

Writing Women of the *Fin de Siècle*

Authors of Change

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'I have expiated my sins to you at last': Motherhood in Victoria Cross's Colonial Fiction

Melissa Purdue

Every woman, however she may dress herself and however she may call herself and however refined she may be, who refrains from child-birth without refraining from sexual relations, is a whore.

Leo Tolstoy, *What Then Must We Do?* (1886, 107)

New Woman writers' explorations of motherhood came at the end of the nineteenth century when pressures on women to prioritize motherhood were heightened in the face of growing feminist activism and concerns about the future of the nation. Grant Allen, for one, argued the importance of motherhood in women's lives in his 1889 article 'Plain Words on the Woman Question,' claiming that 'A woman ought to be ashamed to say she has no desire to become a wife and mother' (452). His primary concern was clearly with the health of the nation: 'In Britain, at the present day... an average of about six children per marriage (not per head of female inhabitants) is necessary in order to keep the population just stationary' (Allen 450). This stance was reinforced by others like Katrina Trask¹ in her 1895 article 'Motherhood and Citizenship: Woman's Wisest Policy.' Like Allen, Trask argued that a woman's duty was 'not the mere bearing of children in an accidental, incidental way, but the mission of the perpetuation of the race; and, until she understands and studies to fulfill her trust to the utmost, she has failed in her obligation and privilege' (610). According to Trask, women should keep themselves physically, mentally, and spiritually fit because the future of the race would depend on them. In the face of such rhetoric, a rejection of motherhood was not simply a personal choice, but an act against the nation itself.

There was particular tension surrounding the figure of the New Woman, who was believed to hold a firm anti-motherhood stance. As Sally Ledger explains, 'the repeated assertion that the New Woman rejected motherhood had a profound political significance at the *fin-de-siècle*: such a rejection was regarded by some not merely as a rebellious whim but as a threat to the English "race"' (18). Arabella Kenealy, for instance, in her 'The Talent of Motherhood,' cautions the New Woman, 'lest in the keen excitement of her new independence, the rush and activity of her new interests, she shall be forgetful of that grave trust the welfare of her children, and, through them, of the progress of the race' (458). Likewise, Ouida, in her article 'The New Woman,' criticizes the 'contempt with which maternity is viewed by the New Woman' and suggests that she might 'practically rule the future of the world' if she would only concentrate on motherhood and the education of children (616, 618). Both Kenealy and Ouida believed the New Woman to be anti-motherhood and both suggested that true power might come from embracing the institution instead.

Certainly, there were New Woman writers who did reject motherhood. Mona Caird's heroine Hadria in *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), for example, argues that 'motherhood, as our wisdom has appointed it, among civilized people, represents a prostitution of the reproductive powers' (343). Further, Hadria refers to maternal instincts as 'acquired tricks' and believes that 'a woman with a child in her arms is... the symbol of an abasement, an indignity, more complete, more disfiguring and terrible, than any form of humiliation that the world has ever seen' (23, 341). Similar sentiments are found in an 1895 article, 'Motherhood and Citizenship and the New Woman,' signed by 'A Woman of the Day.' The author explains of the modern woman:

Disinclined as she is for marriage, she is far less disposed to bear children, partly out of resentment against the Madonna ideal to which she has hitherto been chained. The only woman at the present time who is willing to be regarded as a mere breeding machine is she who lacks the wit to adopt any other role, and now she is the exception instead of the rule. That the zenith of her youth should be spent in the meaningless production of children born into a country already over-populated, seems to the woman of today a sorry waste of vitality. (753)

Responding directly to those like Allen who argued for the necessity of motherhood for the health of the nation and the good of the

population, this 'Woman of the Day' argues that women might use their energy and talents in other ways.

Yet not all New Woman writers rejected motherhood. Sarah Grand, for one, embraced it. As she explains in an 1896 interview: 'There is no more delicate or beautiful work than training and developing the minds of children, and I have no respect for women who do not feel this to be important work' (Tooley 165). Rather than rejecting motherhood, according to Grand, women should take control of the institution and the authority that comes with it. For New Women like Grand, this authority was very much rooted in eugenics. Grand was 'a committed exponent of biological determinism and eugenic feminism' and believed that it was a woman's duty to foster the evolution of the race (Richardson 95). As Ledger explains about the *fin de siècle*, 'A good deal of feminist argument, in common with imperial discourse, was preoccupied with race preservation, racial purity and racial motherhood' (64). Feminist proponents of eugenics sought political power through their commitment to maintaining race and class-based hierarchies.

While there were New Women with opinions like Grand's,² it is safe to say that there was at the very least a growing distaste on the part of New Woman writers for the expectation that all women must become mothers. Further, New Women used their fiction to express their ambivalence, if not outright revulsion, for motherhood much more frequently than had their mid-Victorian predecessors.³ These New Woman authors offered new and complex portrayals of motherhood, particularly in the colonial context, where women might escape the constraints of traditional domesticity. Authors like Victoria Cross, Rosa Campbell Praed, Olive Schreiner, and Sara Jeannette Duncan all wrote fiction about women who grapple with expectations of motherhood away from England. Praed and Duncan express scepticism over the existence of maternal instinct and frustration over the expectation that all women should want to be mothers, and Cross transgresses further boundaries by exploring motherhood in the context of interracial relationships.

As Anne McClintock explains of the colonies in *Imperial Leather*:

Body boundaries were felt to be dangerously permeable and demanding continual purification, so that sexuality, in particular women's sexuality, was cordoned off as the central transmitter of racial and hence cultural contagion. Increasingly vigilant efforts to control women's bodies, especially in the face of feminist resistance, were suffused with acute anxiety about the desecration of sexual boundaries

and the consequences that racial contamination had for white male control of progeny, property and power. (47)

Childbearing and improving racial stock were often viewed as national and imperial duties for women at the end of the century. Anglo-Indian fiction also had to contend with established narratives about the 1857 Indian Mutiny/First War of Indian Independence. As both Jenny Sharpe in *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of the Woman in the Colonial Text* and Nancy Paxton in *Writing Under the Raj: Gender, Race and Rape in the British Colonial Imagination, 1830–1947* explain, Indian-Mutiny narratives constructed British women as innocent victims of sexual assault. In these stories, 'a crisis in British authority is managed through the circulation of the violated bodies of English women as a sign for the violation of colonialism' (Sharpe 4). The safety of British women, often constructed as victims, became an accepted explanation for enacting violence against Indian men. Once this narrative was established, it permitted 'strategies of counterinsurgency to be recorded as the restoration of moral order' (Sharpe 6).

The body was clearly central to the construction and maintenance of the British Empire, particularly women's bodies, which had the power to preserve or 'contaminate' the race. For New Woman writers in colonial settings, women's bodies were even further fraught with meaning. They were variously held up as examples of proper femininity and guardians of morality, and used as justification for violence against Indian men. Given this widespread narrative about innocent British women and rapacious Indian men, Victoria Cross's novels set in India, about English women who choose to marry Indian men of their own volition, are even more extraordinary. Thus *Anna Lombard* (1901) and *Life of My Heart* (1905), novels in which women transgress the boundaries of acceptable behaviour by reclaiming their bodies for their own pleasure, signify a direct challenge to imperial ideology.

Cesare Lombroso, in his 1892 'The Physical Insensibility of Woman,' argues that 'it is, nevertheless, an undoubted fact, that the maternal instinct in woman is far more powerful than the erotic tendency' (357). Victoria Cross seems determined to prove Lombroso wrong in her fiction. In nearly all of her novels, whether set in colonies or at home in Britain, Cross holds love (an emotional and very physical connection for her) as the highest pinnacle in life. Though her characters sometimes bear children, they never fully embrace motherhood. They are women who continually search for passionate love and feel little duty to raise the children who may result from it. In Cross's *Life's Shop Window*

(1907), for example, the heroine abandons her husband and daughter for a chance at a passionate relationship with another man. Her husband writes to her later in the novel, briefly explaining that he has obtained a divorce and that 'the child has died' (272). The letter evokes temporary pity for her former husband, but she barely grieves the death of the daughter whom she had easily abandoned. In *Hilda Against the World* (1914) it is a pregnancy that complicates the heroine's affair with the man she loves (he is already married to another woman, who is confined to an insane asylum). When the child is born she gazes at it and is:

carried back to the past when all her body belonged to him and she had been subservient to his will. She loved the child simply because it was his, a manifestation of their love, a part of him; and as she embraced it and cuddled it to her, she hoped it would resemble him, recall his bearing, his ways, his wonderful distinction. (236)

Here, one of Cross's heroines feels affection for a child, but that affection stems solely from the passion she feels for its father. She loves it 'simply because it was his.' The heroine in *Paula* (1896) expresses similar sentiments. Paula considers having a child because it would be 'the sweetest tie' between herself and her beloved Vincent (188). However, her reason tells 'her that a child is a trouble and a fetter, and that she herself would tire of it' (188). When asked by a stranger if she is fond of children:

"no – oh, no," she stammered, confusedly. It seemed absurd to her to lay claim to the general sentiment. She had always disliked children; did so still; their deficient intellects oppressed her. She avoided their society, and had never coveted their possession – on the contrary dreaded it. It was only when she thought of the man she loved that her heart melted within her. She would have valued a child as being the most adequate visible proof of how deeply she loved him. It was not the child, but the state of maternity that attracted her, this phase of life she would pass through, the suffering and the burden of it, and the subsequent responsibilities that she would like to face for this man alone. (188–9)

Here again, maternal instinct is explicitly denied and children are valued only as symbols and products of passionate love. Holding up romantic love as the ultimate experience in life, Cross frequently brushes aside motherhood as that which might interfere.

Though maternal instinct is denied in nearly all of Cross's work, it is especially important to look at the complicated ways in which it is portrayed in her colonial fiction. Here we have examples of two heroines who bear biracial children: one who ends up killing her child and another who abandons hers without much thought. *Anna Lombard* and *Life of My Heart* are partially extensions of Cross's domestic fiction in their treatment of motherhood, but they are also certainly further complicated by *fin-de-siècle* racial politics.

In *Anna Lombard* the heroine gives birth to a biracial child shortly after his Indian father, Gaida, has died. Anna, who was secretly married to Gaida when the child was conceived, is married to the Englishman Gerald Etheridge when he is born. Gerald is fully aware of Anna's first marriage and has wedded her in part to help cover up the 'indiscretion.' Their pre-birth plans are to send the child away shortly after he is born, but all of that changes when they are faced with the reality of the child. In one of the rare examples of maternal love in any of Cross's numerous novels, Anna falls in love with the baby. She dotes on him, finds him beautiful, and is so consumed with love for him that she barely acknowledges Gerald's presence. Gerald, however, despises the child and what he represents. He is disgusted by the baby's mixed racial background and is annoyed by and jealous of his monopolization of Anna's time:

a shudder went over me. It was hideous with that curious hideousness of aspect that belongs usually to the fruit of Eurasian marriages. As it lay on Anna's arm now the peculiar whiteness of her skin threw up its dusky tint. (127)

He reinforces his repulsion by stating that 'the child was hideous, horrible in its suggestion of mixed blood; horrible as the evidence of a passion long since dead, and from which she had, in suffering, freed herself' (128). Gerald's disgust clearly stems from the child's association with his father, both his race and the memory of Anna's first marriage, because we learn that 'to no eyes but those that knew the secret of its birth, would it have seemed different from a European' (128). Despite Gerald's obsession with the child's 'dusky tint,' there are actually no visible signs of his Indian heritage.

Gerald determines that it must be maternal instinct, a 'law ... greater than we are,' that is to blame for Anna's apparent blindness to his suffering (130). It is this mysterious force, this 'law' to which he is not subject, that for him must be shattered. Once he confronts Anna about her neglect of him, she falls into a depressed state and responds sadly,

“I understand everything. You shall have the reward of your long, long service. The law shall break to give it to you” (131). She reaches the conclusion that in order for her relationship with Gerald to survive, the ‘law’ of the mother/child bond must be broken. According to Gerald, she cannot be both a devoted wife and a mother (particularly a mother to someone else’s child). So in a shocking twist, she kills the child:

“I have expiated my sins to you at last. I have killed it.”

“Killed what?” I said in vague horror. Her words conveyed no sense to me.

“I have killed the child.” (132)

Anna explains that “one had to be sacrificed, either you or the child. And could it be you? Was this to be your reward for all you have done and suffered for my sake?” (133).

Though he is shocked by her actions, all is instantly better for Gerald. After the baby’s death, ‘She was, at least, something of my Anna again. She was no longer merely the absorbed mother, seeing and recognizing nothing but her child’s face, and hearing nothing but her child’s voice’ (131). As Gerald gazes on the dead child he admits: ‘The dusky little form looked very small and helpless now. Yet what a terrible power it had possessed in life, a power before which our full lives had been as nothing, because Nature had invested it with the power of her law’ (133). Once no longer a mother and under the ‘terrible power’ of maternal love, Anna is herself again. Moreover, as Gerald constructs it, she is free to love and devote herself to him.

Cross’s shocking decision to write a novel about an infanticide requires careful contextualization. As Josephine McDonagh observes, ‘the figure of child murder often disavows its most literal referent – the murder of a child – and connotes instead a host of other meanings’ (13). On one hand, much of the rhetoric surrounding the child and Anna’s decision to kill it echoes that found in Cross’s non-colonial fiction. Anna felt passion for the child’s father, and loves the baby because of the union that produced him.⁴ The child is a bond between her and Gaida’s memory and thus a firm barrier between herself and Gerald. As in Cross’s other fiction, when a heroine moves on to another love interest, any children resulting from an earlier union are depicted as troublesome obstacles. Rather than abandoning or sending away her child, however, Anna decides to kill it, erasing all visible reminders of her previous transgressions. The murder is a radical step and is certainly complicated by the child’s Indian heritage.

As Melisa Brittain explains, 'because Anna and Gaida's half-caste baby represents a threat to the stability of racial categories, and therefore to colonial power, its death renders Anna herself less threatening to the empire' (90). While alive, the baby is a continual reminder of Anna's sexual transgressions, but its death opens up the space for her to be 'reassimilated into conventional social roles' and for 'dominant ideologies of race and gender' to be reinstated (Cunningham xxiii). Passing off a half-Indian child as English would threaten the very stability of the nation.⁵ Yet, although Anna may be restoring racial boundaries and hierarchies by killing the child, she is still disrupting gender expectations. In killing her own child she is acting completely 'unnaturally' as a mother. If the abandonment of biracial offspring by European men during the nineteenth century 'was considered morally reprehensible,' a woman willing to abandon or murder her own child would have been an aberration (Stoler 89). Brittain argues that by killing her baby with her own hands, 'Cross makes Anna an active participant in her return to proper femininity, and makes visible both the racial aspects of the Angel in the House, and the limited options available to colonial women who wished to remain within the pale of British society' (91). However this return to 'proper femininity' is complicated, as it rests on an explicitly unfeminine act – the murder of one's own child.

As scholars like Ann Higginbotham and Josephine McDonagh have demonstrated, cases of infanticide occurred in Victorian Britain and were much publicized. Higginbotham states that 42 women were tried for murder, and more for attempted murder and concealment of birth, between the years 1839 and 1906 (325). These murders revealed the very limited options open to unwed mothers, particularly those of the lower classes, and suggested that throughout the nineteenth century 'infant deaths were more readily tolerated than easy virtue' (Higginbotham 337). Although Anna is middle class and respectable at the opening of the novel, after engaging in a sexual relationship with an Indian man her reputation, respectability, and economic standing rest precariously on Gerald's shoulders. Gaida is dead and Gerald is the only other person who knows the truth of the child's birth. Further, as an Assistant Commissioner he holds firm sway over how others will receive her.

Although on the surface Anna's murder of her child could be interpreted as an endorsement of eugenic feminism, this does not seem to be the case. Anna willingly chooses to engage in a sexual relationship with Gaida and expresses no concerns over the child's race when she discovers she is pregnant. She does not show disgust for the child once he is born either, lavishing kisses on him and proclaiming: '“I never was

so utterly, so perfectly happy as I am now” (129). Her painful decision to kill the child is framed as the only option if she is to stay married to Gerald.

Although the novel's events takes place later in the nineteenth century, the child's murder should also be contextualized within the larger framework of Indian-Mutiny narratives and narratives about Indians as child murderers. In *The History of the Indian Mutiny* (1858), for example, Charles Ball describes a supposed incident at Allahabad:

Infants were actually torn from their mothers' arms, and their little limbs chopped off with bulwars yet reeking with their father's blood; while the shrieking mother was forcibly compelled to hear the cries of her tortured child, and to behold through scalding tears of agony, the death writhings of the slaughtered innocent. (vol. 1, 252)

McDonagh argues that narratives like this, along with others about female infanticide, resulted in a cultural association between India and infanticide (138). Perhaps Cross's decision to depict a child murder in this novel, as opposed to abandonment in others, was influenced by this widespread narrative. Foreign places and peoples were frequently constructed as more violent and 'barbaric' than Britain and the British in colonial fiction of the nineteenth century. It also seems possible, however, that Cross might be working against these negative stereotypes. After all, it is Gerald – a respected Christian member of the Indian Civil Service – who precipitates the murder and the educated, English Anna who enacts it. Just as Cross reverses gender roles throughout the novel, so, too, might she be playing with traditional tropes of the colonizer and colonized.

Life of My Heart is another of Cross's novels in which an English heroine, Frances, chooses to marry an Indian man and have children with him. Unlike Anna, however, Frances does not hide her marriage. She admits her love fully to her father, disobeys him (he is far from happy about the union), and goes to live with Hamakhan in his village. She despises the 'degenerate' Englishmen whom her father views as acceptable mates and instead chooses a life of passion. The two live happily together for a time and have a child, but the story ends with their strange and dramatic murder-suicide.

Like *Anna Lombard*, this novel depicts a heroine who prioritizes romantic love over maternal affection, and Frances willingly ignores her child for her husband's attentions. In her portrayal of romantic love, Cross exposes the sexuality behind maternity that is absent in much Victorian fiction. Sex in her fiction is not something to be endured as

a marital duty or an act engaged in solely to procreate. Sexuality is celebrated above all else. Consider the following passage from the novel: 'Frances cared nothing for the child; she let it cling spasmodically to her lap as it best could, turning to Hamakhan and twining her arms round his glowing neck, lifting her smiling, eager face to his smooth lips' (235). The child clings to her, but she turns to cling to her husband. She ignores the child, it seems, not because of its race, as Anna is made to deny her love for her 'dusky' baby, but because her relationship with Hamakhan is all important. As with heroines in other novels by Cross, 'the maternal instincts had never been strong in her' (345). Cross again creates a heroine who prioritizes romantic love over maternity and has little in the way of maternal devotion.

Frances even goes so far as to abandon the child. She chooses to accompany Hamakhan on a dangerous mission (during which they both die) and simply leaves the baby in their hut. She appears to be wholly unconcerned about what might happen to it. As Stoler explains, actual abandonment of mixed-race offspring by colonizing men was fairly common during the nineteenth century, and there were 'civil asylums and charity schools in almost every town, cantonment and hill station' for Anglo-Indian children (70). Yet the abandonment of a child by its mother is a far more rare and shocking story, one that seems to be largely a construct of Cross's fiction. 'Child rearing... was hailed as a national, imperial, and racial duty,' and interracial unions clearly complicated this duty (Stoler 72). Nationalistic rhetoric stressed the importance of giving birth to and raising a strong generation of English children. Mothering biracial children clearly had no place in eugenic propaganda. Nevertheless, motherhood was a supposedly natural part of life for women and a noble pursuit. Cross again elides categorization as she seems to reject nationalist rhetoric, finds little wrong with interracial relationships (going so far to label Englishmen as the 'degenerate' ones), questions the very existence of maternal instinct, and holds passionate relationships above all else.

These contradictions are interestingly illuminated by descriptions of Frances's pregnant body and by the scene of childbirth. Hamakhan is filled with joy at Frances's pregnancy and, unlike Gerald who is angered by Anna's maternal devotion, embraces the prospect of a family. He is proud of her swelling belly and even asks that Frances display it to his friends. Motherhood is portrayed as a source of power for women in Hamakhan's culture, as Frances explains:

Maternity is considered the crown of womanhood, far surpassing that of youth or beauty, and that with them a woman is proud and

delighted to display it. Amongst the English, a woman regards the change in her figure with shame and hatred, and seeks at all costs to conceal it. (147)

As a result of her boundary crossing, 'Frances enters a culture where the female body and maternity are celebrated rather than abjected' (Paxton 220). The members of Hamakhan's village look approvingly on Frances's pregnant body and she feels no shame. When it comes time for Frances to deliver, Hamakhan gathers some of the women from their village together to care for her during labour. To Frances, however, the native women:

seemed like Harpies coming to seize her. Not that she had any prejudice against the natives, as many European women have. She understood and liked them; but in her agony of nervous terror, with all her excitable nerves strung up by torture, she felt a wild panic at her own helplessness as to what they would try to do to her, whether in a sort of half-feminine, half-racial jealousy they would try to disfigure her... but Frances had wronged them by her fears. (216)

Cross repeatedly emphasizes the supposedly progressive nature of Frances's views on 'natives' in the novel, but here Frances collapses into panic and stereotypical fear of the 'Other.' It is fascinating that this rupture in her identity occurs at the moment of childbirth, particularly as scenes of childbirth are rare in nineteenth-century fiction. The emphasis on Frances's physical body and her state of vulnerability heightens the narrative tension and plays on the expectations of Indian violence against English women discussed earlier in this essay. This moment, in which a culturally hybrid child is being born, acknowledges and participates in stereotypes of racial violence, but tries to push past them by emphasizing that the fears are unfounded. This attempt at a new narrative of race relations is written on Anna's first celebrated and then vulnerable body. Cross again in this novel disrupts expected tropes by glorifying Frances's pregnant body but denying maternal love, and by tapping into fears of Indian violence but explaining those fears away.

New Woman writers' colonial fiction opened up new possibilities for the *fin-de-siècle* woman. The colonial setting allowed heroines greater freedom, became an alternate space in which to explore sexuality, and provoked new discussions about motherhood. These authors attempted to open up new possibilities for women, but often put issues of gender and race in play in tense and dramatic ways in the process. Cross pushed

the boundaries of acceptability more than many with her transgressive constructions of femininity and maternity, and alternately challenged and participated in the xenophobia of her day.

Notes

1. Katrina Trask (1852–1922) was a *fin-de-siècle* American author. Although not speaking about Britain, her article does demonstrate just how pervasive the nationalistic rhetoric surrounding motherhood was during the late nineteenth century.
2. Consider Mérie Muriel Dowie's endorsement of eugenics in her New Woman novel *Gallia* (1895). Gallia chooses to marry a handsome and healthy man over the sickly and intellectual one she truly loves.
3. According to Natalie McKnight in *Suffering Mothers in Mid-Victorian Novels*, 'Good mothers in Victorian novels either have babies without complaining and care for them devotedly or die quietly and without complaining in childbirth' (17).
4. Descriptions of Anna's relationship with Gaida are conflicted in the novel. She admits feeling passion and lust for him, but also reveals disgust. These feelings are further complicated by Gerald's role as narrator. The reader is not privy to Anna's thoughts and receives all proclamations of love and disgust through this rival love interest.
5. Ann Stoler explains in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* that there was particular tension surrounding biracial male children. Moral instruction was believed necessary to avert 'political precocity among metis boys who might otherwise become militant men' (69). Without careful monitoring, such children might be able to infiltrate and destabilize carefully established British hierarchies.

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