

Race, Class, and Feminism in the Popular Fantasy Novel *New Moon* by Stephenie Meyer

Qudsia Ahmad

Research scholar
Department of English
Patna University

Dr Sahar Rahman

Associate Professor
Department of English
Patna Women's College
Patna University

Abstract

Popular fiction, especially the fantasy genre, has always been underrated and dismissed as unworthy of attention. *New Moon* by Stephanie Meyer is an apt example of a fantasy text that is slighted as a mere vampire and werewolf folklore printed on paper.

This paper aims to investigate and bring forth pertinent social and cultural issues such as class, race, feminism, and biophobia depicted through the folkloristic creatures of vampires and werewolves.

Keywords: *vampires, werewolf, folklore, race, feminism, biophobia*

Stephenie Meyer is an American author famous for her *Twilight Quartet* which consists of four novels *Twilight* (2005), *New Moon* (2006), *Eclipse* (2007), and *Breaking Dawn* (2008). Though Meyer has written companion novels to the series, *The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner* and the *Midnight Sun*, it is the *Twilight Series* that acquired global success with a sale of more than 160,000,000 copies worldwide and adapted into an equally successful four-part film franchise and over hundred and fifty fanzines both online and offline.

According to Meyer, the novel series developed out of a dream featuring a vampire and a human girl. The series is also influenced by the play *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, Victorian melodrama, and Meyer's Mormonism faith. The basic premise of the series revolves around Isabella 'Bella' Swan who has moved from Phoenix Arizona to Forks, Washington to live with her father Charlie Swan, a police officer after her mother's remarriage. She falls in love with the handsome but mysterious Edward Cullen, who she later discovers to be a 103-year-old vampire. In each part of the quartet Bella's and Edward's love for each other grows stronger, and

they overcome familial hurdles and their biological difference to be together in the final volume of the series.

New Moon is the second installment in the Twilight series. It begins with Bella dreaming about an old lady standing next to an extremely handsome young man. She is rudely awakened when the old lady of her dream looks closely into the mirror and realizes that the old lady is none other than Bella herself. Upon waking up she remembers that “today was my birthday. I was officially eighteen years old” (Meyer 6) officially a year older than her immortal vampire boyfriend Edward Cullen. Edward and his family, a clan of vegetarian vampires, throw Bella a birthday party despite her resistance. While opening one of her birthday presents at the Cullens’ mansion she injures her finger. The sight and scent of human blood caused Jasper, a ‘newborn’ vampire, who has trouble adapting to the Cullens’ vegetarian lifestyle, to lose control and attack Bella. Edward comes to the rescue while the rest of the family members try to tranquilize Jasper. The birthday celebration turns out to be fatal for Bella and Edward blames himself for the near fatal incident. He begins to stay away from Bella and soon, he leaves for good. The breakup and separation cause Bella huge emotional damage and suffering and she slips into depression. She loses interest in her life and indulges in all sorts of dangerous activities such as biking and cliff diving to hear the hallucinatory voice of Edward. To practice biking, she buys an old and broken motorcycle which requires repairing services and while looking for a mechanic she meets Jacob Black, who was first introduced in *Twilight* but is a major character in *New Moon* and the subsequent parts of the series. Jacob becomes a companion, a friend, and a beacon of hope in Bella’s life. He pulls Bella out of her catatonic state and breathes a new life into her lonely and dark existence. Unfortunately for Bella, her friendship with Jacob turns out to be short-lived because she finds out that Jacob is a werewolf. For Jacob too, this transformation from a regular boy to a beast is not easy and he begins to distance himself from Bella to adjust and adapt to his new identity.

Towards the end of the novel, Bella comes to know through Alice (Edward’s sister) that Edward is in Italy provoking the Volturi (head of the vampires) to kill him. Bella and Alice go to Italy to thwart Edward’s attempt at suicide and return safely to Forks. Upon his return, he apologizes to Bella for his irrational behavior and decision and also explains that he left because of Bella’s safety. He believes that his presence in her life puts her at risk as proved by the episodes of Jasper’s attack during the celebration and Laurent’s attack in the forest. Bella, however, detests the thought of staying away from Edward and is even ready to become a vampire to be with Edward forever, of which Edward is extremely critical and he puts a hold on Bella’s decision to become a vampire till her graduation. The novel ends with Bella, Edward, and Jacob ruminating over difficult choices of love, identity, and rivalry.

The novel features vampires and werewolves as major characters. Vampires are chiefly creatures from folklores who are portrayed as nocturnal, blood-sucking species residing in coffins and graveyards who are deterred by garlic, running water, and holy accessories such as rosaries. Vampire-like creatures feature across various cultures known by different names such as Lilitu in Babylonia, Strix in ancient Greece and Rome, Jiang-shi in China, and Obayifo in Africa. The first literary vampire was created by Dr. John Polidori, a personal physician of poet George Gordon Byron, who wrote a horror story entitled *The Vampyre* in which a gentleman called Ruthven happens to be a vampire. ‘The Vampyre’ turned out to be the template for subsequent vampire stories including the most famous ‘Dracula’ by Bram Stoker. From a psychoanalytic

perspective, vampires belong to the Freudian ‘uncanny’ and ‘repression’ returning to their fullest, threatening the cultural order. They also signify what Mladen Dolar calls “an excess and transgression in an otherwise coherent system of identification” (qtd in Gelder), especially in their habit of biting and sucking blood off their victim. The act of sucking blood is also symbolic of repressed sexual energy.

The earlier vampire stories especially in the nineteenth century portrayed vampires as elusive, alluring even homosexual monsters who killed humans to keep themselves alive. Vampires in nineteenth-century fiction such as Count Dracula were also seen as cultural and national threats because of lack of specific nationality and hence the need to exorcise them. However, towards the end of the twentieth century, vampires began to be portrayed as respectable, socially acceptable, and integrated beings who could control their hunger, urges, and behavior. This upgrade in the portrayal of vampires from a grave hunting and haunting creature to almost a gentleman reflects the changes and improvements in American and European society which became more accepting of people belonging to marginalized and subversive groups for which the vampires stood for in earlier portrayals.

Werewolves too belong to the world of folklore and are portrayed as cunning and ferocious beasts. According to Bourgault du Coudray, “a werewolf is a human being who changes into a wolf” (qtd in Beresford). A werewolf can move between a human and an animal and the transformation takes place on a full moon night. In earlier and medieval times it was also believed that men turned into wolves by the application of certain ointments provided by demons and witches. In the medieval ages, classic tales of werewolves also developed such as Melion and Bisclavret. Like vampires, werewolves are also symbolic of transgression and cultural anxieties but unlike vampires werewolves despite being savage creatures have always been victims of violence such as evacuation from their homeland and denial of rights and privileges.

In the novel, Meyer presents vampires and werewolves as two different races who cannot stand each other. The tug of war between the vampires and the werewolves is not because of Bella but is representative of the deep-rooted racism and class hierarchy present in American society. The Cullens are literally and metaphorically white and are civilized, intellectual, and rich as compared to the Quileutes who are an indigenous tribe, live on the reservation, and are financially weak. Bella constantly compares Edward’s personality and voice to an Archangel i.e. he is compared with God and divine beings as “a marble tribute to some forgotten pagan god of beauty” (Meyer 7) and God and divine beings are already assumed to be white, a practice known as ‘whitening of the image of Christ’. The Cullens’ ability to restrain their urge for human blood and Carlisle’s humanitarian services are symbolic of their civilized nature. Being white inherently makes them rich and privileged which is commonly called ‘white privileges’ in Race theory. They live in a grand mansion and lead a luxurious lifestyle. They have a taste for high art and classical music. They own expensive sports cars and wear designer clothes. Alice Cullen stands as the epitome of a capitalistic lifestyle among the Cullens. She not only owns high-end brands of cars and dresses but also showers pricey gifts to Bella, much to Bella’s chagrin. Alice’s ability to predict the future of stock trading helps the Cullens to invest in zero loss portfolios, thus further expanding their wealth.

The Blacks on the other hand come from an indigenous tribe called the Quileutes. Quileutes stand for the immigrants Chicano and native Americans. The Quileutes were a real Native

American tribe who were forced into reservations. Compared to the Cullens, the Quileutes are closer to nature and unlike Cullens who are elusive and keep their existence private and under wraps, engage in manual labor, have animal-like instincts, and are financially weak. Jacob Black and his wheelchair-bound father live in a tiny barn and Jacob unlike impeccably dressed Cullens wears rugged and torn clothes and repairs motorcycles for income. The Quileutes in the novel are a marginalized and oppressed community on two accounts: being a social outcast and being an animal biologically.

It must also be noticed that Quileutes/Blacks do not transform into wolves out of their own will or as a result of some form of punishment/curse or some mental illness medically known as lycanthropy. Rather their werewolf gene is a part of their inheritance because the Quileutes claim to have descended from wolves “they had their legends of the great flood and wolf-men ancestors” (Meyer 72) They also transform into werewolves when they experience intense emotions such as anger and most importantly in the vicinity of vampires whom they call ‘cold ones’. The Quileutes believe that in the past vampires were responsible for the loss of their habitat. This echoes the racial superiority of the vampires who colonized the indigenous territories and forced their members to flee. Jacob’s last name is Black, his hair covers his eyes and his house has narrow windows that block light. These epithets are symbolic of his backwardness. Jacob and other members of the pack have often been described as semi-naked, and strong but dangerous. Jacob has been portrayed as a strong, muscular, and often shirtless who acts as a sexual threat to the sophisticated and frozen Edward. His strength, muscularity, close connection to nature, and agility which pose a sexual and otherwise threat to Edward can be read as an example of biophobia where nature and its associates are considered savage and need to be ‘Othered’. “...this specifically racist biophobia...can be interpreted in terms of an insightful form of ‘cultural diagnosis’ of contemporary American middle class society and its general anxieties regarding sexuality, otherness, and nature.” (Miller and McKay 13).

Apart from pertinent racial and class issues the novel has also been the target of criticism because of the way the female protagonist Isabella Swan has been portrayed and the choices she makes. Bella appears to be a prototypical Victorian girl who sacrifices the comfort of her home and city to come and live with her father Charlie Swan only to have her mother and her second husband Phil some quality time together. She does all the household chores and believes she is good for nothing. After she falls in love with Edward, he becomes the center of her life, which has been critics' major concern. In part one of the series Bella shares with the readers that she works at a local goods store to save money for her college education. Later, when she meets Edward and falls in love with him, she abandons all her ambitions, her family, and even her identity to become a vampire. She becomes painfully dependent on Edward for her emotional well-being, even tolerating problematic behaviors of Edward such as stalking, lying, and domination as Miller points out “...promotes a dangerous and damaging ideology of patriarchy that normalizes and rationalizes the control of women by men” (qtd in Crawford). However, what the critics have failed to notice is that the benchmark word of feminism is ‘choice’. Meyer too has defended her protagonist because the ability to choose is the essence of feminism. Bella chooses on her own free will to turn into a vampire and be a sit-at-home wife and mother. The decision has not been made by others for her. Bella’s desire to become a vampire also speaks of subtle feminism because, in the world of vampires, women are equally strong and capable and are by no means considered less or inferior to men.

Bella and her choices in fact incline towards post feminism. Post-feminism unlike feminism which categorizes its assumptions in binaries is more inclusive of pluralities and contradictions. As a post-feminist character, Bella arouses both progressive and regressive reactions.

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