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## **The English Francophobe: Representation of Alienness, Anxiety and Seduction of Talent in *Vanity Fair***

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**Abstract:** While the Anglo-French rivalry is often the fulcrum of several historical events across the globe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the English reception of the French remains a problematic space that exhibits both desire and derision. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, through the portrayal of Becky Sharp is a classic example of that. While Becky elicits a customary Francophobia among the English society people, she simultaneously evokes a strong desire to acquire and appropriate a culture which the English people, albeit implicitly, considered superior to themselves. This results in a unique xenophobic anxiety and the novel represents this janus-faced response that the paper wishes to explore as the most profound aspect of the post-mercantile cultural mobility in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century England. The paper further intends to consider the representation of the 'alien' Becky in the novel as the gendered space of 'talent' where the xenophobia gets negotiated through the praxis of this apparent contradiction of repulsion and seduction. In this, the paper will take into consideration the haunting of the Napoleonic contemporaneity on the English psyche, that finds fictional representation through Becky.

**Key Words:** Xenophobia, anxiety, seduction, money, mobility, talent.

The French Revolution and the rise and fall of Napoleon created a dichotomous sense of appreciation among the English people not only for the historical developments across the continent but for the French people as well. William Makepeace Thackeray in his 'The Fetes of July' captures this discomfort to perfection. He claims that there can be nothing serious about France as to him all the revolutionary developments are stage crafts and rantings. From liberty, monarchy, glory and justice, to Thackeray, all the French claims to them are nothing but shams. (*The Paris Sketch Book*, 38) While on the



surface, this is a clear admonition of the French, one cannot miss how categorically Thackeray lists the positives, viz, 'Liberty', 'Glory' and 'Justice' only to debunk them all as 'sham'. The desire for these, what can be called the fruits of the revolution is evident in Thackeray. However, he has a profound cultural doubt about the romantic idealism of the French. Like *The Paris Sketch Book*, where the romantic picture is constantly undercut by the narrator's consciousness of the artifice, *Vanity Fair* too resists the rhetoric of romantic ideology. However, the sheer lure of the romance can hardly be ignored and this simultaneous seduction and resistance plays itself out to form a curious anxiety in the very portrayal and treatment of the protagonist of the novel, Becky Sharp, the daughter of a French dancing woman.

The novel follows the lives of two schoolmates, Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley. Amelia comes from a well-to-do family. She is simple, gentle, and loving. Becky is intelligent, resilient, energetic, and poor. The novel shows the gradual fall of Amelia into distress because of her father's once prosperous business going broke and the rise of Becky through means highly secular and amoral. Through several ups and downs the novel shows a resurrection of the fortune for Amelia, while Becky banking on her own resources, legal and extra-legal, attains a life of semi respectability. The novel published serially between January 1847 and July 1848, has as its background the turbulent time in the European history from the French Revolution to the fall of Bonaparte. While the novel shows Becky, of distinct French origin, creating havoc among the rank and file of the English genteel society, its language is replete with French phrases, often untranslated, too creates a sense of intrusion. Patricia Marks finds this intrusive usage of the French language to be a textual counterpart of the invasion of Napoleon. (Brantlinger 76) However, a high society novel in itself, *Vanity Fair*, true to its title exposes not only the vanity of the 'sham' French language, but marks the English language exchanged in these ballrooms and bed-chambers with the same hollowness. Thus the invasive language and culture is at once resisted and internalized, resulting in an unprecedented anxiety.

The invasion of the French language, in the days of *Vanity Fair* would not have the significance of the anxiety of the possibility of the French invasion unattached to it. Though the Waterloo was won, the French was viewed with considerable animosity and in this context, Becky emerges as the social counterpoint of Napoleon as far as her 'invasion' of the English high society is concerned. Interestingly,



what she uses as her weapon is the French language itself. At the very onset of the novel, we are told that Becky is there in Miss Pinkerton's academy for her fluency in the language. In fact, she is allowed food, lodging, some tuition, and a very small salary in return for speaking French with the younger girls in the school. The first chapter in fact shows a fascinating linguistic antagonism of sorts. As Becky evidently wins a livelihood with her mastery over French, her tossing off of Johnson's *Dictionary* is almost a disowning of the English language and the thereby the correspondent culture and society. This is almost a displacement of the battle of Waterloo onto language, and this illustrates the dialogic nature of discourse in *Vanity Fair*. The novel would unfold itself as truly multi-voiced that represents, in M.M. Bakhtin's terms, both the professed intent of the character who is doing all the talk and the intent of the author that refracts itself through that speech. To Bakhtin the prime cause of such multi-voicedness is rooted in the sociology of the speech itself. It is the heteroglossic society that surfaces itself in those speeches through individuated oppositions. (Bakhtin 324-326) Becky thus emerges as the social counterpoint of Napoleon as far as her invasion is concerned, and what she primarily uses as her weapon is the French language itself. The 'refracted intention' of the author, through Becky's portrayal is perhaps to accept, albeit grudgingly, that in the post Napoleonic age, an Anglo-Saxon univocality is impossible and the carnivalization through the incursion of the foreign phrases as well as with individuals such as Becky, has to be accepted.

The novel would always display this simultaneous attraction and repulsion for the French language and culture. Becky knows from the very beginning that it is her mastery over the refined French that should give her access to the high society. Even at an early age she would cause discomfort to Miss Pinkerton by replying to her in French, the language the latter was ashamed to accept in public she was not proficient in. Her job as governess was largely because the high society English households wanted their wards to be fluent in the language of their otherwise arch rival. But at the same time the negatives in the novel often seem to have distinct French connection. For instance, Lord Steyne's profits from gambling is reported to have financed the French Revolution. In fact, at the very start when Becky flings Johnson's *Dictionary*, to Amelia's dumbfounded disgust, she screams out, '*Vive la France! Vive l'Emereur! Vive Bonaparte!*' (*Vanity Fair* 14) This reference to Napoleon would bring obvious parallels between Becky and Bonaparte, but greater significance lies in the way Bonaparte's reception and that of Becky run parallel to each other.



As a schoolboy, Thackeray caught a glimpse of Napoleon, captive at St. Helena while he was on his way to England from India in 1815. Thackeray records how the popular imagination spawned around the figure of the emperor as his black servant would tell him that Napoleon eats three sheep each day and even gobbles up every child he finds around him! (Ray 1)

The same Thackeray seems to be oblivious to this representation of the man when, as a young man making his maiden speech at Cambridge Union, he focuses on another facet of the Napoleonic myth and declares that all the esteem and accolades that Napoleon had received from his nation are well deserved for his excellence as a lawgiver and a monarch. (Ray 45)

Thackeray's position on Napoleon seems to be exactly the one that he holds for Becky. When she is climbing the social ladder with an effortless ease, she seems to him the perfect representative of the Napoleonic idea of talent over birth. Her sharp intelligence is praised and her ability to sway men's favour is almost revealed at. But as she suffers a fall, it is the same Becky who ends up becoming a siren with a diabolic and hideous tail. (*Vanity Fair* 577) In fact, in her rise and fall, Becky is the heroic archetype that Napoleon went on to become. In the word of Shoshana Knapp Napoleon was all dichotomies in one. He was the cult hero and the outlaw; the angel of the revolution and the demon of the misadventure. (Putzell 76) These apparent coming together of the opposites manifests the primary facet of the anxiety that the treatment of Becky, both by the novelist and the society, exhibit; namely, the simultaneity of attraction and repulsion, desire and disgust.

This is where Thackeray's use of French interpolations in the novel becomes intriguing. Becky's indomitable rise, in spite of her alienness and oft deplored French nature, is latent in the very need of French in the world of this novel. *Vanity Fair* uses French language to camouflage the truth in the aristocracy where even those who sit on satin cushions may have a secret that tends to surface every now and then from the embroidered cover in the most uncanny way. (*Vanity Fair* 419-420) Becky is a success in Gaunt House as she is needed there to cover up the foibles of the English high society and transfer them all on her. Thereby the native shortcomings are hushed up. Likewise, the French untranslated



interpolations in the novel perfectly complement the characteristic reticence of Thackeray. Maria Di Battista connects Thackeray's reticence in interpreting the charades and the issue of Becky's guilt with Lord Steyen as a studied reluctance that generates out of fear as the deeper enigmas or the veiled secrets that govern a given society may come out otherwise. (Brantlinger 79) Di Battista terms this anxiety as the fear of complete annihilation. While Thackeray stops short of describing them, he does cause enough arousal of curiosity regarding them – creating a seductive charm around the same. This is highly in tandem with the apparently dichotomous desire and denial that the narrative is constantly subjected to.

In this respect, the novel seems to take an interesting turn from the Bakhtinian refracted desire of the author to a reflection of the 'readerly' desire in the theoretical premise of Wulfgang Iser. This seductive anxiety of foreignness is captured in the novelist's reticence about the translation that in a way, puts the onus on the readers to translate. Consequently, as Iser suggests, *Vanity Fair* emerges as the crucial 'readerly' text where the reader draws inference and fills 'empty spaces' in the text with her own interpretation. In this way, an interesting shift takes place as the readers' criticism of social opportunism is turned back on herself. The narrator thus overtly identifies with the reader. To Iser, in this process the reader gradually identifies himself with the objects of her criticism. Hence, the critique and characters that are criticized confront each other in an uncanny doppelganger of sorts (Iser 51). Thus what at one point in time appeared the pathology of the narrator becomes almost a record of the historical mood of a race. The anxiety towards foreignness and its negotiation through simultaneous attraction and repulsion thus, through *Vanity Fair* becomes almost the general response of the age.

That historicity and the way that has shaped itself around Becky Sharp has a distinct politico-economic background to it. Paul Delany in *Literature, Money and the Market* argues that there is a prominence of money in the Victorian literature as the people started appreciating the transformative power of money as the global trade started to centre itself in London (Brantlinger 49). The intrinsic value of money is of lesser significance now as the things it can buy and the changes it can bring became the matter of greater significance. Karl Marx captures this unique shift most poignantly as he declares unequivocally that it is the extent of the power of the money in one's possession that determines the extent of that individual's



power. Individuality plays little role now as what one is capable of is determined by the money in possession rather than character or mettle. (Marx 103)

The case of Becky is captured in this critical turn of history. While she is a determined social climber, she is always conscious and desirous of the issue of money. In chapter 49 of the novel the Marquis of Steyne bullies his wife and daughters-in-law into inviting Becky and Rawdon to a dinner party. The women are rude to her but her singing once again charmed the men. While she is basking in the high society luxury and attention, the audience is made critically aware that her goal of wealth is continuing to elude her. The Victorian novel has given us a character like Heathcliff of *Wuthering Heights*, who has learnt most dramatically that power does not come from hoarding money but by the social relations built into the exchange when it is given away. Becky wishes to attain that kind of wealth that would undo her less than modest history and lineage and transform her into a lady of the respectable society. Towards the end, with Jos' insurance money, she attains exactly that. Becky thus is a product of this curious turn of the history of money as it was transforming itself from the feudal coffer hoards to the merchant's medium of exchange.

What the novelist and the world of *Vanity Fair* took Betty for, at least initially, is this mode of exchange itself. The social structure of the novel, as has been mentioned, is permeated with French phrases and an ardent desire to acquire a certain French refinement in conversation and manners. Though Bonaparte's terror looms, the society deemed it fit to welcome the French as lending a '*distingue*' air that heightens the value of the mundane and, perhaps more importantly, gloss over the shortcomings of the native society so that it can "make a great show with very little means" (*Vanity Fair* 456). The narrator comments, "people's daughters are universally sold in marriage" and in England, daughters are 'finished' to speak in French so that they marry well (*vanity Fair* 102). Thus what constitutes the distinctness of the English supremacy is their daughters being adequately tutored in French. The smugness that the common Englishman exhibited in his country emerging victorious over Napoleon kind of gets undone by this desire of 'Frenchification'. Hence we see at a family dinner, where the table is set with silver and linen, the menu includes '*mutton aux navets*', '*potage de mouton a l' Ecossaise*', ,, '*pommes de terre au natural*', and '*choufleur a l'eau*'. What they eat, of course, is a mutton with turnip, barley soup, plain potatoes, and



cauliflower cooked in water. Pit Crawley would claim this to be the refined custom to extend French nomenclature to the familiar English dishes to make them fit the high society dining etiquettes. (*Vanity Fair* 69-70). The French serve as that exchange value which offers camouflage of aristocracy perhaps in lieu of a grudging acceptance of the arch-rival's supremacy in culture and refinement. Becky emerges victorious in Gaunt House as well as in her earlier expeditions at Brussels and Paris, in spite of being penniless at times, because she has learnt to use her capital's exchange value and reap benefits out of the same. She invents an aristocratic background which was grossly untrue. However, the society accepts it because of her fluent French was considered enough of a proof. At one point we see her comforting a despondent Amelia with her 'genteel jargon' (*Vanity Fair* 253) and at Gaunt House we see her height of social success with the charades. With Becky both intermingle as she uses her French like the abstraction of currency money to the exchange value of which the continent was gradually maturing into.

Regenia Gagnier in her essay 'Money, the Economy, and the Social Class' considered this transition in the 19<sup>th</sup> century society to be one of property moving from being private and hoarded to becoming subsequently an exchange medium in the hypermarket. According to her, this movement blurs the erstwhile values and creates a vacuum of sort as money emerging to be considered as community and communication blurs the boundaries of relative and absolute value, of presence and representation (Brantlinger 62). Becky's positioning even in this paradigm is not a unilateral one. This hypermarket of community and communication, according to Gagnier that is built on this abstract transformative power of money, will produce a dialectic of wealth and waste. While wealth is the employment of money in transformative communication and therefore dynamic, waste is the sheer lack of it, and thereby static. Becky hated anything static and her desire for upward social mobility from the very onset is enough proof of that. But this desire is never something that found a concrete destination. In other words, her desire for upward mobility is without any specific form and shape about it. In this way, Becky becomes tantalizingly similar to the design that the concept of money was maturing into at that point of time in history. The common English attitude at this transition is one of sheer anxiety. Thomas Carlyle in his 'Chartism' rues how exchange of cash was becoming the singular connect between human individuals (Carlyle 199). He goes on to lament even further on the gradual undermining of the intrinsic value of things and being:





And now what is thy property? That parchment title-deed, that purse thou buttonest in thy breeches-pocket? Is that thy valuable property? Unhappy brother, most poor insolvent brother, I without parchment at all, with purse oftenest in that flaccid state imponderous, which will not fling against the wind, have quite other property than that! I have the miraculous breath of Life in me, breathed into my nostrils by Almighty God. (Carlyle 194)

Becky's world is essentially a divinity-independent one. She knows that she cannot rely on her intrinsic value alone, she needs to utilize it using all her resources, moral or otherwise. The contemporary society was finding this rather fiendish.

But what is fiendish to many was talent to some. And this idea of talent, from the perspective of the European history, would have a distinct post-Napoleonic identity about it. Eric Hobsbawm contextualizes 'talent' in the French post revolutionary period in the following way:

It was a society of the parvenu, i.e. the self-made man, though this is not completely obvious except when the country was itself governed by parvenus, i.e. when it was republican or bonapartist. It may not seem excessively revolutionary to us, that half the French peerage in 1840 belonged to families of the old nobility, but to the contemporary French bourgeois the fact that half had been commoners in 1789 was very much more striking; especially when they looked at the exclusive social hierarchies of the rest of continental Europe. (Hobsbawm 226)

Hobsbawm refers to a popular saying of the times that went 'when good Americans die, they go to Paris. (Hobsbawm 226)' However, Thackeray places even this element of talent in a problematized terrain for Becky. While in Paris, she and Rawdon manage to live near royally and that too after the latter was disinherited. The chapter is sarcastically termed as 'How to Live Well on Nothing A-Year' and shows how the couple, without any income thrives in Paris by convincing their creditors that they will eventually pay their bills, although they have neither intention nor the resources to do the same. Becky later would convince Rawdon to sell his place in the army and then they settle in England by paying a small portion of what they actually owe. Perhaps out of their sheer respect for Becky's 'talent', the creditors by now were happy to get anything at all!



This euphoria of talent, historically, did emancipate a certain portion of humanity and recognized their due right to the wealth of the world. But as Hobsbawm insists, even this emancipation followed a distinct pattern of selective emancipation. In the English context, the emancipation is handed over only when the receiver accepted the norms of Utilitarianism, a philosophy that found a substantial support from the British manufacturing bourgeois. Hobsbawm generously quotes from Charles Dickens' *Hard Times* and shows how the Gradgrind school was nurturing and advancing the 'industrial' talent. To find the roots of this, Hobsbawm investigated the very pathology of the popular 'talents' of that time:

The fringe of agnostic eighteenth-century intellectuals and self-made scholars and writers who spoke for them should not obscure the fact that most of them were far too busy with making money to bother about anything unconnected with this pursuit. They appreciated their intellectuals, even when like Richard Cobden (1804-1865), they were not particularly successful businessmen, so long as they avoided unpractical and unsophisticated ideas, for they were practical men whose own lack of education made them suspect anything that went much beyond empiricism. (Hobsbawm 229)

Thus, it may appear that the British concept of talent would have a distinct idea of productivity associated with it. However, soon that too is seen to be not the real case as the manufacturing-industrial talents of Britain simultaneously showed a desire to be like the feudal masters in all the other aspects of life, barring the factory, with ample money to splurge on pseudo baronial mansions, near gothic and quasi-Renaissance town halls and the on rebuilding of the mundane looking chapels with the perpendicular style of architecture (Hobsbawm 230). The desire to learn French is an off-shoot of this desire of aristocracy itself. But at the same time, the revolutionary France was one hard pill to swallow. In the twilight of this desire and derision, thrived Becky. She makes a parody of the manufacturing bourgeois talent as her upward social mobility utilized everything from adultery to literal horse-selling to an alleged murder. But still, such a character is not ostracized by the English community. In fact, at the end we see her very much a part of the society itself with an apparently regained reputation who is a regular at church services and a regular donor in many charities. She has made herself accepted to the English society by most dexterously utilizing the seductive grey zone between the desire and derision.



The negotiation of this xenophobic anxiety that Becky posed to the English society is distinct from similar anxieties of non-European kind. Immanuel Wallerstein in *The Modern World System*, that the capitalist xenophobia has an Anglo-European core which demands the surplus of the labour of the non-European periphery (Gagnier 63-64). In *Vanity Fair*, this is illustrated by the character of Miss Swartz, the rich, orphaned, Jewish-Jamaican heiress who was wanted to be utilized by Mr. Osborne for her wealth against Amelia, the fortune of whose family took a sharp downturn. Becky and the anxiety that she engenders are distinct from that. She is somewhat an excess desire who could not quite be compartmentalized as per what the English society demands of her. And she took the full advantage of that, in the form of a literal femme fatale. Her distinct Frenchness is maintained throughout though. Towards the end we see her singing Napoleonic songs to the ailing Jos, a self-proclaimed Waterloo hero. Becky thus undoes Waterloo and emerges as that seductive French anxiety that the English had no other option but to grudgingly domesticate.

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