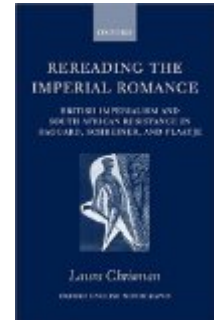


**Laura Chrisman.** *Rereading the Imperial Romance: British Imperialism and South African Resistance in Haggard, Schreiner, and Plaatje.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000. 241 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-812299-9.



**Reviewed by** Peter Midgley

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In *Rereading the Imperial Romance*, Laura Chrisman has attempted to investigate "the historical experience of British Imperialism in South Africa" (p. 1) by means of a critical analysis of three novelists: Rider Haggard, Olive Schreiner and Sol T. Plaatje. Each of these writers represents a different political grouping, viz. imperialism, liberal anti-imperialism and African nationalism. What ties these authors together is the way they reacted to their individual experiences of colonialism. The book is divided into three sections: Haggard's fiction is the first to fall under Chrisman's scrutiny (four chapters), followed by Schreiner (two chapters) and Plaatje (two chapters). This order not only makes sense historically, it also builds up to a fitting climax in the discussion of Plaatje's work, which I felt was the strongest section of the book. Plaatje himself acknowledges his indebtedness to Haggard as a source for his own book, *Mhudi*, while he named his daughter Olive in recognition of the high regard he held for Schreiner. Plaatje, therefore, not only follows the other two writers chronologically, he also makes use of their work in his own.

Chrisman adeptly shows how Haggard manages to manipulate fact and fiction to generate mystery in his writing; his ambivalence towards the colonial enterprise is also evident: while criticizing it, he simultaneously upholds it. For Haggard, the death of the African is necessary to allow the development of the "greater good" of colonialism. Foutala's death in *King Solomon's Mines* signifies the ultimate commodification of the African body: it removes the stigma of imperial capital, and, as Chrisman points out, "neatly exchanges an imperial threat (miscegenation) for an affirmation (symbolic; eternal devotion of a submissive Africa to her master)" (p. 56). It is through this commodification that he is able to contain the African and create a space for European expansionism. In *Nada the Lily*, the development of Haggard's political identity is centred around his identification with the Zulu. As Chrisman puts it, "Nada the Lily\_ is "a fantasy by Haggard of the Zulu at the time, but at the same time, a fantasy of the imperial British as Zulus" (p. 119).

Whereas Haggard indicates the way in which the metropolitan subject is bruised and battered

by his exposure to the African continent, Schreiner offers a viable alternative. In *Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland*, she actively engages the metropole in her criticism of British Expansionism under the Rhodes' Charter Company. Peter Halket the trooper is no different from Peter Halket the trader in the way he exploits the African body. Chrisman argues that, for Schreiner, this brutalization of the colonial body is self-inflicted. If the colonial mindset can be changed, the result will be a more favourable attitude to Africans. For Chrisman, Schreiner places colonial economic relations at the centre of her fiction, and thus offers a critique of capitalist relations in the colonies. On this level, Schreiner is then able to offer an alternative to Haggard's perception of Africans. However, despite an excellent recuperative reading, Chrisman is unable to take Schreiner's fiction beyond intellectual liberalism.

Haggard's fiction employs Africa and its inhabitants to mediate a fundamental ideological contradiction: the imperial subject is reviled by Africa, yet drawn to it as a potential source of political identity. Without the African, a modern Imperial identity cannot exist. Plaatje is quick to pick up this contradiction and exploit it in his own definition of African nationalism. While he models *Mhudi* on Haggard's *Nada the Lily*, he presents his own book as a critique of Haggard's imperialism. The key to Plaatje's use of Haggard can be found in a letter he wrote to Silas Molema, in which he describes *Mhudi* as "a love story after the manner of romances; but based on historical facts ...with plenty of love, superstition, and imaginations worked in [between the wars]. Just like the style of Rider Haggard" (quoted on p. 162). The core of Plaatje's approach lies in the use of the phrases "but based on historical facts" and "like the style (my emphasis) of Rider Haggard." Plaatje is not interested in emulating Haggard, but in offering a critique of his work. As Chrisman notes, critical attention has, to date, ignored this relationship between *Nada the Lily* (which deals directly with the Zulus) and *Mhudi*. It is this relationship that

Chrisman investigates in her work. She shows how Plaatje exploits Haggard's identification with Zulu militarism by making his own heroes the victims of Ndebele imperialism. Plaatje is thus able to implicitly draw parallels between Ndebele imperialism and the white power that replaced it (p. 164) and to develop a sense of African nationalism to counterbalance Haggard's eurocentricity. Plaatje's protagonist, Mhudi, also challenges Haggard's notions of the feminine, as presented in his character, Nada. Through her discussion, Chrisman reveals the strategies Plaatje employs to provide "a radical reformulation of [Haggardian] sexual politics" (p. 186) and place African women at the centre of African political identity. This is not a revolutionary reading of Plaatje's work; its value lies in the way it shows how Plaatje's characterisation deliberately undermines Haggard's imperial chauvinism.

In the introductory paragraphs of the third section, Chrisman notes that Plaatje's representation of a pan-African ideal is often neglected by critics, yet she herself does not explore this question in much detail. It is interesting that Chrisman finds it necessary to offer a detailed biographical sketch of Plaatje and a summary of the rise of African nationalism, while she does not do anything similar with regard to either Schreiner, Haggard or the development of liberalism in South Africa.

I also wondered why a meticulous scholar such as Chrisman would refer readers to the 1973 edition of *The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje* when more recent editions exist in *Mafeking Diary: A Black Man's View of a White Man's War*[1] and the second edition (revised and updated in the light of recent evidence and criticism), which appeared in 1999 under the title *The Mafeking Diary of Sol Plaatje*. [2]

In terms of a critical paradigm, Chrisman is clear about her intentions: she questions the specificity of the time period and geographic location in the work of theorists such as Spivak, re-

marking that "Spivak's lack of acknowledgment of alternative regions and periods and her regular allusions to 'allegory' mean that this region and period assume theoretical primacy"(p. 1). Chrisman therefore argues that this theoretical epicentre of postcolonial studies encourages the relative marginality of regions such as South Africa in post-colonial studies. While individual authors do receive attention from academics outside South Africa, in the "critical metropolises of the UK and the USA, these writers' works tend to be analysed less as products of a historically particular, distinctive geo-political region and more as representative of the African continent" (p. 2). The result is that certain works by a particular author are foregrounded because they conform to the broader Africanist readings of them, while others are ignored because of their regional focus.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt shows how the discovery of diamonds and precious metals moved South Africa to the centre of imperial culture (p. 5). Chrisman relies on Arendt's analysis to emphasize the resulting tension that arises between South Africa's historical centrality and its relative marginality in postcolonial studies. In *Rereading the Imperial Romance*, the argument is convincingly made to grant South African literary studies a more central place in critical discourse. Although Chrisman's work is firmly placed within postcolonial studies, she works against the general trends of this critical approach by granting South Africa centrality in her study and by looking at the more neglected texts alongside the ones that generally receive critical attention. By doing this, she is able to show how "the analysis of late nineteenth century imperial subject-constitution needs to recognize the self-conscious way this subjectivity differentiates itself from, and engages with, mid-Victorian ideological, economic, and political formations" (pp. 4-5).

*Rereading the Imperial Romance* succeeds in confronting and questioning postcolonial dis-

course and its effectiveness in studying South African literature. In most instances, Chrisman bases her critique on relevant examples taken from the works of the three writers under discussion and continues to suggest alternate critical frameworks, or extends existing frameworks to incorporate and account for the specificity of the South African situation. She opposes Said's concept of a unified metropolis and sides with Spivak by arguing for the possibility of metropolitan opposition. However, using *Peter Halket of Mashonaland* as an example, Chrisman extends a Spivakian reading of the text by asserting that Schreiner's "analysis of the subject is a materialist confrontation of the class structure that feeds and is fed by this subject" (p. 9). But, rather than seeing the missionary "soul" and "subject" as determinants of colonial mentality, as Spivak does, Chrisman reverses this position and illustrates how the colonial writer in fact reveals considerable political agency in determining the metropolitan outlook of Victorian times. Chrisman reveals the fault-lines of a postcolonial discourse that marginalises South Africa, while at the same showing the reader how to employ the same discourse in an analysis of texts.

While some readers may consider Chrisman's treatment of theory in the text itself rather thin, I found it one of the most pleasing aspects of the book. Rather than bog the reader down with intricate theoretical concepts, she chooses to articulate her argument with the texts as primary source. The main text is supplemented with extremely thorough footnotes that form an intelligent and relevant addition to an extremely compact text. However, in a work that pays so much attention to detail, I found it both disconcerting and intriguing that a list of important African intellectuals (p. 15) does not include Herbert Dhlomo, whose contribution to literary criticism in particular was significant.

*Rereading the Imperial Romance* is an important text for South African literary studies. Chris-

man's nuanced reading of the interrelationship between history, politics and literary production provides fruitful scope for re-evaluating other marginalised writers and their interaction with colonialism. By shifting the centre of postcolonial studies onto Africa, Chrisman offers a valuable strategy for revisiting British Imperial literature.

#### Notes

[1]. Comaroff, John, Andrew Reed and Brian Willan. *Mafeking Diary: A Black Man's view of a White Man's War*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1990.

[2]. Willan, Brian, Andrew Reed, John Comaroff and Solomon Molema. *The Mafeking Diary of Sol Plaatje*. 2nd ed. Cape Town: David Philip; and Oxford: James Currey, 1999.

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