
SPATIAL AND CORPOREAL POETICS OF THE HAUNTED HOUSE: A FEMALE GOTHIC READING OF HELEN OYEYEMI'S *WHITE IS FOR WITCHING*

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The paper seeks to offer a Female Gothic reading of Helen Oyeyemi's 2009 novel, *White is for Witching*. The dis/location of female identity and corporeality are examined within the context of Gothic space. Female Gothic corporeality and identity are explored through the themes of eating disorder, maternal hauntings, and the haunted house. The spatial and corporeal poetics of the haunted house are illustrated through the peculiar and symbiotic relationship that the female protagonist shares with the haunted house. Oyeyemi's novel is interpreted as belonging to a Female Gothic tradition and as a narrative that embraces and reconfigures the classic Gothic trope of the haunted house.

Keywords: Female Gothic, female corporeality, female identity, haunted house

1 Introduction

The critically acclaimed British-Nigerian author Helen Oyeyemi was only nineteen when her first novel, *The Icarus Girl* (2005) was published (Wisker 2016, 150). Oyeyemi's oeuvre has garnered significant academic attention in the past few years, evidenced by the collection of essays *Telling it Slant: Critical Approaches to Helen Oyeyemi* (2017). Oyeyemi's novels blend myths, fairy tales and the Gothic with tropes, narratives, and images from a wide range of literary and cultural sources. The critical reception of her work tends to consider her a postcolonial writer (Wisker 2016, 150) but her work engages innovatively with contemporary Gothic and feminist literature as well (Buckley and Illott 2017, 8). Some of her works weave together classical Gothic tropes with Caribbean folklore and African Yoruba mythology (Buckley and Illott 2017, 3).

Sarah Illott argues that Oyeyemi's novels are what H el ene Cixous describes as * criture feminine*, or "women's writing" (2017, 4) and can be read as "feminine textual bodies" (Illott 2017, 4). Cixous and other feminist literary critics, such as Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue for a distinct female literary expression that differs from a masculine style of writing. They claim

that a feminine mode of writing describes unique female bodily experiences and female anxieties. Oyeyemi herself in an interview verified that she prefers to write about women: “I just want to find out about all the different lives a woman can live” (Oyeyemi 2014).

Female Gothic is the sub-genre that most accurately describes the Gothic and feminist implications of Oyeyemi’s *White is for Witching*. The Female Gothic is regarded as a distinct sub-genre of Gothic fiction and a critical area of study. The term was coined by Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* (1976), in which she defined it as “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic” (1976, 90). Moers describes how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women novelists such as Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, and the Brontë sisters employ certain coded expressions to describe anxieties over domestic entrapment and the female body and sexuality. Moers also claims that the nature of the Gothic produced by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century female authors continues to be present in the works of twentieth-century authors such as Sylvia Plath and Carson McCullers. Moers made one of the earliest attempts to trace a female manner of writing the Gothic. She argues that Female Gothic narratives are “where woman is examined with a woman’s eye” instead of being objectified from a male standpoint (109). She argues that depictions of uniquely “female experiences” such as pregnancy, motherhood as well as the exploration of repressed sexuality, “self-disgust, the self-hatred, and the impetus to self-destruction” and giving “visual form to the fear of self” are recurring themes and more common in the writings of women than of men (107). Moers’s term touched on something vital to women’s experience and generated a body of feminist literary scholarship exploring the Gothic themes in women’s writing.

The relevance and the fertility of the Female Gothic lies in its ability to bring out new interpretations from canonical texts, re-evaluate neglected texts, and introduce new texts to the existing canon. This is evidenced by recent works such as Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace’s *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (2009), or Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik’s *Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (2016), which offers a chronological study addressing texts from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. Gina Wisker’s *Contemporary Women’s Gothic Fiction: Carnival, Hauntings and Vampire Kisses* (2016) establishes a new canon for contemporary women’s writing with the inclusion of recent works. Wisker argues that women’s Gothic writing also continues to deal with matters such as “the domestic, [...] sex and sexuality, spaces, places, behaviours and norms which oppress women, the body as a site for reproduction, and terror, technological control and power relations” (107).

Oyeyemi’s novels explore the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. For this reason, according to the critical reception of the novels, no dominant critical

perspective provides an all-encompassing reading of her fiction (Buckley and Ilott 2017, 2). The authors of *Telling it Slant* read *White is for Witching* in the context of postcolonialism (see Burton 2017, 74; Ilott 2017, 132). However, in an interview for *The Guardian*, Oyeyemi explains that readers tend to read *White is for Witching* as a story about race while it is about providing a new direction in the genre of Gothic haunted house fiction: “*White is for Witching* was my haunted-house/vampire story. But people get a bit excited if there’s a black person and say, ‘Oh this is about that thing’ when actually it’s about expanding the genre of haunted house stories [...]” (Oyeyemi 2014).

Agreeing with Oyeyemi’s claim, instead of a postcolonial reading, this paper offers an analysis of the novel in the context of the Female Gothic and aims to join and enrich the literary critical discourse of this sub-genre with the analysis of *White is for Witching*. The focal point of my investigation is eighteen-year-old Miranda Silver, who lives in a mysterious ancient house in Dover with her father Luc, her mother Lily, and her twin brother Eliot. Miranda suffers from an eating disorder called pica. After her mother’s death, her condition worsens and she develops an ability to communicate with the ghosts of her female ancestors haunting the house. Throughout the novel, Miranda struggles against the haunting presence of her maternal ancestors and the house’s domination that threatens to destroy her mental and physical health. The novel chronicles the events that lead to the disappearance of Miranda. Oyeyemi’s text leaves the ending open for several interpretations. It is never revealed whether Miranda disappeared or was killed by the house.

In the first section of the essay, I discuss the female character’s antagonistic relationship with her maternal ancestors. It focuses on Oyeyemi’s portrayal of femininity and motherhood as monstrous instead of nurturing. Femininity and the Female Gothic body are explored through the concepts of the monstrous feminine by Barbara Creed, and the abject by Julia Kristeva. I read Miranda’s eating disorder as part of her monstrous maternal inheritance and a symptom of her divided self, which I examine through the trope of the Gothic double.

Then I move on to discussing the corporeal and mental disintegration of the disturbed and fragmented female subject. Many Gothic narratives have delved into women’s concerns regarding physical and mental health; this unit argues that Oyeyemi achieves this by portraying Miranda’s unique eating disorder known as pica. This section of the analysis relies on the intersection of relevant contemporary theories such as food studies, consumption theory, and women’s Gothic fiction to highlight the connection between Miranda’s disordered eating habits and her relationship with food and consumption. The ambiguous relationship between food and horror makes us reconsider what counts as food, and motifs such as the

transgressive and devouring body, disgust, and hunger. The second half of this section discusses the erotic possibilities of food and eating in the novel.

The last section explores the topic of the haunted house and demonstrates the inventiveness of the novel by analysing examples of how the house is portrayed as a conscious character.

2 Female Gothic Hauntings: The Maternal Bloodline of the Silver Women

Many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic narratives show an interest in the family, which symbolises inheritance, usurpation, and aristocratic primogeniture: “[t]he ‘house’ (like the Gothic castle of later texts) is not just the domestic space, but itself a metaphor for the legal institutions of marriage and patrilineal inheritance (enacted through the ‘bed’) which erase the female name” (Wallace 2009, 29). A classical eighteenth-century Gothic plot involves a female character who escapes a tyrannical father and finds herself in the hands of a powerful husband. Usually, everything is about male inheritance, which means that the name and property are passed down from father to son, while women lose the right to inherit and possess. Many female authors like Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley and Shirley Jackson have questioned gender and sexual ideologies within the family structure. Instead of presenting a powerful male line, like many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic narratives, Oyeyemi centres her narrative on a powerful female line.

Juliann Fleenor places at the centre of the Female Gothic “an ambivalence over female identity, above all the conflict with the archaic all-powerful mother, often figured as a spectral presence and/or as the Gothic house itself” (qtd. in Wallace and Smith 2009, 3). The Female Gothic, in particular, offers a lens through which the complexities of female identity and motherhood are examined and subverted. Many Female Gothic texts, such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, offer monstrous and threatening depictions of female embodiment and mothering. Fleenor’s claim is in line with *White is for Witching*’s elements as it presents Miranda’s ambivalence about her identity and corporeality and her conflict with her maternal ancestors. Some Female Gothic narratives present a living mother while others use the motif of the absent and deceased mother. For example, in the eighteenth-century Gothic texts by Ann Radcliffe, the mother dies before the narrative begins. In *White is for Witching*, the motif of the absent and deceased mother appears in the haunting presence of the ghost. Miranda was sixteen when her photojournalist mother was shot to death in Haiti. Miranda could not deal with the grief, had a mental breakdown and admitted herself to a psychiatric clinic. After her homecoming, Miranda’s eating disorder called

pica worsens and she starts to get visited by her spectral foremothers, the generations of Silver women: her mother Lily, grandmother Jennifer, great-grandmother Anna Silver, and an unnamed ancestor referred to as the Goodlady.

Claire Kahane says the following about Female Gothic narratives highlighting mother/daughter relations: "This ongoing battle with a mirror image who is both self and other is what I find at the centre of the Gothic structure, which allows me to confront the confusion between mother and daughter and the intricate web of psychic relations that constitute their bond" (1985, 337). In *White is for Witching*, the bond between the generations of Silver women manifests in their eating disorder. Except for Miranda's mother, all of Miranda's female ancestors have suffered from pica. Miranda's great-grandmother, Anna Silver developed a strange craving for mud and leaves. Miranda's grandmother Jennifer also suffered from pica. Interestingly, Miranda's mother, Lily did not suffer from this eating disorder. There was an unnamed female ancestor long before Anna Silver who might be the Goodlady that haunts Miranda. The woman's mysterious condition is described in the following way:

This woman was thought an animal. Her way was to slash at her flesh with the blind, frenzied concentration that a starved person might use to get at food that is buried. Her way was to drink off her blood, then bite and suck at the bobbed stubs of her meat. Her appetite was only for herself. This woman was deemed mad and then turned out and after that she was not spoken of. I do not know the year, or even how I know this. (2009, 24)

In the Gothic, women have been identified through the body, which often has been associated with monstrosity (Mulvey-Roberts 2016, 108). Marie Mulvey-Roberts argues that the female body has been at the heart of the Female Gothic and calls it the "unruly or transgressive female Gothic body" (107). She argues that "the female Gothic body has developed through the Madonna/whore duality, incarceration, fragmentation, hybridity, and sexuality, while femininity itself has been demonised in Gothic" (108). Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous Feminine* explores the representation of woman-as-monster in the horror genre. She names this figure as the "monstrous feminine," and argues that the ghastly figure represents "what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (1993, 1). Drawing on Kristeva's notion of abjection, she argues that the monsterisation of women happens because of women's closeness to the abject, especially through menstruation and childbirth. Accordingly, this female figure in Oyeyemi's novel is explicitly described as monstrous by exhibiting cannibalistic, vampiristic and auto-vampiristic tendencies. Auto-vampirism is considered a rare medical condition and refers to drinking one's own blood. It is also documented as a mental disorder because some schizophrenic patients showed signs of auto-vampirism. People suffering from auto-vampirism

often engage in self-harm to obtain blood (Jensen and Poulsen 2002, 47–78). This female ancestor also “sustains the purity of her blood without polluting her body with the blood of others” (Stephanou 2014, 1249). Her auto-vampirism marks the beginning of the history of consumption in the female line of Miranda’s family. The madness and illness that plagued the mysterious female ancestor are later transmitted through blood inheritance. Drinking her own blood ensured the passing down of a pure female line and inheritance without the intervention of patriarchy in the Silver family. Thus, the house of the Silver women is governed not by a patriarchal system of power relations but by a powerful generation of monstrous matriarchs. Pica is also depicted as a hereditary disease because almost all of Miranda’s female ancestors have suffered from this eating disorder. The first woman’s extreme form of pica gradually moderates and is replaced by eating mud, chalk, plastic, and other inedible substances.

Oyeyemi presents a duality in motherhood, depicting it as an innocuous longing and a monstrous one. The maternal haunting is both comforting and frightening for Miranda. In the following poignant passage, the presence of her mother’s ghost offers consolation:

my adjustment to Lily’s ghost was sort of like when you’re insanely thirsty, but for some reason you can’t get the cap on your water bottle to open properly so you tussle at it with your teeth and hands until you can get a trickle of water to come through. A little water at a time, and you’re trying to be less thirsty and more patient so that the water can be enough. The thing with having seen Lily was just like that, a practical inner adjustment to meet a need. At least she is there, I’d thought, even if she is just a ghost and doesn’t speak, at least she is

there

was a bird on the windowsill later in the afternoon. (2009, 62)

Here, Oyeyemi makes an interesting comparison between the need for water and the presence of a ghost. In the Gothic tradition, ghosts have an uncertain status: “the tangible intangibility of a proper body without flesh, but still the body of someone or someone other” (Jacques Derrida qtd. in Munford 2016, 121). Thus, neither present nor absent, material nor immaterial, the ghost troubles the stability of the subject (Munford 2016, 121). Water is a soothing element and symbolises life, rebirth, and healing. For Miranda, the mother’s ghostly presence is soothing like water and is part of her healing process. In this passage, “Oyeyemi’s experimental use of lineation additionally functions as a visual code of narrative disruption” (Din-Kariuki 2017, 65). Here, two different narratives are connected by the deictic word “there,” which is placed in between them. It is relevant to Lily’s ghostly presence and the bird on the windowsill. Thus, the deictic word “there” also creates a spatio-temporal disruption

and indeterminacy. The word “there” also indicates the spatial indeterminacy of the ghost. Oyeyemi intentionally made the two happenings spatially and temporally distinct yet coalescing.

Miranda is controlled by her maternal ancestors through their shared eating habits. Joan Brumberg writes that

[e]ating disorders are rooted in the problems of mother-daughter separation and identity. [...] The “hunger knot” experienced by so many modern daughters represents issues of failed female development, fear, and the daughter’s guilt over her desire to surpass her mother. [...] Women who have disordered relationships to food are unconsciously guilty of symbolic matricide and their obsessive dieting is an expression of their desire to reunite or bond with the mother. (2000, 31)

Women in the Silver family are similarly tied to their own “hunger knot,” which manifests in their pica. The intentions of her maternal ancestors are not entirely clear for Miranda. At times she acts as a vessel for their evil forces and as a victim of their will and destructive desires. For instance, Miranda often asks her foremothers for advice on how to deal with her eating disorder: “How is consumption managed?” (Oyeyemi 2009, 170). Miranda hopes for consolation and one of the women answers her in the following way: “It is useful, instructive, comforting to show that you are not alone in your history. So I have done you good and now, some harm” (24). In the following grotesque and nightmarish dining scene, Miranda is invited to join her maternal ancestors around a table filled with edible and non-edible food:

They were naked except for corsets laced so tightly that their desiccated bodies dipped in and out like parchment scrolls bound around the middle. They stared at Miranda in numb agony. Padlocks were placed over their parted mouths, boring through the top lip and closing at the bottom. Miranda could see their tongues writhing. (2009, 127)

Here, the female body is monsterised, deemed ungovernable, and associated with threatening forces. The “desiccated” bodies of the women symbolise Miranda’s sickly, anorexic body. The maternal ancestors also resemble the devouring mother archetype of Jung, or Freud’s Oedipal mother. This archetype is a symbolic representation of a mother who devours her child psychologically and emotionally. This devouring mother represents the most negative aspects of motherhood, for example, possessiveness, control, and manipulation (Proser 2020, 155). The women invite Miranda to eat for them – as one of them says, “[e]at for us” (2009, 128). They want to control Miranda through their shared eating disorder; to make her fully embrace her maternal heritage and become like them. The women have padlocks upon their mouths, which offer “a visual metaphor for the politics of silencing that are both racial and gendered” (Harris Satkunanathan 2017, 124). Usually, some

parts of the female body, such as the mouth, breast, or genitalia, are portrayed as the most threatening (Mulvey-Roberts 2016, 111). The mouth not only symbolises resistance against patriarchy but also a dangerous appetite to destroy the racial other. Miranda's great-grandmother Anna Good's husband was killed by the Germans in Africa during the Second World War. Her hatred is expressed in racist and nationalist terms: "Blackies, Germans, killers, dirty . . . dirty killers" (Oyeyemi 2009, 118). Miranda's identity comes to resemble more and more her maternal ancestors' as she slowly comes under the control of the Goodlady. When Miranda looks into the mirror she sees all her ancestors in her mirror image: "She looked at her reflection and saw a cube instead, four stiff faces in one" (129).

Thus, Miranda's connection to her maternal ancestors and their past represents a burden for Miranda. Lily also warns Miranda that the Goodlady is "much stricter than any mother. She's like tradition, it's very serious when she's disobeyed. She's in our blood" (2009, 66). Miranda tries to break away from the hatred and sorrow that is bestowed upon her by her ancestors. She disobeys her ancestors because she leaves the house to study at a university. At the university, despite her eating disorder, Miranda tries to lead a normal life away from the house and the depressing presence of her female ancestors. Her lesbian relationship with Ore, a black girl, causes trouble for the house and the maternal ancestors because if Miranda engages in a lesbian relationship, there will be no continuation of their female bloodline.

White is for Witching shows powerful instances of the splitting of Miranda's identity. Miranda's problematic identifications include her conflict with her identity, corporeality and maternal ancestors, which are illustrated by the trope of the Gothic double. The double or *doppelgänger* became a recurring motif in Gothic fiction, which expresses otherness and the duality of human nature (Ballesteros González 2009, 119). Doubling has psychological roots because it explores a conflict in the mind. This conflict is represented by the split of personality. This motif explores the encounter with oneself as another or the other. It refers to the division of the self, such as when characters fight with the good and evil parts of their personality. The following passage shows an interesting type of double, the mirror image:

Miranda looked in. She looked with the most particular care and she saw Lily Silver standing there in her room, smiling sadly. It took half a minute, too long a terror, to realise that she was only looking at herself. Wasn't she? (2009, 33–34)

When doubling happens, surfaces such as mirrors and portraits act as mediators to reflect and reveal the darker and hidden aspects of one's identity. Here, the mirror acts as an important signifier for the acts of Miranda's self-identification. Miranda's double appears in the mirror as the ghost of her mother. The double and doubling can also be examined in the light of Freud's concept of the uncanny. Freud describes

the uncanny as something foreign, but at the same time strangely familiar ([1919] 1955, 226). In *White is for Witching*, Miranda's terror is not necessarily caused by her image in the mirror but by the uncanny recognition that she sees herself as her mother. This dread and anxiety that Miranda feels comes from the feeling of what is called matrophobia, "the fear of becoming a mother oneself; the fear of specifically becoming one's own mother" (Reid 2020, 78). Matrophobia is a recurrent motif in many Female Gothic narratives. Deborah D. Rogers coined the term Matrophobic Gothic and argues that the "dramatic heart [...] of the Matrophobic Gothic [...] is the daughter's conflict with maternal figures from whom she cannot totally separate" (Reid 2020, 78).

Tania Modleski's term "female uncanny" appears to be in line with the concept of matrophobia. Offering a gendered interpretation of Freud's argument that two sources of an uncanny sensation are "the fear of repetition and the fear of castration" (Freud qtd. in Modleski [1982] 2008, 63), Modleski argues that these are for women: a "fear of never developing a sense of autonomy and separateness from the mother" ([1982] 2008, 63). Modleski further argues that "since women have more difficulty establishing a separate self, their sense of the uncanny may actually be stronger than men's" (63). Similarly, Miranda has difficulty separating from her mother, who keeps returning. Lily's appearance in the mirror symbolises the power of the matriarchal line in Miranda's family. Miranda's biggest fears are repeating her mother's life (being murdered) and becoming monstrous like her maternal ancestors.

The following two examples of Miranda's double illustrate her problematic acceptance of her identity and corporeality. The motif of doubling occurs when Miranda sees or imagines a perfect version of herself in a drawing:

The perfect person was a girl. Bobbed dark hair, black dress, pearls she was too young for, mouth, nose and chin familiar . . . Miranda's, almost. Look, look, remember. This sight might not come again. The perfect person had beautifully shaped hands, but no fingernails. A swanlike neck that met the jaw at a devastating but impossible angle. Me, but perfect. She quickly corrected herself. (2009, 48)

Miranda sees an alternate version of herself. For Miranda, facing her double is frightening and disturbing because she recognizes herself as foreign but at the same time strangely familiar. This might be a perfect version of Miranda but somewhat grotesque, threatening and monstrous. The distinct physical features of Miranda reflect the good and evil parts of her personality. Miranda's quick correction of herself strongly indicates that she is ambivalent and hesitant about seeing herself as other and monstrous. In the following grotesque and nightmarish scene Miranda encounters her ghostly double:

She was not quite three dimensional, this girl. And so white. There couldn't be any blood in her. She was perfect. Miranda but perfect. She was purer than crystal, so pure that she dissolved and Miranda couldn't see her anymore but still felt her there. (2009, 79)

The words “dissolved” and “still felt her” prove that Miranda meets her ghostly double. However, the appearance of this ghostly double also resembles a vampire because it is too white and has no blood. Miranda's monstrosity is not just described by her strange eating habits but by her supposed vampiric behaviour. There is a possibility that Miranda inherited vampiristic tendencies from her unnamed female ancestor who drank her own blood. Oyeyemi in an interview hints at Miranda being a vampire: “I thought, what's an unnatural appetite? A girl who eats chalk, but probably with a desire to eat something else” (Oyeyemi 2010). This is evidenced in the novel when Miranda secretly desires an unnamed food and realises “how hungry she was; not for the sharp-toothed fireworks that Sade was lighting in Luc's pot. Not for chalk, not for plastic ...” (2009, 96). Elsewhere, during the nightmarish dinner scene with the maternal ancestors, it becomes evident that all the food and non-food displayed on the table “make Miranda hungrier for what was not there” (127). Thus, Miranda secretly knows that she craves blood. In both examples, Miranda sees her strange and grotesque versions, which might reflect her split self that acts as a physical manifestation of a dissociated part of herself. This dissociated part is the direct manifestation of the darker side of Miranda – none other than the figure of the vampire.

3 The Female Gothic Body: “Manage your consumption”

In *White is for Witching*, Miranda's corporeality and fragile sense of self are always connected to her consumption. Lorna Piatti-Farnell in *Consuming Gothic* argues that Gothic and horror fiction abound in images of food-related bodily experiences (2017, 3). The ambiguous relationship between food and the Gothic invites us to think about motifs such as monstrous appetite and pleasures, hunger, repulsion, and abjection. Gothic and horror literature, through the representation of food and consumption, explores and questions the boundaries between “human and inhuman, self and other, right and wrong” (4), edible and inedible, nourishing and non-nourishing. In the Gothic, humans or supernatural beings such as vampires and zombies are always associated with unnatural and monstrous appetites. Thus, Gothic food is portrayed as something that increases hunger rather than satisfies it. In the Gothic, food and consumption appear as pleasurable and disgusting at the

same time. However, most importantly, consumption always expresses the nature of the character it is associated with.

White is for Witching portrays a violation of taboo in the exploration of a peculiar eating disorder that involves eating things that should not be eaten. The illness that Miranda suffers from, pica, is a “medical term for a particular kind of disordered eating. It’s an appetite for non-food items, things that don’t nourish” (Oyeyemi 2009, 22). Brumberg writes that the classification of food-refusing people falls into three categories (2000, 102). One is “morbid appetite,” meaning “eating outside the normative food categories (ingesting leaves of trees, seeds, roots, chalk, unripe fruits, and faeces or urine)” (310). Miranda’s morbid appetite manifests itself in a strange craving for chalk and plastic. Pica is classified as an eating disorder that usually develops in infancy, childhood, or adolescence (Keel 2017, 16–17). Its symptoms sometimes increase when someone is experiencing extreme stress and anxiety. In addition, psychosocial factors such as family issues and maternal deprivation can be causative factors (S. Singhi, P. Singhi and Adwani 1981, 783–85).

In the novel, food and consumption determine the way Miranda sees herself. Food and eating are “central to our subjectivity, or sense of self, and our experience of embodiment, or the ways that we live in and through our bodies, which itself is inextricably linked with subjectivity” (Lupton 1996, 1). “Eating transforms our bodies, but it also affects our identities: for what we eat, and how we eat it, is never truly separate from our notions of ourselves” (Piatti-Farnell 2017, 4). Miranda’s strange eating habit does not just transform her body but also the way she defines herself. Ever since her early teenage years, Miranda has always defined herself through her eating disorder. When Miranda had to introduce herself in school or somewhere else, instead of saying her name she said the following: “Pie-kah, pie-kah, I’ve got pie-kah” (2009, 22). Pica also serves as the language of Miranda’s inner experience. Here, the word pica is written down as “pie-kah” (Miranda’s pronunciation) to express her affliction. Miranda as a child defined herself through her illness: “Whenever Miri talked about her pica with Lily she seemed so grown up about it, a shaky balance of humility and dignity” (22). Miranda is also aware that her eating disorder is an addiction that imprisons her body and she has little control over it. As she says to her brother, who wants to taste chalk to feel what Miranda feels when she eats it: “Don’t start, you’ll get stuck” (23). As a consequence of eating chalk and plastic, Miranda often had cramps that “twisted her body, pushed her off her seat and lay her on the floor, helplessly pedalling her legs” (23).

Oyeyemi depicts Miranda’s eating body as malleable and volatile and connects consumption to a sense of otherness. In the Gothic, consumption is a transgressive act that violates taboos, especially that of the body. Kelly Hurley in *The Gothic Body* argues that instead of presenting the body as stable, the Gothic offers “the

spectacle of a body metamorphic and undifferentiated; in place of the possibility of human transcendence, the prospect of an existence circumscribed within the realities of gross corporeality” (1996, 3). The Gothic is a body-centred mode that displays the body’s fragility, vulnerability, and bodily functions as disgusting and threatening. One of the major preoccupations of the novel is what is and is not considered food. Pica can be repulsive to those who do not suffer from it. In the following haunting scene, Miranda’s “gross corporeality” can be observed as she takes pleasure in consuming plastic:

Plastic was usually very satisfying. A fifty-millimetre wad of it was tough to chew away from the main body of the strip, but with steady labour, sucking and biting, it curved between the teeth like an extension of the gum, and the thick, bittersweet oils in it streamed down her throat for hours, so long she sometimes forgot and thought her body was producing it, like saliva. (2009, 76)

At first, before digestion, food enters the mouth. Sarah Ilott argues that the mouth in taking in food is used to symbolise the formation of Oyeyemi’s female protagonists, as the mouth “functions as border between inside and out and involves processes of identification, internalisation, and assimilation, or abjection, dissociation, and disgust” (2017, 135). Thus, the mouth is an important space where we can experience pleasure or displeasure. When food is swallowed and chewed, it “ceases to be food, and becomes something else” (Piatti-Farnell 2017, 18). It becomes Other (14). Certain matters are deemed repulsive, forbidden and one “does not put in the mouth forbidden [and] polluting things” (41). No pleasure should be connected to ingesting inedible substances. The act itself is culturally and physiologically perceived as unnatural and alien. However, consumption in itself is horrific because we can never truly know the foods that are entering our bodies: “once the oral threshold has been breached, we have been colonised by the food, connected to its sensorial and physiological boundaries in virtue of its liminal properties” (15).

Piatti-Farnell calls the Gothic body an “eating body” that gives “an insight into how the perception of the effects of food on the body – from thinness to fatness – is profoundly connected to our cultural notions of right and wrong, desirable and repulsive” (2017, 12). There is a certain feeling of otherness about the process of eating: “we leave the familiar in order to encounter the unusual, unfamiliar, strange, Other” (Heldke qtd. in Piatti-Farnell 2017, 4). Our primary goal with eating is to gain nourishment. Food can be known or unknown and there is always a certain unfamiliarity linked to consumption: food is conceptualized as extra-corporeal, it exists outside of our bodies, and it is something that physically does not belong to us. The process of consumption involves the familiarisation and acceptance of something foreign into our bodies (Piatti-Farnell 2017, 4). There is a duality in

Miranda's eating disorder. Miranda exhibits food-refusing behaviour as she refuses or reluctantly consumes edible and nourishing food, while she craves inedible, non-nourishing substances. Non-food items are not just extra-corporeal but inherently unusual and unfamiliar. In contrast, Miranda finds edible and nourishing food non-nourishing, repulsive and undesirable.

Oyeyemi, in the passage above, provokes the reader with the possibility of eating such matters and also shakes the boundaries of acceptability. The novel's preoccupation with what is and is not food also invites a reading of the novel employing Kristeva's theory of abjection. In her *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva argues that food "designates the other" and "penetrates the self's clean and proper body" (1982, 75). Abjection also "involves the process of casting away something that unsettles one's concept of identity by clouding the distinction between the self and what lies outside the self" (Murphy 2016, 28). Kristeva further argues that "[f]ood becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories. A boundary between nature and culture, between the human and the nonhuman" (1982, 75). Abjection is the feeling of anxiety and disgust that arises in the subject at the sight of certain horrible substances. These matters are faeces, urine, vomit, menstrual blood, and decaying food (2–3). Kristeva also argues that experiencing an abject material might simultaneously cause pleasure and disgust (1). The matters Miranda eats are not food per se but it is possible to consume them. I argue that they can also be considered abject materials. In the passage above, the body as a live organism merges with an indigestible substance and the body is the one that becomes the other, unfamiliar and unknown. This alien matter goes inside the body and the body becomes so accustomed to the foreign matter that it connects to its "liminal properties" by producing it. As a consequence, Miranda becomes a liminal subject. Pica is also defined as a "qualitative disturbance of appetite, a 'pathological' urge or craving" (Strungaru 2007, 32). Here, Miranda consumes plastic with an insatiable desire that can be defined as a perversion and a fetish.

Miranda's pica and lack of appetite for nourishing food leave her body starving and extremely emaciated. She begins to see her own body as the other, unfamiliar and strange, and her condition also shows signs of anorexia. Brumberg writes that the contemporary anorexic is food-obsessed, constantly counts calories, and structures her life around the avoidance of food (2000, 5). Miranda also avoids food and whenever she has to eat food, she counts the bites. To restrain her appetite and consumption, she systematically tells herself and often writes it down "Behave yourself, she wrote. Eat." (2009, 191), and "Manage your consumption" (191). This raises interesting questions: is it possible to control one's own digestive system and appetite? or is the body and its functioning forever unknown and foreign to the self?

The following paragraph describes Miranda's obsession with her condition, her own body and its flaws:

Miranda nodded and her reflection nodded, so that was twice. She crossed her hands over her stomach, as if that would stop her from retching. She blushed because the light in the fitting rooms was stark and hot, like being stared at.
(I'm not that thin, I'm not that thin)
She smoothed the pleated skirt of the dress she had on. She liked it. He had chosen the perfect dress for her. Or, at least, for the girl she wanted to be. (2009, 40)

Her slowly vanishing body is plagued by her eating disorder, which is visible when she goes shopping with her father: "full of clammy ghosts that hovered around her body when she put them on. The cold trickled down in the gaps between the material and her chest. Scarecrow girl" (2009, 36–37). Here, Oyeyemi provides Miranda's clothes with a spectral quality as she compares their thin material to a ghost. The very thin materials that Miranda tries on offer "a tangible reminder of the otherwise intangible, absent body" (Munford 2016, 123). Similarly, Miranda experiences her own body as ghostlike because of her extreme thinness. Miranda's father blames her for her condition: "No one who is well looks the way you look at the moment" (2009, 39). This shatters Miranda's already fragile sense of self, which is evidenced when Miranda admits that her life is miserable due to her eating disorder and the haunting presence of her ancestors: "I am not alive" (182). Her father thinks Miranda is too thin and refuses to buy her new clothes. This way he oppresses Miranda and exercises his patriarchal power. He aims to control Miranda's dressing, as an incentive to make her eat food. Usually, women occupy the role of the nurturer but here Miranda's father tries to assume it – yet, Miranda constantly refuses the food he cooks for her. The rejection of the father's food represents the rejection of patriarchy.

In *White is for Witching*, Oyeyemi not only explores the horrific possibilities of the oral, but also that of the erotic. At the university, Miranda begins a passionate, romantic relationship with a girl named Ore, who is of Nigerian descent. In the following quote, Oyeyemi describes the lesbian erotic embodiment through the mouth in Miranda and Ore's lovemaking: "her nipples hard under my lips, her stomach downy with the fuzz that kept it warm, the soft hollows of her inner thighs" (2009, 180). For Miranda, the mouth acts as a space where she can explore her budding sexuality and femininity. For her, during lovemaking, the mouth is something she can control; however, when she consumes inedible substances the eating disorder gains control over her.

Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran argue that the erotic bond within lesbian relationships is often expressed in terms of food and eating (2003, 5). In the following passage, Oyeyemi merges lesbian lovemaking and food:

Ore's smell was raw and fungal as it tangled in the hair between her legs. It turned into a blandly sweet smell, like milk, at her navel, melted into spice in the creases of her elbows, then cocoa at her neck. Miranda had needed Ore open. Her head had spun with the desire to taste. She lay her head against Ore's chest and heard Ore's heart. The beat was ponderous. Like an oyster, living quietly in its serving-dish shell, this heart barely moved. Miranda could have taken it, she knew she could. Ore would hardly have felt it. (2009, 191)

This passage is rich in gastronomic and erotic images. Some foods carry a strong sexual and erotic connotation because they are considered sensual for their appearance and taste. We usually associate love and sex with sweet-tasting foods (Hospodar, 2004, 84). Foods such as chocolate and whipped cream are sometimes used for titillation. Here, Oyeyemi employs milk, cocoa, oyster, and spice to depict the sensuality of their lovemaking. All of these foods are considered powerful aphrodisiacs (Hospodar 2004, 84–91). Chocolate, as one of the most effective of them, is a seductive delight that is depicted here as a smell and taste on one of the most sensual parts of the body, the neck. Oyster is said to be a classic aphrodisiac because of its shape, texture, and smell, often compared to the vulva (85). Here, interestingly the oyster is not used to symbolise the vulva but the heart. A heart that Miranda thinks she could easily take out if she wishes.

Oyeyemi portrays an interesting duality of sexual desire: a sensual, harmless desire and a monstrous one. The second half of the passage quoted above has a darker tone and depicts the possibility of violence. The mouth functions as a space through which monstrous and carnal desires speak via gustatory hauntings of taste and appetite. Miranda realises that her appetite for Ore is becoming more and more dangerous. Miranda admits that she may want to taste Ore's flesh by biting her: "running her nose over the other girl's body, turning the beginning of a bite into a kiss whenever Ore stirred, laying a trail of glossy red lip prints" (2009, 191). Miranda tries to restrain her dangerous appetite for Ore and reminds herself that "Ore is not food," and admits that "I think I am a monster" (192). Her vampiric tendencies, traceable back to her unknown female ancestor, might not be restricted to craving her own blood.

4 “There’s something wrong with this house, isn’t there?”: Miranda and Silver House

At first sight, a haunted house looks just like any other normal house, but sooner or later it turns out to be dangerous. In the case of the haunted house, the haunting does not always originate from the same source. A traditional haunted house is usually defined as a house that is inhabited by a ghost. The house does not possess a will on its own and only acts as a passive setting because the ghosts use it as an instrument. There are houses, however, whose “ominousness is not the result of a curse or possession by an unseen, alien presence, but stems instead from its very own self; that is, the house is itself the very source of strangeness or anomaly” (Ng Hock Soon 2015, 2). Dale Bailey writes that the first writer to attribute a definitive feature to the haunted house formula was Edgar Allan Poe: a house that is alive and possesses a will on its own; a sentient house (1999, 22). However, in the mid-twentieth century, Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) offered a novelty to the haunted house formula: a haunting house. In the case of a haunting house, the ghostly effects are only caused by the unconscious workings of the character’s troubled mind. Oyeyemi recycles these traditional gothic tropes, namely the haunted house and the ghost story; however, the inventiveness of Oyeyemi’s novel rests on its depiction of a sentient house that is a conscious character and one of the narrators.

Oyeyemi uses ambiguity effectively to create suspense and frustration and to raise unanswered questions. Ambiguity is an important feature of the Gothic genre. Oyeyemi leaves supernatural events open to interpretation and plays with the Todorovian notion of the “hesitation” ([1970] 1973, 41) which rests between belief and disbelief of the supernatural. The novel’s most unusual aspect is that the reader is never quite sure who is evil: the house, the ghosts of the matriarchs, or Miranda herself? The other two major ambiguities permeate the whole narrative: are the ghosts of the female ancestors real or the symptoms of Miranda’s fragile mental health? Does Silver House possess an evil consciousness? Or has it become the vessel of the hatred that its female inhabitants exhibited? The novel’s unorthodox narration is “structured by a set of interwoven narratives, drawn together through variations in typography, including switches in font and style to signal shifts in narrative position” (Din-Kariuki 2017, 65). Oyeyemi employs the narrative voices of Miranda, the house, Eliot, and Ore, who all share their distinct viewpoints of the events. Through this multiplicity of narrative voices, and a fragmentary narration, *White is for Witching* does not offer closure; instead, it offers multiple possibilities. For instance, the novel immediately starts with a question concerning space: “where is Miranda?” (2009, 1). Disregarding the traditional narrative structure and linearity,

the story begins with the ending, while providing opposing answers from Miranda's brother Eliot, Miranda's girlfriend Ore, and Silver House itself, describing her mysterious imprisonment, disappearance, and death, respectively. However, the most interesting one is the house's reasoning: "Miranda is at home (homesick, home sick)" (2009, 3), "me I will not allow her to live" (2009, 4). The house's menacing statement implies that it is the house itself that might have killed Miranda. The prologue immediately sets a dark tone and gloomy atmosphere and foreshadows that there will be no happy ending.

In Gothic texts, many haunted houses are presented as threatening and menacing not just from the inside but outside, as well. However, when Miranda and her family move into Silver House, Eliot describes the house in the following manner:

Our new house had two big brown grids of windows with a row of brick in between each grid. No windows for the attic. From the outside the windows didn't look as if they could be opened, they didn't look as if they were there to let air or light in, they were funny square eyes, friendly, tired. (2009, 22)

On the one hand, the house's exterior is surprisingly friendly. On the other hand, the appearance of the windows and their inability to let in air and light create a claustrophobic feeling. The house is incredibly tall with its five stories. Its façade is deceptive: it is friendly from the outside but menacing from the inside. From the inside, the house manifests hostility to foreigners, black people, and immigrants, to the level of trapping them in strange spaces or bringing them to floors that should not even exist. The Kurdish family who worked and lived in the house felt the house's threat and decided to leave. The house's xenophobia may be rooted in the great-grandmother, Anna's hatred toward foreigners, which could animate the house and encourage it to expel the racial other. This transition from secure and friendly to uncomfortable is similar to that of the familiar turned strange, which defines Freud's concept of the uncanny. According to Freud, the uncanny is "undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror" ([1919] 1955, 219). Freud also notes that the homely and unhomely are intimately connected and the slow unfolding of the homely into the unhomely is the basis of the uncanny (226).

The house's consciousness is evidenced by its being a focaliser. When the house presents its own point of view, the reader gains access to its thoughts and aims. The house's conscious presence can be observed in the following passage:

I am here, reading with you. I am reading this over your shoulder. I make your home home, I'm the Braille on your wallpaper that only your fingers can read – I tell you where you are. Don't turn to look at me. I am only tangible when you don't look. (2009, 73–74)

Oyeyemi here delves into the idea that there is an enigmatic quality that pervades the whole structure of the house both from inside and outside. Surprisingly, the house seems not menacing at all and tells a lot about the intimate relationship that humans share with it. In *Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard argues that the most intimate of spaces is the house and regards it as a “felicitous space,” and “the space we love” ([1964] 1994, xxxv). For Bachelard, the house acts as a “tool for analysis of the human soul” (xxxvii). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty claims that space may be independent of the subject, but it also extends from them. Space also “determines the configuration of the subject to a point by either serving as a mirror from which the subject derives her sense of self-image or affecting her unconscious to subtly recalibrate the coordinates of her subjectivity” (qtd. in Ng Hock Soon 2015, 12). This demonstrates how both subject and space leave an imprint on each other. Additionally, the house suggests that it is this feature that makes the house a home. “I am only tangible when you don’t look” can mean that the house, like a spectre, can observe its inhabitants without being observed in return, or without making the observed person know when they are being observed.

How did the house become a sentient house and a hostile entity? Does it have any supernatural abilities on its own or is it haunted because of the ghostly presence? The house recalls becoming a conscious entity in the following manner:

I cried and cried for an hour or so, unable to bear the sound of my voice, so shrill and pleading, but unable to stop the will of the wind wheeling through me, cold in my insides. That was the first and last time I’ve heard my own voice. I suppose I am frightening. But Anna Good couldn’t hear me. When she closed me up again it was only because she was too cold. (2009, 23)

This passage exemplifies a personification of the house: it cries and feels cold, like a human being. This quote underpins Merleau-Ponty’s argument that both the subject and lived space leave imprints on each other in the process of habitation. Oyeyemi also shares this view as she writes that “[h]abitation is in itself a form of haunting, whether that’s a tribe that settles on a particular piece of land, a family in a home or the mind in the body” (2012). Indeed, the house shares a special and intimate relationship with the generations of Silver women. The close connection between the house and the Silver women is evident in the following statement by the house: “you are a mother of mine, you gave me a kind of life, mine, the kind of alive that I am” (2009, 24). The house thinks of the woman as a mother.

However, there is evidence that before the house became fully sentient, it already had some supernatural power on its own, as it declares “I chose to be created” (2009, 67). This statement strongly implies that the house possessed a will of its own but

it needed human agency to become a conscious entity. The great-grandmother's original intention was to surround herself with a house that protects her from everything. However, the house rather became an unhomely home than a homely one for the Silver women. Later, the house came to possess a desire to keep the Silver women within its bounds. It also came to possess a moral agency to tell and decide what is proper and what is not. Based on this, I argue that the house exerts a great power over Miranda. To destroy her, the house directly interferes with her physical and mental health. The narrative very effectively presents the slippages in space which are the result of Miranda's deteriorating sense of space due to her illness, grief and the house's evil influence.

The house plays a significant role in Miranda's deteriorating sense of space.¹ Miranda is "only uncertainly here; she comes and goes" (Punter 2017, 27). This means that Miranda's reality is also questionable because her perception often changes from a normal-seeming reality to an awareness of the supernatural. For instance, Miranda constantly has bad dreams, which are initiated by the house. Therefore, Miranda is usually awake at midnight hours, which means that she likely suffers from insomnia. The waking and sleeping hours get blurred for her. In the text, the spatio-temporal indeterminacy is shown through random intercuts between different places and times. A case in point is when Miranda decides to have her midnight feast, goes to the kitchen and a bit later she suddenly finds herself in the street. She sees strange, pale people from one of her mother's pictures and also a corpse. Such strange presences pervade the text. Miranda is haunted by these occurrences, which express the problematic absent presence of places and objects, which might be there and not there. The house plays these cruel tricks to make Miranda question her sanity.

The house also interferes with Miranda's physical health. It attacks Miranda at her weakest point: her eating disorder. The house wants to control her through consumption. The first day Miranda's family moves into the house, Miranda finds chalk on the floor of the bedroom that "she'd picked as hers" (Oyeyemi 2009, 20). This defining moment marks the beginning of Miranda's pica. The house also might consciously lure Miranda into picking the chalk. Miranda's choice of room also describes her later declining mental and physical health. She names her room

¹ For instance, her uncertain existence is described by spatio-temporal indeterminacy. Miranda's sense of time is connected to her deceased mother. She loses track of time because she wears her deceased mother's watch, which is "ticking away Haitian time, five hours behind ours" (2009, 5–6). This means that she is out of time. She also often does her activities in different time slots and as a result, she is disoriented. For instance, when she decided to have a "midnight feast" (2009, 76) she checked that it was 5 a.m. in Haiti and her mother probably would be awake having an early breakfast. She tries to continue living according to her mother's time in Haiti.

psychomantium. The room is the darkest one in the whole house and Miranda has heavy curtains to make it even darker. The room is described in a haunting and uncanny way: “In a psychomantium, glass topples darkness. Things appear as they are. Visions are called from a point inside the mirror, from a point inside the mind” (33). The darkness of the room stands for Miranda’s unstable mental health, fragmented identity, and fragile physique. In the room, Miranda has a huge mirror that shows things as “they are”; the mirror reflects Miranda’s slowly vanishing and emaciated body. In another example, in one of her “midnight feasts,” Miranda cannot sleep and in the kitchen, she desperately tries to eat food:

She took a knife and divided the plate, pushing food aside so that there was a clear line in the middle of the plate, a greasy path of sanity. [...] She thought, there is no way that taking this stuff into my body is doing me any good. Sauce ran across her nose and cheeks and there were tears in her plate. (2009, 77–78)

The house frequently controls Miranda through supernatural occurrences. This kitchen scene describes Miranda’s unsuccessful and desperate attempt to eat food and she notices that all the vegetables disappeared from her plate. This is one of the cruel tricks of the house that makes Miranda question her sanity and keeps her weak, hungry, and ill. The divided plate also symbolises Miranda’s divided self.

When Miranda goes away to attend university, for the first time she feels free from the house’s surveillance and the ghost of her foremothers. She almost succeeds in leading a healthier life but it is already too late for her. After a year she is sent back home. This time the house does not hold itself back and expresses its malicious intents:

I would save Miranda even if I had to break her. [...] How easy to suffocate. Her heart and lungs were already weak. It would not have taken much to kill Miranda. That moment passed. In the next moment my thought was to let her die. If she continued as she was, that would be soon. [...] It was my little joke. (2009, 194)

As the house itself expresses, it would be so easy to kill her because she is already dying. When Miranda returns from college, she is in very poor health. The house describes Miranda’s state as:

She had been finding it difficult to see, and as she came in on her father’s arm and hesitantly turned her head from side to side, I saw how heavily she was relying on her hearing – I felt her struggle to perceive shapes. [...] I depressed my floors for her, made angles of descent that led her across the hallway and through my rooms and up my stairs with the decisiveness of someone who could see properly. (2009, 193)

This passage exemplifies that Miranda is almost blind and she can no longer spatially determine where she is in the house.

When Miranda brings her lesbian lover, Ore, back home, the girl sees the house's real intentions from the very first, and she also feels that she has been picked by the house as its next target. Miranda and Ore make love and the house and the female ghosts watch them in disgust: "We saw who she meant. [...] The skin. [...] Anna was shocked. Jennifer was shocked. Lily was impassive. Disgusting" (2009, 194). The house and the female ghost's racism is clear from this quote. They wish to kill Ore but she manages to escape, leaving Miranda behind. The house has got what it wanted: a broken Miranda.

In the last chapter, Oyeyemi goes back to the first question that the novel starts with: where is Miranda? Each character had a different explanation of where Miranda ended up. According to Ore, she is dead, while Eliot thinks she has disappeared. However, there is a strong implication that she was succumbed by the house:

It was in trapdoor-room that she fell, and the house caught her. She had thought she would find the goodlady below, or Lily, or Jennifer, or her GrandAnna, but there was no one there but her. In trapdoor-room her lungs knocked against her stomach and she lay down on the white net that had saved Ore but would not save her. Two tiny moons flew up her throat. She squeezed them, one in each hand, until they were two silver kidneys. Acid seeped through her. (2009, 239)

Miranda's body is never found. The text implies that Miranda is imprisoned inside the walls of the house as a ghost after her death. The other possible explanation for Miranda's disappearance is that the house consumed Miranda and her corporeality merges with the house. Her brother notices that furniture is moved in the house and hears steps in the attic. Miranda occupies an in-between space: she merges with the house and is also bound to the matriarchal lineage in the form of a ghost.

5 Conclusion

Helen Oyeyemi's deeply disturbing novel *White is for Witching* proves to be an excellent example of *écriture féminine* with its portrayal of a feminine textual body. The novel rightly belongs to the sub-genre of Female Gothic, a feminine mode of writing the Gothic that describes unique female bodily experiences and female anxieties. In addition, the novel provides a lack of a happy ending which is a more recent phenomenon in the Female Gothic subgenre. The entire novel centres on the mentally and physically broken female protagonist, Miranda. Oyeyemi cleverly chooses an eating disorder as the central illness, which is an epidemic among the young, especially women today. Moreover, Oyeyemi weaves this illness into Miranda's family history, an eating disorder

that is passed down from generation to generation. In this paper, I have argued for the protagonist's disordered eating habits as part of the monstrous maternal inheritance, with the novel demonstrating that women by their nature are not always nurturing. In doing so, Oyeyemi depicts a duality in motherhood and sexual desire, presenting it as an innocuous longing and a monstrous one. Oyeyemi presents pica, an eating disorder that involves the consumption of things that should not be consumed. Here, pica is Gothicised and represented as an ultimate violation of taboos. Understanding pica as an example of abjection provokes the reader to consider the possibility of eating such matters and also shakes the boundaries of acceptability. Miranda's unvarying focus on her eating disorder in defining her subjectivity and corporeality is instrumental to her ultimate, sad fate. Oyeyemi engages innovatively with the traditional forms of Gothic literature, reworking the classical tropes of a Gothic haunted house and the ghost story genre to examine Miranda's corporeality and identity. Oyeyemi has added a new dimension to contemporary Gothic literature by presenting the haunted house as a conscious character with its own will and distinct viewpoint.

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