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Reburial of the Mother and the Horror of the Feminine in Southern Gothic Fiction

This article focuses on the portrayal of women, especially mothers, in the works of Southern gothic authors Anne Rice, Poppy Z. Brite, and Charlaine Harris. The works of Rice and Brite imagine the South as a white, male-coded space. Nonetheless, a few strong female characters in their works challenge the patriarchal order but end up paying with their lives. Rice's The Vampire Chronicles *presents strong nonwhite matriarchs and excavates matrilineal lineages only to rebury them in favour of white patriarchs and patriarchal heritages. In Brite's* Lost Souls, *in contrast, independent young women who express their sexuality are deemed promiscuous and punished with unwanted pregnancies and death at childbirth. Charlaine Harris's* The Southern Vampire Mysteries *has a female protagonist, Sookie. However, in this series, too, Adele, the matriarch, is killed early, and more importance is given to the patrilineal heritage. Another young mother, Crystal, meets the same fate as the women in Brite's novel. All the mothers who die in the works of these authors allow for the mixing of races. This article argues that although these authors give strong women a voice and place, they do so only to take the agency away from the women in favour of a patriarchal order. These works display matrophobia, a fear of becoming one's mother and of motherhood. Moreover, matrophobia is used to instill fear of miscegenation, control women's reproductive function, and preserve gender and racial divisions.*

Introduction

The works of Southern gothic authors Anne Rice, Poppy Z. Brite (William Joseph/Billy Martin),[1] and Charlaine Harris have been celebrated for using gothic conventions for socially progressive purposes. Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* (1976–2018) and Brite's gothic horror novels: *Lost Souls* (1992), *Drawing Blood* (1993), *Exquisite Corpse* (1996), and *The Crow: The Lazarus*

Heart (1998) were appreciated by audiences and critics alike for their representation of queer individuals and relationships when there were few such representations in mainstream literature. Although Rice and Brite give voice to one marginalized group, they also silence another one. The few women characters appear in their novels, those that do, die gruesome deaths. In contrast, Harris's *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001–2013) is iconic for its strong female protagonist, Sookie Stackhouse. However, women, especially mothers, are silenced in this series as well. These authors imagine the South as primarily a white, male-coded space. Their works include some strong female characters and matriarchs and unearth matrilineal kinships and multiracial lineages, like Akasha's vampire progeny and Maharet's Great Family, which include humans and vampires alike in *The Vampire Chronicles*, and Sookie's grandmother Adele Stackhouse's supernatural legacy in *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*. By doing so, they momentarily challenge the traditional preference for the patrilineal lineage and patriarchal order. However, even as these texts engage with matriarchs and matrilineal kinships, they often do so to reestablish the normative white supremacist patriarchal order. The appearance of strong women and mothers in these works, who freely exercise their social, political, and sexual rights, do not encourage other women to emulate them but serve as cautionary tales against behaviour that should be avoided. Men continue to exercise control over the bodies of these women through the institution of motherhood, judge them as good or bad, and use pregnancy and death as punishment for their self-expression. These works use matrophobia, or the fear of ending up like one's mother, to caution women against self-expression, sexual freedom, and, most importantly, miscegenation. Both gender and race are social constructs; race, like motherhood, also serves patriarchy. Women's stories, spaces, and matri-lineal kinships and legacies often reemerge in the Southern gothic works of authors like Rice, Brite, and Harris but only for a final reburial.

Rice, Brite, and Harris were born in the South in 1941, 1967, and 1951, respectively. Rice and Brite were born in Louisiana, and Harris was born in Mississippi. They either grew up or began their writing careers during the second wave of feminism when women were fighting for equal pay for equal work, access to birth control, the right to abortion, and the end of gender discrimination. As Janet Allured has pointed out, feminism was part of the "regional movement against social injustice that southerners initiated, mobilized, and energized, and that women native to other areas of the country took up and embraced as their own" in the 1960s (389). Allured adds that Louisiana feminists were active in campaigns "to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, to reform the community property system, to reform rape laws, and the anti-domestic violence movement" (389). The South saw much activism for social justice. A case filed in the South, and relevant to this article,

is *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), which drew national attention. Mildred Loving, a Black woman, raised her voice against the state because the law would not recognize her marriage to a white man. The Loving couple demanded legitimacy for their relationship and their children, which led to the invalidation of every antimiscegenation law in the United States (US) (422). However, miscegenation remains a significant issue, and women characters in the works of all three authors are persecuted because of miscegenation.

Gerald Torres and Katie Pace question "whether patriarchy has a color," which has been asked by feminists like Catharine MacKinnon and Marylyn Frye, and in response, they say that "whiteness has a gender" (130). They point out that whiteness is considered superior in American racial thought, and whiteness is as gendered as it is racial (130). In other words, patriarchy is white, and whiteness is male. White men are superior and control the bodies as well as reproductive functions of white women. In "Race, Gender, and Intercultural Relations," Peggy Pascoe points out that "the very first prohibitions on interracial marriage" in the US were "passed in Maryland in 1664," and it "was straightforwardly sex-specific: it prohibited marriages between 'freeborn English women' and 'Negro slaves'" (7). The other states followed suit and defined the children of enslaved women as slaves. Miscegenation laws firmly controlled white women's sexuality while giving white men sexual access to Black women (7). To monitor white women's sexuality, the home became their confinement, and bearing and rearing their husband's children became the norm. In her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan exposes the dissatisfaction and confinement that women experienced as homemakers in the previous decade owing to forced gender roles that limited their freedom.

In 1976, Anne Rice's first novel, *Interview with the Vampire*, was released, the same year Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* was published. However, Rice's and Rich's take on motherhood and women's self-expression are opposite. Rich's work became foundational in understanding motherhood by feminists. When Rich's book was published, many feminists considered motherhood an obstacle to women's liberation ("Rich, Adrienne" 1078). Rich challenged antimaternal sentiments and differentiated motherhood from mothering, defining motherhood as a repressive patriarchal institution constructed to serve male interest and mothering as women's lived experiences as mothers (1078). According to Rich, motherhood as an institution is perpetuated by monotheistic religions, medical science, the mother-child relationship, and social responses to maternal violence (1078). Moreover, although the institution offers improved choices in gynecological and obstetric practices to upper-class white women, it is more restrictive towards mothers who are poor, lesbian, or racialized (1079).

The institution of motherhood is so powerful and oppressive that it creates

in women what poet Lynn Sukenick calls matrophobia, the fear of becoming one's mother (Rich 235). Rich explains: "Thousands of daughters see their mothers as having taught a compromise and self-hatred they are struggling to win free of, the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted. Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her" (235). She further adds: "There may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely" (235). Women do not want to become their mothers, yet there is always a chance that they will, and they live in fear of that but also harbour a secret desire to emulate their mothers. Matrophobia, like any other fear, is repressed and can haunt someone, which makes it an element of the gothic. In a patriarchal system, no matter what mothers do for their children, Rich observes that "the small female who grew up in a male-controlled world, still feels, at moments, wildly unmothered" (225). Hence, under a patriarchal system, many women may feel unmothered and fear becoming oppressed like their mothers.

In her book *The Matrophobic Gothic and Its Legacy*, Deborah Rogers expands on this "fear of identification with and separation from the maternal body and the motherline"[2] and argues that matrophobia "is the central metaphor for women's relationships with each other within the context of … male-dominated culture" (1). Rogers traces women's anxieties around motherhood from Romantic fiction to present-day television and includes the interpretation of women's anxieties around motherhood by both male and female authors and creators. According to Rogers, the defining characteristics of matrophobic gothic are inadequately mothered and deluded heroines who live in isolation in a gothic setting and are separated from their mothers but search for them (Rogers 38). Another characteristic is the presence of villains who may pose some danger; however, they turn out to be red herrings, whereas the real fear is that of the maternal (38). Matrophobic gothic may also have feminized heroes who fail to rescue their heroines and have a female sensibility that encourages passivity and depression (38). This sub-genre often includes an explanation of the supernatural to enlighten its heroine/s (38). In *Matrophobic gothic*, poetic landscapes also reflect the heroine's character (38). Rice, Brite, and Harris's gothic include some of these characteristics in their matrophobic gothic works.

Whereas matrophobia is the fear of turning into one's mother and losing one's freedom or suffering oppression, the matrophobic gothic of Rice, Brite, and Harris preaches the fear of freedom and self-expression, which bring fatal pregnancies and death to women in the novels. I first explore how Rice uses matrophobic gothic to caution against the establishment of matriarchy, the recognition of the matrilineal, and the mixing of races. The chief characters of

Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* are white males of European heritage living in the US. These characters are vampires who were mostly orphaned when they were born into vampire life. They search for their identity and origin, and their quests lead them to the six-thousand-year-old Akasha, an Egyptian queen of Mesopotamian heritage and the mother of all vampires. They also discover another equally old mother, Maharet, of Middle Eastern heritage, who traces her female line through all humanity. However, later in the series, these mixed-race lineages are whitewashed and overwritten through the reinvented character of a white patriarch, Amel.

In the next section, I discuss how Harris's *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* repeats the same pattern: The matriarch and the matrilineal are set aside for a patriarch and his legacy. Sookie, the protagonist of this series, is a mixed-race woman, metaphorically presented as a cross-species woman with rare abilities owing to her grandmother's, Adele's, reproductive choices. Adele's choices make Sookie unique and set her on an adventure with other species, metaphorically representing different racialized identities of the South. However, Harris sets Adele aside in the series and gives more importance to the patriarch, Niall, Sookie's great-grandfather, and his legacy. Sookie's sister-in-law, Crystal, a rebellious woman, tries and fails to exercise her freedom under the patriarchal control of her community and becomes a victim of a hate crime by racial purists of a superior species (race) in the series. Crystal also represents the poor women of the South who do not have security, economic independence, reproductive rights, and access to health and wellbeing.

In the final section, I turn to Crystal's predecessors, the teenagers Jessy and Ann, in Brite's *Lost Souls.* Like Crystal, these teenagers dare to exercise their sexual freedom. As a result, they are punished with rape, monstrous pregnancies, and botched abortions that lead to their untimely deaths. With their deaths, Jessy's and Ann's legacies are lost, as their children, like the vampire-human hybrid called Nothing, seek only the father. These works present strong-willed characters as poor examples of women under patriarchy and punish them for their self-expression and participation in miscegenation.

Despite the role and contribution of Southern women to social justice, as pointed out by Allured, these Southern gothic authors give precedence to white men in their novels. Perhaps that is also because some Southern states still lag in social reforms. According to the 2016 report on the status of women in the South, published by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, Louisiana is not the best place for women in the US. Compared to the other Southern states, Louisiana performed poorly in all the parameters used for evaluation, such as women's participation in politics, employment, and earnings, women's status in work and family, women's poverty and opportunities available to them, their reproductive rights, and their access to health and well-being (Institute for Women's Policy Research xxvi). Nonetheless, the

report also notes that the overall status of women in the Southern states is improving gradually in terms of earnings ratio and access to health and wellbeing.

It is worth noting that the condition of women in the South has been reflected upon in literature over the centuries. Pearl McHaney points out how Southern women were once stereotyped as "mammies, belles, ladies, and mulattos" (1). These stereotypes, McHaney adds, have been both perpetuated and disrupted in fiction. Over the ages, Southern women have also been called rebels, evidenced by their activism for social justice, as pointed out by Allured. From a survey of three centuries of American literature, McHaney concludes that in the twenty-first century, women in Southern literature "vigorously explore their sexualities, races, ethnicities, social and economic classes" and "successfully challenge the hegemony of white authors and white characters and the binary of black and white (1)." It is evident from studies like McHaney's that women in Southern literature are no longer confined to racial and gender stereotypes. They now have a voice and agency within the Southern space. However, there are exceptions; Rice, Brite, and Harris give voice and agency to their women characters, only to take them away. They present strong women as harmful stereotypes. By doing so, they revert to an older South and its stereotypes that oppress women.

Erasure of the Matrilineal and the Matriarchs in Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*

The Vampire Chronicles (*VC*) are about white men. Of the thirteen *Chronicles*, only two are about women: *The Queen of the Damned* and *Merrick*. The main characters of the series are Lestat, Louis, Marius, and David, all white men of European heritage who have taken up residence in different parts of America over the centuries. Both Louis and Lestat exhibit symptoms of matrophobia. Initially, Rice identified with her vampire character, Louis (Riley 14). In *Interview*, Louis exhibits "female sensitivity that encourages passivity and depression" (qtd. in Riley 38), characteristics that Rogers identifies as symptomatic of matrophobia. Later, Lestat, who "was as always the voice of [Rice's] soul in this novel" (*Called out of Darkness* 207), becomes the protagonist of the *VC*. Curious about his origins, Lestat embarks on a "quest for maternal figures/identity," another symptom of matrophobia, according to Rogers (38). In *The Queen of the Damned*, Lestat's quest leads him to two ancient mothers of Asian origin, Akasha and Maharet, whose children encompass all of humanity. They are not the ideal origin points for Lestat, and he disavows them. Although the mothers and the matrilineal are recognized, they are also reburied in the series, confirming matrophobia.

Akasha, a six-thousand-year-old Egyptian queen of Mesopotamian origin, is the first vampire and mother of the vampire kind. She was transformed into

an immortal being when a mischievous spirit named Amel, eager for a human host, infused himself with her spirit and blood as she lay dying. The infusion reanimated Akasha's body, giving her immortality. It also exaggerated the power-hungry nature of the queen by giving her an insatiable thirst for blood. Lestat's quest through white territories of Europe leads him to nonwhite origins—beyond Europe, Asia, and Africa and to mothers instead of fathers. Lestat also discovers that the Afro-Asian Akasha's blood runs through all vampires. Lestat is then introduced to Akasha's archenemy, Maharet, another six-thousand-year-old vampire who hails from the region of Mount Carmel, or present-day Israel. Whereas Akasha is the mother of all vampires, Maharet is the mother of all humanity. Maharet maintains a Great Family Tree, where she traces her lineage through her human daughter, Miriam, who was born to her before becoming a vampire. Maharet traces her line of descent through her female descendants, who have spread across the globe and intermarried with all communities through the millennia. Therefore, the tree includes all of humanity. Maharet's Great Family Tree attests to mixing races and debunks notions of racial purity. These matrilineal lineages are inclusive and encompass all communities. With these discoveries, matriarchal lineages and women's spaces become visible within dominant white male spaces occupied by the white male vampires, such as the New World colonies and older Europe.

With the discovery of Akasha and Maharet, Lestat also learns about their lives, actions, and the motherline. Although these women belonged to ancient societies, they were independent in their thoughts and actions. Akasha was a monarch. She is credited with bringing cultivation to her kingdom of Kemet and turning her people away from their traditional practices involving cannibalism. She is also credited for creating and disseminating the myth of Isis and Osiris to deify the royal couple, Akasha and Enkil. When Lestat finds her, Akasha has long been petrified or dormant yet still receptive to all humanity's voices and prayers. Maharet and her twin sister Mekare, in contrast, were called "witches" and were positively perceived as healers. They were also revered for their ability to communicate with spirits. As witches, they were not marginalized by their community but respected. As vampires, they witnessed history unfold, especially Maharet, who recorded the continuity and experiences of her female line over six thousand years. When Lestat looks at Maharet's Great Family Tree, its branches spread across all regions and communities. Although this history is fictional, it presents an alternative perspective from the female point of view about the role of strong and willful women in building civilizations. These women are not disenfranchised but are empowered leaders of their communities. Men do not control them. Enkil was a puppet king, and Maharet and Mekare were never married. These women were free.

Whereas Maharet is content with observing and nurturing humanity,

Akasha is not one to be satisfied with the narrow gender role; she dares to rule and control. Therefore, Akasha is presented as an Eastern despot in *The Queen of the Damned*, who has no respect or regard for other cultures. She looks down on older cultures that practice cannibalism and forces her people to change and follow her ways. She deifies herself and her husband and persecutes those who dare to differ. She puts her ideals before her people. Even after spending thousands of years in a catatonic state, when Akasha reawakens in the twentieth century, she prioritizes her vision over humanity. She is a telepath who hears all humanity's pain, suffering, and prayers. She concludes that men cause war and rape; therefore, 99 per cent of men should be killed to make a New Eden for women. Her maternal violence is for the protection of her children, especially women. She actively personifies the cruel, unsafe abode of Mother Nature, who demands sacrifices at her whim. Therefore, like nature, she, too, has to be controlled and reined in.

Through Akasha, Rice presents her interpretation of feminism. Rice lived in San Francisco in the 1960s and was not very comfortable with the version of feminism that she witnessed there (qtd. in Riley xv). She thought some feminists were very puritanical, tyrannical, and fascistic in their approach. According to Rice, "Feminism became a huge stick with which to beat people over the head. Women would attack other women in the most insensitive ways… [They] become truly enamoured of ideas … believe they're absolutely right … do the damnedest things … get swept up in some pretty crazy cruelties" (qtd. in Riley 151). Akasha represents this negative interpretation. Therefore, Lestat and his acolytes choose to kill Akasha to prevent her from changing the world and to preserve the established order that subjugates women.

Akasha is also presented as a predatory woman of colour. She nurses Lestat with her powerful ancient blood and seduces him with her scheme of social engineering. She is an Africanist stereotype, a "nurse shark" in the novel. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison terms the portrayal of women of colour as "nurse sharks" in the works of many white novelists, including Ernest Hemingway (85). A "nurse shark" is a woman of colour who is described as predatory…[and] non-human" (84–85). They are "unnatural women who combine the signs of a nurse with those of the shark" (85), like Akasha. Morrison points out that in the works of white authors, white men describe women of colour in a way that is the farthest from humans or even mammals. They are depicted as "predatory, [with] devouring eroticism and signals the antithesis to femininity, to nurturing, to nursing, to replenishment" (85). Rice uses this stereotype for Akasha, who is monstrous and far from human. First, she nourishes her children with the immortal vampire blood but later becomes the antithesis of femininity when she decides to destroy men with violence.

After eliminating Akasha, a new order is established. Mekare becomes the

new mother by consuming Akasha's brain and the vampire essence, and Maharet acts as Mekare's guardian. However, the twins recede into the background, Lestat takes charge and becomes the prince and monarch of the vampires. From the matriarchal origin and order Akasha had espoused, the power is transferred to Lestat, the new white patriarch. Later, in *Prince Lestat*, Amel replaces Akasha as the father and progenitor of all vampires. Rice reinvents the backstory of Amel, in *Prince Lestat and the Realms of Atlantis*. Amel is described as a white man from the North with red hair and green eyes (*Atlantis* 347). Amel is credited with creating Atlantis to protect humanity from an interfering alien race of emotional vampires. Unlike Akasha, the dark predator, Amel is the white saviour. The positive qualities of the vampires are attributed to Amel, like the vampires' immortality, whiteness, and ability to control their thirst for blood with time. In contrast, the negativities, like bloodlust, are attributed to the power-hungry Akasha.

Although Amel loved Mekare when he was a spirit, he becomes agitated when he is transferred from Akasha's body to Mekare's. Akasha tortured and mutilated Mekare before turning her into a vampire; Mekare is not only mute but carries the trauma even after six thousand years. Amel hates the addled mind and the disabled female body hosting his spirit. Moreover, Amel is also upset because his essence is stretched across all vampires of all races and genders, which is torturous for Amel. Amel wants a white male body and convinces male vampires through telepathy to get rid of Mekare and Maharet. When Maharet is murdered, her Great Family Tree falls apart. Corporate lawyers in charge of her wealth distribute it among all her progeny, but no one remains to trace her female line any further or observe and preserve humanity. Mekare recognizes her inadequacy, willingly sacrifices herself, and transfers Amel to Lestat, a more desirable white male host (*Prince Lestat* 412). Finally, Amel's spirit is transferred into a synthetic biochemical body, prepared in a lab, and not born of a woman (*Atlantis*). Moreover, when his spirit is extracted from Lastat, Amel's connection is severed from all vampires, returning him to his old state of racial purity (*Atlantis*).

By the end of the series, spread over four decades, Asian mothers are replaced with white fathers. From including powerful women of Asian origin and their matriarchal orders and lineages at the outset, the story regresses to a white patriarchal order in the end. Akasha's blood, which united all vampires, and Maharet's Great Family Three, which united all humanity, are forgotten with their deaths. The mixed-race heritage of vampires and humans discovered by Lestat is whitewashed by the precedence given to the older white Amel. The death of Maharet and the distribution of her wealth sever the matrilineal ties that united her family. The matrilineal lineage and the women's space that reemerge in *VC* collapse to restore the white supremacist patriarchal order. Akasha and Maharet remind everyone that racial purity is a myth. Whereas

Akasha is predatory, Maharet is a nurturing mother who silently observes humanity for millennia. However, like Akasha, Maharet also allows for the mixing of races. Therefore, they cannot be exemplary mothers. Their tales are cautionary and instill matrophobia through the cruel ends they are forced to meet.

There are other vampire women in Rice's series, like Gabrielle, Merrick, and Pandora, who seem equally empowered as the vampire men. However, these women also play second fiddle to Lestat and the other vampire men. Time and again, they are forced to perform as nurturers and called upon to sacrifice for the greater good. Merrick, who is of mixed heritage, is condemned by white male vampires in the series when she seduces Louis to become a vampire. Merrick manipulates Louis into turning her into a vampire; therefore, she is like Akasha, a power-hungry seductress. She redeems herself in *Blackwood Farm* by sacrificing herself for the good of all vampires and humanity. She becomes the mother to an evil spirit called Goblin, who thirsts for vampire blood. To prevent Goblin from becoming a more powerful entity from powers drawn from vampire blood, Merrick immolates herself while holding the infant Goblin's mortal remains in her arms as a surrogate mother (*Blackwood Farm* 766–67). From the "nurse shark," Merrick transforms into the nurturing mother who serves the system. By doing so, she sets a good example, redeems herself in the eyes of the white vampire patriarchs Lestat and David Talbot, and receives forgiveness.

Miscegenation in Charlaine Harris's *The Southern Vampire Mysteries*

In *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (*SVM*), Harris's protagonist, Sookie, is a woman; nonetheless, when it comes to mothers and matriarchs, Harris's treatment is not different from that of Rice. Harris repeats the same pattern as Rice; she gives us a strong matriarch, kills her, and replaces her with patriarchs. Similarly, Harris also cautions against miscegenation, pointing out that when women's bodies and reproductive functions get out of control, they are put to death. Sookie's grandmother, Adele, and sister-in-law, Crystal, both engage in sex outside their marriages—more importantly, outside their races—and become targets of racial purists who brutally murder them.

In the *SVM*, supernatural creatures metaphorically represent people from different social and ethnic groups in the American South. The vampires are presented as a community with their own law and political order, which run parallel to and threaten American law and political order, instilling the fear of civil unrest and even a political takeover. The were-panthers stand for closed social groups and represent the poor white communities of the region. The shapeshifters and the werewolves are closer to a blend of Cajun and Native Americans, and the weretigers are perhaps more exotic migrants in the area.

These groups seem subhuman in their representation. Then there are the fea, comprising demonic and angelic beings with superhuman abilities. Except for vampires, who make pets of human beings or occasionally convert them, and the fairies who indulge in sexual acts with humans, most other groups prefer to stick to their packs or communities. The humans against the supernaturals, especially the vampires, are united under the church, the Fellowship of the Sun. They organize and execute many plots to exterminate vampires on several occasions. Each of these groups also follows gender hierarchy, and their women get into trouble when they become involved with men outside their communities.

Professor Raewyn Connell popularizes the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and dominant or emphasized femininity in her 1987 book *Gender and Power*. These act as tools of patriarchy that allow and promote practices to reinforce male dominance and female subordination in society. It is done by sanctioning a brand of aggressive masculinity accompanied by brute force in private and public spheres while looking down upon any form of weakness as a subordinated form of the same. Women falling in line with the submissive and accepted brand of femininity, which is desired by patriarchy, fall under emphasized femininity, and those who do not conform belong to the unacceptable subordinated version of it. The display of power by men is accepted, but a similar display by women, like in the case of Akasha, is rejected. Women are socialized and conditioned in such a way that they internalize emphasized femininity or at least try to; when they do not, the hegemonic masculinity compels them to do so. For example, women who act against the norms of their community and date or sleep with vampires, like Sookie and her coworkers, are targeted by the Cajun serial killer Rene Lenier. Rene is a human, and his hatred for vampires runs deep. His first victim is his sister, whom he murders and then rapes for dating a vampire. Rene seems unhinged in his hatred and desire to aggressively control the women of his community. He hides in plain sight, dates Sookie's colleague, Arlene, and works on the Road Crew with Sookie's brother Jason. Moreover, he pretends to be a good father to Arlene's children and a good friend to Sookie and Jason. However, when he fails to kill Sookie, he kills Adele. Although Rene is unaware of Adele's involvement with other species, he knows about her tolerance for vampires. Therefore, he does not hesitate to kill her in her kitchen. Rene's aggression towards human females involved with vampires cautions other human women to avoid such dalliances.

The deaths of her colleagues and her grandmother are warnings for Sookie. Before Rene's intervention, since she was little, Sookie felt safe around her grandmother and in her home. Rene takes that away from Sookie, throwing her into a state of unease in her home. However, she continues to live there and arms herself for protection. Rene disturbs the peace of Sookie's life and

home and takes away the matriarch who brought Sookie up. Sookie and her brother Jason were orphaned as children; Adele took them in and raised them. Through the thirteen novels in the series, Sookie repeatedly proves her mettle when faced with challenges, and she does so with all the human qualities and superhuman gifts she inherited from Adele. Sookie lives with her grandmother, loves and adores her, and never fears a future like hers until Rene enters the picture, kills Adele, and scares Sookie. However, when Rene finally attacks Sookie, she fights back and survives, bringing the killer to justice.

Sookie is an exception. She fights her battles and survives to tell the tale; she is Charlaine Harris's extended essay on the "final girl"[3] trope. Although she embarks on her adventurous journey owing to her grandmother's legacy, she is robbed of the matriarch. However, she must survive by negotiating with patriarchs like vampires Bill and Eric, were-folk Alcede and Quinn, and fairy royalty like Niall and Breandan, who take over her life in Bon Temps. In *From Dead to Worse*, Sookie learns that due to Adele's husband, Mitchell Stackhouse's infertility, Adele's children were fathered by another man (61). Adele met the half-fairy Fintan Brigant in her garden, who fell in love with Adele. Adele chose to have an affair with Fintan only after he promised her the children she wanted (61). She wants to be a mother and makes it possible when her husband cannot help her. Adele is not passive but can make her own decisions. Fintan fathered Adele's children and left a gift for Adele, a magical object called a cluviel dor, which contains the power of fairy light magic. Sookie inherits this gift, and it helps save her life later in the series (*Dead Reckoning* 137). Adele also receives other gifts from the Fae folk. Fintan's friend, Mr. Cataliades, a demon, blesses Adele's progeny with telepathy. Not all of Adele's children or grandchildren inherit it, but Sookie does because she has Adele's essential spark (322). Though meant to be a gift, telepathy is a disability for Sookie, as it alienates her from the human population of the fictional small-town Bon Temps, Louisiana. Telepathy also attracts supernatural folk to her. They use Sookie's ability to their advantage, drawing Sookie into their feuds.

Besides the supernatural gifts that come to Sookie owing to Adele's relationship with the Fea folk and the strength of character that she inherits from Adele, Sookie is also surrounded and comforted by Adele's human memories and skills. Sookie continues to live in Adele's house, moves into Adele's room, and prepares Adele's recipes. However, part of Adele's human legacy is also taken away from her when another attempt on Sookie's life, an incident of arson, burns down Adele's kitchen (*Dead as a Doornail* 109, 119). Sookie is torn away from Adele's home, memories, and legacy and thrown into a quest to discover her royal fairy lineage through the rest of the series. Fintan Brigrant, her grandfather, turns out to be a half-fairy prince and the son of the fairy king Niall (*From Dead to Worse*). The novels set the matriarch aside for the patriarch of a superior race. With her forefathers, Sookie also finds out

that her parents were killed because of their mixed fairy lineage by her great grandfather's archenemy and fairy purist, Breandan (*Dead and Gone* 134). Sookie is hunted by the same enemy until all portals connecting the worlds of humans and fairies are closed off in *Dead and Gone*. Adele's choice of sleeping outside her species and producing cross-species children endangers them. Although her parents die, Sookie survives despite her hybridity. When the fairies fail to erase all the fairy-human hybrids, they shut out the human world to prevent further traffic with humans.

However, Sookie's were-panther sister-in-law, Crystal, is not so lucky; she is brutally murdered for her promiscuity and her unborn hybrid child in *Dead and Gone*. In *Dead to the World*, we are introduced to Crystal from the isolated community of heavily inbred were-panthers in Hotshot, away from Bon Temps. Like other women of the clan, Crystal is also tasked with reproducing more offspring for the survival of her pack, even though, owing to generational inbreeding, Crystal constantly suffers miscarriages. The fact that inbreeding poses significant threats to the inbred child, as well as the mother carrying the child, is overlooked by the pack, or they may not care. The women in Crystal's community are confined by isolation, a trope of matrophobic gothc, and motherhood. They are restricted to their community's boundaries and left to suffer and die trying to produce children for their pack, as they are entirely cut off from Bon Temps society. They have their church and help one another within their community. They are beyond law and order as a Bon Temps sheriff goes missing and is presumed dead when he goes to investigate a were-panther rapist in Hotshot. It is evident that Hotshot society is controlled and managed by aggressive and territorial men, and the women of Hotshot, like Crystal, lack reproductive rights and access to health and wellbeing.

Crystal sees a way out of her dire situation in Jason. However, her jealous lover kidnaps Jason and turns him into a were-panther in hopes of deterring Crystal from leaving him. Moreover, Crystal's pack sees it as an opportunity to expand the pack with Jason's fresh blood, which means they do comprehend the risks of inbreeding; nonetheless, they practise it. Crystal's way out—her respite from the burden of motherhood, isolation, and suffering—is hijacked by her pack and deployed to serve the pack. Here, the men of the pack bend Jason's will by using force on him and infecting him with their venom. Despite knowing the risks of inbreeding, they convert Jason into a were-panther. Crystal looks elsewhere to escape her plight and cheats on Jason in *From Dead to Worse*. Her pack's patriarchal order does not allow her respite from her duties, and promiscuity does not help either. She is punished for cheating. However, when she is pregnant with Jason's child, who is a panther-fairy-human hybrid, fairy purist Breandan's goons, Lochlan and Neave, torture, crucify, and kill her.

Crystal stands for poor women who survive by allowing others, especially

men of their community, to use their bodies and die trying. Perhaps women of her community are socialized and conditioned in such a way that they have internalized emphasized femininity and motherhood as their destiny. When they do not, like Crystal, the hegemonic masculinity compels them to do so. Her desire to escape her fate of troubled motherhood and to express her sexuality for herself backfires when Jason is inducted into their pack. Finally, the fear of the abomination she threatens to give birth to gets her killed by racial purists.

Matrophobia is used to instill the fear of miscegenation and control the bodies of women and their impulse to break the rules through the treatment of Adele and Crystal by Harris. Rogers points out that in matrophobic gothic, often "arresting villains who, while they may pose some danger, are red herrings—the real fear is that of the maternal" (38). Therefore, the serial killer, Rene, who punishes women who dare to date outside their race, the were-panther men of the inbred pack at Hotshot who confine and subjugate their women with isolation and motherhood, and the racial purist fairies who mutilate and kill Crystal for carrying a hybrid child may come across as the villains in the series. However, these villains are just red herrings who are made insecure by their inability to control their women's bodies and their wombs. Adele's affinity towards the supernatural and superhuman or individuals from a different race inherited by Sookie and Adele's and Crystal's hybrid children pose a more significant threat to the men's pure identities.

Death for Promiscuity and Unsafe Sex in Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls*

Like Crystal in Harris's series, teenagers Jessy's and Ann's bodies are also used for procreation and cast aside after their purpose is served in Brite's *Lost Souls*. Jessy and Ann are mothers to vampire-human hybrids and die in the process of childbirth or botched abortions. These white women are not presented as victims but as sexual predators. They are not submissive but challenge the men in their lives and set out to do as they please. Moreover, like Rice's Akasha and Merrick, they crave power over men and aspire to become like them; hence, they are punished with unplanned pregnancies, death at childbirth, and forced abortions. Out of all the three authors, matrophobia is presented with the most gruesome and graphic details by Brite. Matrophobia in *Lost Souls* is directly about the fear of pregnancy and the ordeal of childbirth and abortion. The novel evokes matrophobia through what Erin Harrington has termed "gynaehorror," horror that includes all aspects of female reproduction.[4] Miscegenation is also part of it because Ann and Jessy conceive vampire babies that eat their way out of their mothers' bodies. However, vampire babies affect their mothers' bodies in the same way, whether they are impregnated by human or vampire males, as we see in the story of vampire Richelle narrated

by a suspicious magician, Arkady, in the novel.[5] These fatal babies can also stand for sexually transmitted infections caused by unsafe sex with strangers. However, they may also cause fatality to their mothers owing to the lack of care, nutrition, and access to healthcare.

Brite's gothic horror works mainly focus on gay male characters and relationships. There are a few women of significance in them, and the few that are, regardless of their sexual orientations, become victims of patriarchal violence. In *Lost Souls*, the vampires are a separate race of beings who mate with human females to procreate vampire-human hybrids. The human females are either raped or seduced by the vampire patriarch Zillah. Pregnant women are murdered by their vampire progeny as the fledglings eat their way out of their human mothers' bodies. Not only does the mother die with the birth of the child, but there are also no memories of the mother for the child, who, like Jessy's son Nothing, the hybrid, looks only for his father. When Nothing finds his father, Zillah, and his companions Twig and Molochai—they immediately form homosexual and incestuous relationships. Zillah is unfaithful, territorial, and abusive. Above all, he serves as a figure for a lousy father and a paternity that must be left behind. However, Zillah's character is glamourized to the extent that Jessy and Ann easily fall prey to his charms. He is the apparent villain, the "red herring," but the real threat is the women's sexuality. In the novel, they express their sexuality, demand sex, and make themselves available to propagate the race of monstrous hybrids; they suffer for their desires and not for the fault of any man.

Jessy is a vampire wannabe and enthusiast who frequents a goth bar in New Orleans. Her sexuality is aberrant and predatory; she is on the hunt outside her home as well as the inside. She seduces her father, sleeps with him, and cuts him open to drink his blood (78–79). Jessy emulates vampires to become one. When Jessy first meets Christian, the only humane vampire in the novel, she smokes Marlborough Lite, and Christian remarks that only virgins smoke that brand (5). Rogers points out that "matrophobia may eroticize chastity as a source of female power" (75). Christian is impressed by Jessy's apparent innocence, and he eroticizes her feigned chastity. When she spies Christian engaged in the oral exchange of blood with the other vampires, Twig and Molochai, she violently interrupts them and goes after the vampire blood herself (8). She tries to steal the blood from vampires, like Rice's Merrick. Unfortunately, Brite's vampires are not made but born. Zillah feeds on Jessy and impregnates her with his vampire child. Not satiated by her sexual encounters, the pregnant Jessy moves in with Christian. Later, he gives in to the demands of a pregnant Jessy, has sex with her, and cares for her after Zillah abandons her. Jessy not only demands sex from Christian but also forces him to bite her and draw blood (9). Her bizarre sexual adventures come to an end when Nothing is born. He eats his way out of his mother's body,

killing Jessy in the process (9–10).

Rogers notes that pregnancy could cause a morbid preoccupation with the possibility of maternal mortality (75), and pregnancy can, therefore, function as a symbolic punishment for female sexuality, as in the cases of Jessy and later Ann. Matrophobia includes the fear of motherhood. Childbirth can often include complications, the horrors of which are inscribed on women's bodies. Rogers discusses these horrors, though in an eighteenth-century context when women gave birth at home under the supervision of midwives. Jessy, too, gives birth at home, but there are no experienced women or midwives to help her. There is only the vampire Christian, who sympathizes with her but is unable to help.

> Jessy screamed until she could scream no more, and her eyes showed only the whites with their silvery rims, and great gouts of blood poured from her. When the baby slipped out of Jessy, its head turned and its eyes met Christian's: confused, intelligent, innocent. A shred of deep pink tissue was caught in the tiny mouth, softening between the working gums. Christian separated the baby from Jessy…. Then he knelt between Jessy's limp legs and looked at the poor torn passage that had given him so many nights of idle pleasure. Ruined now, bloody. So much blood to go to waste. (Brite 9–10)

Unlike Jessy, Ann is not a vampire enthusiast or wannabe, but she yearns for her abusive ex-boyfriend, Steve, even when she is in a healthier relationship (105–06). However, Steve blames Ann for his abusive behaviour towards her and admits that he used to rape Ann because he felt overpowered by Ann's sexuality (108). Later, to make Steve jealous, Ann sleeps with Zillah and his friends and becomes pregnant with a vampire child. Infuriated, Steve, with the help of his best friend Ghost and quack doctor Arcady, plans to abort Ann's baby. From his association with Richelle, Arkady knew the pregnancy needed to be aborted. Therefore, they poison Ann, and along with the baby, Ann bleeds to death. Even as she dies, Ann's sexuality scares Steve. "Between the milk-pale thighs" of Ann is her "treacherous cunt," and Steve "knew that if he looked at her too long, he would want her, even passed out. Yes, he could slip inside her so easily, it would be like coming home—but what if the thing in her womb reached a tiny hand down and grabbed him? What if it got ahold of him with its *teeth*? His hard-on was suddenly gone" (*Lost Souls* 311). By calling her vagina treacherous, he makes it sound like something that can be dangerous or trick him or others, like Zillah, to behave in a certain way, perhaps rape and abuse her. Ann lies helpless as Steve imagines the treachery of her body. Richelle, Jessy, and Ann do not receive the necessary care and support for their unplanned and complicated pregnancies. All they get are men who either welcome the birth and the preservation of their race, like

Zillah and Christian, or men who try to stop the birth, like Steve and Ghost. Although Steve and Ghost attempt to save Ann, they end up intervening and making decisions for the mother, causing more harm to her than help. Perhaps more knowledge would have helped, or would it? Rich observes that "the advent of the male midwife and obstetrician being one—passive suffering and the archetypal female experience of childbirth have been seen as identical. Passive suffering has thus been seen as a universal, 'natural,' female destiny" (129). Rogers agrees with Rich and adds, "Ironically, in the very act of giving birth, women were treated like helpless children, unable to make decisions" (82). The women who get pregnant in *Lost Souls* do not choose to, although they are careless and do not use protection. Jessy does not know she will die at childbirth, although Christian knows but does not help. Richelle knows she will die. However, she tries to abort her pregnancy, the only one deciding for herself. Ann, however, is rendered unconscious and force-fed the poison by Steve, Ghost, and Arkady. She does not decide to abort her child, nor does she approve of the use of poison (Brite 307–08). It may seem that the two-century-old vampire Richelle has more agency than human women, but none survive.

Just like Adele and Crystal, Jessy and Ann express their sexuality. They sleep with whom they desire. Moreover, they enjoy rape, incest, and abusive behaviours from their sexual partners. Their promiscuity comes to an end with a vampire child, much like the end of sexual freedom brought about AIDS in the 1980s, the decade preceding Brite's novel. While New Orleans and the fictional Bon Temps in Louisiana serve as a playing field for the superhuman and human men in the novel, they also serve as a burial ground for the women. *Lost Souls* also includes elements of matrophobia. In *Lost Souls*, the deaths of teenagers Ann and Jessy not only highlight the fear of motherhood but also the fear of sexually transmitted infections, especially AIDS. Just like AIDS, the vampire hybrids take root in the bodies of these promiscuous women and eventually kill them.

Conclusion

Although late twentieth and early twenty-first century representations of Southern women may have become more inclusive of women with agency, racialized women, and women who express their sexuality, the representations could also take two steps back and depict such women as unacceptable. The report on the Status of Women in the South, mentioned in the introductory section, shows that women's participation in politics is restricted in the South; their status is low in families, they suffer from poverty, and they also lack reproductive rights and access to health and wellbeing. The women in the works of Rice, Brite, and Harris are victims of these Southern issues. Moreover, a deep sense of matrophobia looms over these works. It is evident from the

above examples that the strong women characters found in these works do not inspire but are used to invoke fear of exercising freedom, expressing sexuality, and desiring power over self and sometimes even control over others. Most of all, they instill fear of miscegenation through the use of matrophobia.

Endnotes

1. Poppy Z. Brite is the pen name of author William Joseph/ Billy Martin, who uses it on his websites and in his horror fiction.
2. Naomi Ruth Lowinsky explains that the motherline is a name for the pattern in women's stories, "for the oneness of body and psyche, for the experience of continuity among women … as a central organizing principle in the psyche of women, relating to us the ancient earth of female procreation" (134).
3. The girl or woman who faces the killer/s and survives to tell the tale in horror movies. Carol J. Clover coins the term in her article "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film" (1987) and further explores it in *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992).
4. Gynaehorror is the "horror that deals with all aspects of female reproductive horror, from the reproductive and sexual organs, to virginity and first sex, through to pregnancy, birth and motherhood, and finally to menopause and post-menopause" (Harrington 3).
5. "Richelle was celibate. She had a terror of becoming pregnant. She insisted that no precautions were reliable enough. Should she conceive, she told me, it would mean the end of her" (Brite 272), and it did when she accidentally got pregnant.

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