependent, fragile, submissive and silent. She is the Victorian ideal of femininity incarnate and Thackeray is hard and even cruel with her. Her worship of her dead husband is pathetic and Thackeray is merciless in his portrayal of this passive woman, incapable of independent action or independent thought. The writer punishes her to the extreme that her adored child ill-treats her even more than her idolized husband, George, had done before, and, though in the end she marries *dear* Dobbin, we are not really allowed to rejoice much and almost feel sorry for Dobbin himself, whose unrequited love has been strong enough to last through the almost eight hundred pages of the novel. Dobbin obtains his reward at the end, though Thackeray not only does not make his love heroic but keeps the narration at a distance from the event and seems to disagree with him as to the value of it all:

The vessel is in port. He has got the prize he has been trying for all his life. The bird has come in at last. There it is with its head on his shoulder, billing and cooing close up to his heart, with soft outstretched fluttering wings. This is what he has asked for every day and hour for eighteen years. This is what he pined after. Here it is – the summit, the end – the

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<sup>7</sup> Marina Warner (2002) also argues that narratives are spaces to experiment with multiplicity.

last page. Good-bye, Colonel.- God bless you, honest William! – Farewell, dear Amelia –  
Grow green again, tender little parasite, round the rugged old oak to which you cling!  
(1981: 792)

To this epitome of the angel in the house, Thackeray juxtaposes Becky Sharp, only one year after the publication of *Jane Eyre*: “She was small and slight in person, pale, sandy-haired, and with eyes habitually cast down. When they looked up they were very large, odd, and attractive” (1981: 49). Becky Sharp is an orphan like Jane Eyre, though Thackeray starts his revision of Brontë’s female *Bildungsroman* from “she never had been a girl, she said; she had been a woman since she was eight years old. O why did Miss Pinkerton let such a dangerous bird into her cage?” (1981: 49) Unlike Jane, Becky is familiar with the ways of the world from the start, with the ways of Vanity Fair, which is precisely why she is never a girl in the novel: “‘I’m no angel’. And, to say the truth, she certainly was not” (1981: 49). This is the reason why Thackeray’s novel proves not to be a *Bildungsroman* itself, as there is no journey from innocence to experience, no development of character in this direction. Instead, Thackeray’s work is consciously a parody, a satire on the ways of Victorian society: “Come children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out” (1981: 797).

Becky wants to progress, as many other novel heroes of her time had done before her and would do after her, ( for instance, Dickens’s characters). Her wish to progress is emblematic of the emerging capitalist bourgeois society in which she lives, though Becky has a problem here: she is a woman in a man’s world. According to the gospel of self-help,<sup>8</sup> men were admired in Victorian society when capable of material progress by their own means. In fact, their personal ambition and wish for self-fulfilment and, by extension, power over their lives were unquestionable proof of their worth as males. Instead, women had no means of progressing other than marriage. Becky knows this instinctively, as she is a survivor (in this sense a rogue, akin to eighteenth century novel characters),<sup>9</sup> and she knows that becoming a governess like Jane Eyre will not get her anywhere in social and financial terms. Only by marrying someone like Rochester, for instance, may women like Becky achieve power through social and economic security and improvement (see Austen’s view of marriage as the only answer to a woman’s life).

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Smiles wrote a number of biographical and moral works, of which the best known is *Self-Help*, a guide to self-improvement, published in 1859. Kimmel (1996: 26) affirms that “the term *self-made man* was an American neologism, first coined by Henry Clay in a speech in the US Senate in 1832 ... Rev. Calvin Colton noted in 1844 that America ‘is a country where men start from a humble origin, and from small beginnings gradually rise in the world, as the reward of merit and industry ...’ ... The central characteristic of being self-made was that the proving ground was the public sphere, specifically the workplace”. Kimmel has studied the relation between the self-made man and the construction of masculinity in the modern western world.

<sup>9</sup> The word *rogue* was first recorded in print in John Awdeley’s *Fraternity of Vagabonds* (1561), and then in Thomas Harman’s *Caveat for Common Coursitors* (1566). The 1572 Vagabond Act defined a rogue as a healthy person of no land, no master and no legitimate trade or source of income; it included rogues in the class of idle vagabonds.

And Becky sets herself to progress in the only way society allows her, through marriage: "If Mr Joseph Sedley is rich and unmarried, why should I not marry him? I have only a fortnight, to be sure, but there is no harm in trying'. And she determined within herself to make this laudable attempt" (1981: 55). She makes of marriage her profession and applies herself to it, body and soul. She is ambitious, independent, clever, self-made, and uses her body to meet her ends.<sup>10</sup> She has none of the qualities of the angel in the house (except her beauty, which she puts at the service of her ambition) and therefore subverts the Victorian ideal of femininity to impersonate what Judith Halberstam refers to as the female masculine, a man (in cultural terms) in a woman's body.

Becky wants power, which, within Victorian identity politics, turns her into a monstrous creature. And she is therefore constructed in the text as a monstrous mother. Indeed, whereas Thackeray devotes time and space to the birth of Georgy and Amelia's nursing and loving of her child, he merely reports the birth of Rawdy: "In the early spring of 1816, Galignani's Journal contained the following announcement in an interesting corner of the paper: 'On the 26<sup>th</sup> of March, - the Lady of Lieutenant-Colonel Crawley, of the Life Guards Green - of a son and heir'" (1981: 414). Within the text's dialectics, Becky's masculinity disqualifies her from motherhood. And so the relation between Becky and Rawdy is portrayed as cold, distant and unloving in Thackeray's novel: "[Becky] had not, to say truth, seen much of the young gentleman since his birth ... His father would ride over many a time to see him rosy and dirty, shouting lustily ... Rebecca did not care much to go and see the son and heir. Once he spoiled a new dove-coloured pelisse of hers" (1981: 433). Curiously enough, the masculinisation of Becky runs parallel to a somewhat feminisation of Rawdon, her husband, especially emphasized in Thackeray's exploration of Rawdon's tenderness as a father. The subversion of roles works effectively to the construction of Becky as a monstrous mother and by extension a monstrous female, following Victorian identity politics.

Indeed, the two extremes cannot be reconciled (no wonder, bearing in mind the standards of parenthood in Victorian society) and Becky is finally ostracized, much like Heathcliff before her. The ambiguity<sup>11</sup> is never resolved, and Becky is pushed to the social periphery whilst the novel is left without a heroine. Amelia, however, is not vindicated as the perfect model either. The novel confronts the reader with a relentless critique of the Victorian model of femininity, yet shows itself suspicious of alternative models, which may be read as an expression of society's fears of women like Becky, women who challenged the dominant stereotypes of femininity.

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<sup>10</sup> Sambudha Sen argues, in this sense, that "What makes Thackeray's delineation of Becky's body truly paradigmatic of the social dynamics that underlie the novel ... is that the moralized trajectory of representation coexists with a fascinated exploration of the socially empowering aspects of her sexuality. At this level Becky's body, far from being a passive object of male fantasies, is shown to be something that is deployed, with brilliant effect, by a gendered intelligence so developed that its maneuvers in the social arena are often compared with those of Napoleon in war" (2000: 495).

<sup>11</sup> One of the signs of abjection is precisely ambiguity (see Kristeva 1987), duplicity. It implies multiplicity, which threatens the stability of the Cartesian subject.



### 3. Heroic feminine Becky

At the time of Virginia Woolf, half a century later, the repressive ideal of women represented by the angel in the house was still so potent that the famous novelist wrote, in 1931, "Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer" (Woolf 2009a). From then on, the amount of work done by women in this direction has marked their artistic production throughout the twentieth century in a variety of ways. The work of Mira Nair<sup>12</sup> may be inscribed in this new 'tradition', so to speak. In this connection, Mira Nair offers her viewers a fresh representation of both Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley. She rescues Becky from the margins and reads her as a heroine, a woman to be admired and perhaps even to imitate.

Nair also sets her re-presentation of Thackeray's work in Victorian England, substituting the classic dark view of the period that we have traditionally seen on screen in most films dealing with Victorian England for a much more colourful one. This is one of the elements that strike the viewer, and anticipates the celebration of Becky Sharp that takes place throughout the production. The gaze is full of light. Nair does two very interesting things with Becky from the beginning. One is that she gives Becky a childhood and a (*dead*) mother. Indeed, the film introduces Becky playing with her puppets in a dark scene which includes her father selling a painting of her mother. On the one hand, the world has become a stage and the characters are puppets in Becky's hands, with her now being the real character and puppet-mistress. The boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred in a postmodern fashion, while a link is established with the preface as well as the ending of Thackeray's novel. In Nair's production, Becky's little play is one about the nineteenth-century marriage market, about marriage and money, which indirectly serves to inscribe her story in the history of womankind at large:

- Is this your daughter, madam?
- I will take her, half cash down and half in consols.
- Surely, mama, you cannot sell me to the highest bidder though he is a lord!
- Why ever not, child? We cannot flout the rules of good society. [Excerpt from film]

On the other hand, Becky is related to the classic Victorian hero (a Dickensian or Brontëian character), an orphan in a dark, hostile world where survival is difficult. Characters such as Heathcliff, Jane Eyre, Oliver Twist and Pip become precursors of this Becky Sharp at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, Becky has a

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<sup>12</sup> Film Director/Writer/Producer Mira Nair was born in India and educated at Delhi University and at Harvard. She began her film career as an actor and then turned to directing award-winning documentaries. Her debut feature film, *Salaam Bombay!* was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1988. Her next film, *Mississippi Masala*, an interracial love story set in the American South and Uganda won three awards at the Venice Film Festival. Nair directed *My Own Country*, based on Dr. Abraham Verghese's best-selling memoir about a young immigrant doctor dealing with the AIDS epidemic. In the summer of 2000, Nair shot *Monsoon Wedding* in 30 days, a story of a Punjabi wedding, winner of the Golden Lion at the 2001 Venice Film Festival, *Monsoon Wedding* also won a Golden Globe nomination for Best Foreign Language Film and opened worldwide to great critical and commercial acclaim. In May 2005, Nair premiered the Focus Features production of the Thackeray classic, *Vanity Fair*.

mother who is dead but present. Tenderness becomes an element in the portrayal of the character, which was absent in Thackeray's version (as masculinity implies lack of tenderness according to Victorian gender politics). This is not the case now. Nair repeatedly offers her audience instances of Becky's soft-heartedness: when Becky gives Amelia her present of the only painting by her father she has left, when she sees the painting is being auctioned at the Sedley's sale, or when she sees the picture of her mother again in Lord Steyne's house towards the end of the film. Nair's insights into Becky's marital chamber also offer the audience some gentle moments to share. Nair's peeping into Becky and Rawdon's privacy certainly contributes to her feminisation. Becky is indeed a young woman and she is shown as a loving wife. She may be ambitious, she may be strong, she may wish for power, yet she is at one and the same time a sexy feminine woman, tender and desirable.

The other interesting aspect focussed on by Nair at the beginning of the film is her re-presentation of the character of Lord Steyne. He appears from the beginning as a menace, an impersonation of the dangers of the world in which Becky is moving. His first appearance is definitely Dickensian and Nair inserts him into a tradition of dark worldly characters like Fagin or Miss Havisham.<sup>13</sup> Steyne makes his first entrance now to buy Mr Sharp's painting of the latter's dead wife, ironically called *Virtue Betrayed*. Becky does not want to part with her mother's picture and raises the price. Everything can be bought and sold in Vanity Fair and everything and everybody has a price, which is made clear from the beginning. Yet the gaze on Becky is kind, and it is necessity not vice which is underlined in Nair's production at this stage:

LORD STEYNE: And if I give you 10 guineas for this picture of your mother, will you be happy to see it go?

BECKY: No. But it will be too much to refuse.

Becky, one may presume, needs the money to survive. Therefore, she is justified. Lord Steyne re-appears a number of times as witness to Becky's life experience throughout the film. Through him, Nair offers her audience a degrading portrayal of Victorian aristocracy. Lord Steyne has no scruples and is corrupting. He has Rawdy, Becky's son, sent to school and pushes Becky through the social door, though he asks for her sexual favours in return: "I never forget anything Mrs Crawley ... least of all an unpaid debt". Once little Rawdy is sent away, Becky is progressively pushed to the periphery of Victorian society: "the trouble is, Mrs Crawley, you've taken the goods. It's too late to query the price", as when she plays the exotic-dancer at one of Lord Steyne's parties. At this point, Nair cleverly subverts her own representation of Becky. Indeed, watching the exotic-dance scene, Lord Steyne's gaze seems to dominate the framing of the character. Becky is consequently apparently constructed as a sexual body to gaze at, becoming an object of male desire: fair, beautiful and sexy. But, at one and the same time, she seems to resist such framing and the audience is invited precisely to reject Lord Steyne's masculine gaze, so that somehow Victorian politics of

<sup>13</sup> Two references are worth making here also, one to Cuarón's *Miss Dismore* (1998 adaptation of *Great Expectations*) and the other to Polanski's *Fagin* (2005 adaptation of *Oliver Twist*), as relevant con-texts also in a consideration of Nair's production.

gender are altered in Nair's production. And so, at this stage, Nair's adaptation of the Victorian text draws attention to Becky's naivety in so far as she seems surprised to find out the price she is bound to pay both Lord Steyne and society. In this way, though her performance as exotic-dancer locates her as Other according to Victorian cultural constructions of gender, Becky will eventually be rescued from the margins towards which she seems inevitably pushed. Indeed, Becky will be socially ostracized from here, as Rawdon comes home to find her in Steyne's arms and leaves her after pushing Steyne out of their house. But for a moment she is also an unprotected abandoned girl, and the audience is invited to feel sorry for her, even to read her as a victim of the powers-that-be.

Lord Steyne also serves Nair's purpose of feminising Becky in a different way in her reading of this character. Becky's portrayal as a mother is clearly softened in this film adaptation. To be redeemed from the margins and reconstructed positively, Becky definitely cannot be a monstrous mother. And so she's not. Lord Steyne is now the real worldly creature, while there is some naivety in Becky, which reveals multiplicity and is used by Nair, together with her softened portrayal as a mother, to rescue her from the margins to which Thackeray had pushed her.

As in the portrayal of most Victorian orphan heroes, Nair's reading of Becky Sharp repeatedly insists on the ways in which she is bullied and marginalized by society. From Miss Pinkerton, through George Osborne and Miss Crawley, to Lord Steyne's wife and daughters-in-law, Becky is consistently rejected by the powers-that-be as an outsider, much like Heathcliff or Frankenstein's creature before her, for instance. Yet, and as has already been discussed, Nair's Becky is not submissive and, like Jane Eyre, she voices her rebellion and subverts the discourses of power that constantly try to engulf her.<sup>14</sup> She has Becky proclaim "*Vive la France*", inscribing her words in the post French Revolution European discourse of liberty, equality, fraternity that paved the way for the development of civil rights in the Western world throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Becky's relationship with Miss Crawley is a good exponent of the ways in which Becky is marginalized by Victorian society. Miss Crawley, together with Sir Pitt and Lord Steyne, represent Victorian aristocracy in *Vanity Fair*. While Nair uses Lord Steyne to personify the dark side of society, always menacing, she uses Miss Crawley brilliantly to portray society's hypocrisy, placing her alongside other famous fictional women aristocrats of the century such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh or Lady Bracknell, for instance. The egalitarian speech of Miss Crawley (whose pet dog is named Byron) will mislead Becky, who will ultimately be rejected by her, though Becky never loses her smile.

Becky is an adventurer and an explorer and views her own life and changing luck always with equanimity. Nair rejoices in that smile in her reading of the character. Life is a game and offers the chance of playing many different roles, which allows for the possibility of exploring the multiplicity of subjectivity, as it is conceived in the postmodern world.

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<sup>14</sup> Mick LaSalle states, in this connection, that "'Vanity Fair' is inevitably a feminist tale, because Becky will not be kept down" (2004).

Nair has Becky play Scarlett O'Hara. Margaret Mitchell repeatedly denied that her character was based on Becky Sharp and that of Melanie Hamilton on Amelia Sedley. Yet, critics have insistently established a connection between the four women and, generally, between the two novels. What cannot be denied when watching *Vanity Fair* is that Nair believes in the connection and goes back to *Gone with the Wind* to relate Becky to Scarlett. Two scenes stand out here: the Waterloo scene and the farewell scene between Rawdon and Becky. The former recalls the Gettysburg scene in *Gone with the Wind* in a very obvious manner, with Rebecca playing the protecting male towards Amelia, just as Scarlett protected Melanie in the much acclaimed film. The latter scene is the moment in which Rawdon leaves Becky. To Becky's "In my way I've loved you", Rawdon replies "Then that is your misfortune". Rawdon and Rhett Butler become one. The result is the masculinisation of Rawdon (through the identification with the virile Clark Gable) and the consequent feminisation of Becky through her identification with Scarlett at that moment. This feminisation of Becky, as has been seen, is a relevant strategy in the process towards rescuing Becky from the margins to restore her to the centre. The intertextual game proves particularly fruitful here and serves its purpose effectively.

Finally, Amelia Sedley is dealt with respectfully in Nair's production. To Thackeray's satirical view of the character, Nair juxtaposes a kind, feminine one. On the one hand, Melanie Hamilton is very apt as intertext here. Scarlett learns to appreciate and value the braveness of women like Melanie, who at the end of her life is praised and valued by Scarlett, which elevates Melanie in the audience's appraisal. On the other hand, Amelia, like Melanie, represents womankind at large. She is the conventional suffering daughter, wife and mother, living her life through the life of others: father, husband and child. In her treatment of Amelia, Nair seems to repeat Woolf's claim that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (Woolf 2009b: Ch. 4). Amelia is where women come from, Becky where they are heading to. But mothers ought to be valued, since we need to integrate our past in order to construct ourselves successfully in the present and future.

#### 4. "I love to visit new places": Celebrating Becky's adventure of life.

Nair's reading of Becky Sharp offers the twenty-first-century audience a refreshing representation of the emblematic nineteenth-century character. Becky Sharp, who had been demonized because of her masculine ambition and desire for power and pushed from the centre to the margins of Victorian society, is nowadays rescued by Mira Nair's production to be enjoyed and admired. Postmodern understandings of subjectivity (individual and social) as multiple, and of representation as inherent to reality (or at least to our knowledge of reality) as well as of the politics inherent in representation allow for a re-visioning of this character alongside Western twenty-first-century notions of gender identity. Becky's sharp masculine ends are flattened in this adaptation: her desire for personal fulfilment is reconciled with her role as mother; her ambition and wish to climb the social ladder are reconciled with her tenderness, her beauty is reconciled with her wit. All in all, Becky undergoes a process of feminisation and is rescued by Nair from Thackeray's construction of her as a monstrous female masculine.

As has already been argued, Linda Hutcheon claims that adaptation, as a deliberate, announced and extended re-visitation of a prior work is, above all, repetition without replication, pointing to the fact that there may be many different possible intentions in the act of adaptation. Mira Nair's revisiting of Thackeray's novel proves the extent to which cultural forms of representation are ideologically grounded and cannot avoid involvement with social and political relations and apparatuses. Indeed, the process of feminisation of Becky Sharp in the hands of Mira Nair is not politically neutral, and points to the ways in which dominant Western discourses of gender have been constructed in the past centuries and are still constructed nowadays. Nair's portrayal of Becky shows that masculinity and femininity are both culturally constructed at the same time as it also brings to the surface the extent to which film adaptations of novels may be read as interventions,<sup>15</sup> that is to say, having a bi-directional relationship with the culture in which they are produced, both feeding from and actively contributing to the construction of culture itself. In this connection, Becky's rescue from the margins of Victorian culture also shows that, although the concepts of masculinity and femininity have undergone a significant transformation since the nineteenth century, postmodern notions of identity are nevertheless trapped in binary constructions of gender, whereby masculine/feminine are still determinant in the shaping of subjectivity. Once again, as with many other adaptations of nineteenth century fiction, Victorian identity politics prove to be a critically productive source from which to understand contemporary revisions of social dynamics.

All in all, Nair's production of *Vanity Fair* celebrates Becky with all her complexities and, contrary to what happens in the novel, rewards her at the end of the film, uniting her with Joseph Sedley and sending her to India. This final turn reveals the politics of Nair's postmodern re-vision of Thackeray's classic as both post-colonial and feminist. Indeed, Nair's production fills Victorian England with light and colour mainly through Becky, who is always seen full of colour and light in the film, as well as through everything associated with Joseph Sedley (and by extension with India), likewise portrayed and framed in colour and light. In this way, Becky and Joseph are somehow 'united' from the beginning of the film to finally join together in India.

In this sense, the film may be seen to draw on the relation between both discourses in their concern with the struggle against oppression and injustice, at least in so far as imperialism, like patriarchy, is an ideology of subjugation and domination. If, within imperialism, the colonized subject holds the position of the oppressed Other, women hold a similar position within patriarchy. Rewriting Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, both patriarchal and imperialist in ideology, Mira Nair rescues both women and the colonies from the periphery they occupy respectively in the discourses of patriarchy and imperialism, uniting them at the end of the film. Indeed, the margins ultimately replace the centre in Nair's refreshing reading of Becky Sharp. Life is an adventure and, as Becky says when she first meets Joseph in the film, "I love to visit new places".

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<sup>15</sup> I am drawing here on Sinfield's (1992) notion of *literature as intervention*.

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