
The Imperial Domesticities of Mary Seacole's Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands

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Abstract

Many critics have suggested important reasons why Mary Seacole's *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857) remains on the outskirts of our understanding of Victorian womanhood (she is black, she is from Jamaica, her autobiography is, in many ways, a departure from others written at the same time, among other reasons). Rather than dwelling on what distinguishes Seacole from her contemporaries (she's not white, not English by birth, not a professional writer, among others), we should recognize the ways in which she marks her national identity through familiar nineteenth-century rhetoric: her understanding of material things shows how she is, in fact, a recognizable British subject. As she travels and works throughout the Americas, Seacole uses material objects to mark herself as a British woman and citizen. This essay examines how Seacole's repeated use of specific material objects becomes the most visible way she represents her Britishness as an unmarried "Mulatta" Jamaican woman throughout her travels across the Americas. While Seacole shares few personal details, the calico and other material things that reappear in her hotels become global signifiers that document how she understands and replicates the Empire at its edges. In this way, she presents herself as both wife and mother to these global strangers, a fact some critics have seen as the mark of her otherness, but one that, I argue, also marks her as a consummate heroine. For Seacole, then, these material things become a way of marking British domesticity in places where she might be identified as a racial or national other-and forge transcontinental connections within a burgeoning British consciousness.

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