

Echoes Of Trapped Voices: The Role Of Women In Doris Lessing's *The Grass Is Singing* And Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory In The Flesh*

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the representations and the of women in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh*. Addressing the questions of female identity, subjectivity, and agency, the paper highlights the intersection of colonial and patriarchal forms of domination. It adopts a feminist framework in highlighting such issues. The significance of this study is that it is – to the best of my knowledge – the first one to compare between these two novels in light of feminist and postcolonial approaches. Moreover, the paper discusses the technique and significance of narration as a tool of masculine domination. It borrows Minh-ha's and Ebrahim's notions of female writings. It also draws on De Beauvoir's analysis of the roles of women in male-dominant societies. The paper concludes that in the context of patriarchal and colonial forms of domination, women are always positioned as the inferior and passive others.

KEYWORDS: patriarchy, colonial, postcolonial, women, narration

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Women all over the world have been trying to express their own experiences, find their own voices and identities. In her novel *The Grass is Singing*, English writer Doris Lessing portrays such a quest by her female protagonist Mary Turner. From her very childhood to her tragic death, Mary has been struggling to make sense of herself. She fails to establish her independent identity and true happiness, which is a result of living in a patriarchal society in white colony in South Africa. Another patriarchal society and another female journey are depicted by the Arabic writer Ahlam Mosteghanemi in her novel *Memory in the Flesh* (originally published as *Dhakirat Al Jasad*). The female protagonist Hayat / Ahlam is a successful Algerian writer who lives in Paris, whom we read through a male narrator. Such narration is the reason why the female voice gets lost in the novel.

This paper discusses the role of women in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* and Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh*. Such a study is important in order to explore the female identities and experiences in different cultures and societies. The research approach adopted in this paper includes analysis of the female protagonists in both novels, their conflicts, and their relationships with the male characters and with their worlds. Through a feminist perspective, the research also discusses the influence of colonial and postcolonial societies on their female members. Although "gender divisions cross national boundaries and assume new definition and value in each culture" (Higonnet 155), the main conclusion drawn from this study is that women play similar roles in male dominant societies.

I. The Illusion Of Independent Women:

In the first chapters of *The Grass is Singing*, Mary Turner lives by herself in "the girls club". Coming out of a difficult childhood, she is finally enjoying her life. She finds a sense of belonging that she has been missing in her parents' home. "She liked the crowds of girls" and "was a person of some importance" (Lessing 32). But most importantly, she was free. Although she has a lot of male friends, whom she plays with tennis or hockey, they all treat her as a sister and "a good pal" (Lessing 33). As a result of this hard wall she builds to keep men away, "she was leading the comfortable carefree existence of a single woman" (Lessing 31). She has been a happy thirty years old woman "without love troubles" (Lessing 34). However, this illusion of independence comes to end.

¹The title of this paper is borrowed from a book with the same title: (Elena Filatova. *Echoes of Trapped Voices*. 2005).

Living the life she wants, working in a place she likes, and having many friends are certainly not enough for Mary. She starts to feel “a restlessness, a vague dissatisfaction” (Lessing 34). Such feelings get more intensified, until one day she overhears her friends wondering why she is not married yet. They come to a judgmental conclusion that “she isn’t like that” and that “something is missing somewhere” (Lessing 36). To fulfill this “missing” part, she decides to get married. However, it is not her independent choice, but “people made her get married” (Lessing 90). She is “not able to sustain the role she desires to make for herself as different from that of her mother, not depending on a man emotionally and economically, because she cannot transcend her gendered subjectivity” (Aghazadeh 109). As a female member of a patriarchal society, Mary has to play her constructed role as expected. As Simone De Beauvoir puts it: “She only succeeds in accepting herself from the perspective of both the present and the past by combining the life she has made for herself with the destiny prepared for her” (817).

In *Memory in the Flesh*, the female protagonist Ahlam is an independent writer, yet we come to know her and her writing through the narration of Khaled. Consequently, her language, and her whole identity got distorted. “A learned woman robs man of his creativity, his activity, his culture, his language” (Minha-ha 19). Therefore, she borrows the voice of a male to be heard. In Mosteghanemi’s words: “in order to confront a male-dominated society I would have to ensure the presence of a man at my side” (qtd. in Moore 82), which limits the female presence in the text. Ahlam is represented by Khaled as a strong and smart woman, who has her own opinions and beliefs. Yet he fails to contain his dominant presence; “You were empty like a sponge, and I was deep and heavy like the sea. And you have been filled by me” (My translation of Mosteghanemi 102). He also introduces himself as a mentor and Ahlam is his student, who listens to him with great admiration like someone “under the influence of hypnotism” (My translation of Mosteghanemi 119).

Living independently and successfully in Paris has been nothing more than an illusion for Ahlam. When she visits her home in Constantine, Algeria, she becomes unable to do anything without other’s surveillance. She calls Khaled in Paris to tell him that she is being watched, and that this call is a risky “adventure” (My translation of Mosteghanemi 188). As a female member of an Arabic patriarchal society, Ahlam cannot be completely independent and free. To prove this illusion of independency even more, she leaves Khaled to marry an important and rich political figure whom her uncle chooses for her. “Si Sharif knows that he made a dirty deal, and that he sells his brother’s name by this marriage” (My translation of Mosteghanemi 272). Nevertheless, she accepts the marriage in a “passive reaction even though she is well educated” (My translation of Saleh 147). She feels that she is obligated to marry him and sacrifices herself, for she believes that it is her “fate” (My translation of Mosteghanemi 278). Such sacrifice is a gendered role for women.

II. Double Identity:

In *The Grass is Singing*, Mary has two identities that contribute to her internal conflict and her tragic death: one as a colonized female and the other as a white colonizer. In a male-dominated society, she presents the female gender; the object. Therefore, she has to play her role as expected for her. However, Mary also presents the white dominant race; the subject. When her husband Dick gets ill, she takes over the farm work and enjoys it, because “the sensation of being boss over perhaps eighty black workers gave her new confidence” (Lessing 104). Commanding and controlling the native workers show her superiority as a white person. Aghazadeh argues that Mary ensures her dominance over the native “others”, as “a kind of compensation for her sense of being a feminine and weak “other” for the masculine “self” of the white man” (112-113). Eventually, Moses kills her as a consequence to this conflicted duality of identities. “Her gender role makes her act the role of sacrificial victim”, who has to pay for the whole white civilization (Aghazadeh 119). According to De Beauvoir, women are “powerless” and “made to suffer”, and they would accept what happens to them rather than resisting or revolting against it (728-729).

The female protagonist in *Memory in the Flesh* also has two identities and two names; Hayat and Ahlam. Hayat is the name her father has chosen for her at birth, and the one Khaled likes to use. Hence, Hayat is a creation of the male narrator. In his book on feminist narration, Abdullah Ebrahim states that: “The text is based on the binary oppositions of sending and receiving, Khaled is the sender and Ahlam/ Hayat is the receiver” (My translation of Ebrahim 239). However, Ahlam is also a sender in the sense that she is a reflection of Ahlam Mosteghanemi the author and an echo of her voice. Khaled writes his novel *Memory in the Flesh*, the novel that we read by Mosteghanemi, to remember and immortalize their story. While Ahlam writes her novel “The Turn of Forgetting” to forget their love. (My translation of Ebrahim 237). The duality of voices, texts, and identities contributes to the confusion of the female presence in the novel. As a result of the two contradicted representations of the female protagonist, her true identity gets lost in the novel, and her image gets distorted.

III. Male-Female Relationships In Colonial And Postcolonial Societies:

In *The Grass is Singing*, Mary’s first example of a relationship is the one of her parents. Witnessing her mother suffers, she has been trying not to be in a similar relationship. But she actually ends up playing the exact

same role as her mother's. Moreover, she grows unaware of how much she wants to play it, for she wants "a small daughter, comforting her as she had comforted her mother" (Lessing 125). Although her husband is dominant in the social public sphere, he is not much of a dominant in their private intimate sphere. Dick works to support her economically and therefore he makes the important decisions in their life. But he is "so nice – so nice... so decent" (Lessing 127) and these qualities are perceived by Mary as weakness, which she hated him for. "She needed a man stronger than herself" (Lessing 118), even if it might make her suffer. Because of her submissive gendered role, she has this "willingness to suffer" (Lessing 60), and to be dominated. However, Mary finds the strong man in Moses, the native worker. She falls "helplessly in his power" and develops "a dark attraction" for him (Lessing 144). But when it comes to her relationship with him, two dominant forces get conflicted: the first is presented by Moses as a dominant male. He speaks with her "like a superior to a subordinate" (Lessing 137) and "as if he were speaking to one of his own women" (Lessing 141). The other one is her dominant race. As a white woman, she is forbidden to have a relationship with a black man other than master-servant relationship. Because a man is dominant in most cultures, white men do not allow their women/ race to be dominated by others. Thus, they alert white women not to trust the natives. "She was afraid of them of course. Every woman in South Africa is brought up to be" (Lessing 54). By stereotyping native men as violent and frightening, white men "take the individuality from white women and colonize them as sexual objects always in danger" and need their protection (Aghazadeh 111).

Although *Memory in the Flesh* is about postcolonial Algeria, most of the events take place in Paris, where the Arabic society seem too far to control their choices. However, Khaled and Ahlam form a fictional relationship rather than a real one. As Ebrahim puts it: "The act of writing in *Memory in the Flesh* is a substitute to the act of body" (My translation 236). In this relationship between Khaled the male narrator and Ahlam the female reader, the sender and the receiver, he dominates her presence. Ahlam is merely an object, who is recreated and reshaped by him. For him, she is a "dough, taking the shape of my beliefs, ambitions, and dreams" (My translation of Mosteghanemi 155). This fictional existence reflects the reality that men "have shaped it and ruled it and who still dominate it" (Beauvoir 725).

In his relationship with Catrine, his French lover, Khaled is still the dominant one. He also thinks of her as an object. Although Khaled keeps comparing between the two women, Ahlam and Catrine, and finds Ahlam to be more unique and extraordinary, he actually objectifies them both. In his expression: "a painting is like a female; they both like the lights" (My translation of Mosteghanemi 74). However, the binary opposition of the colonizer West and the colonized East is not fully presented and discussed in their relationship. Catrine makes his life in Paris much easier, and provides him a "beautiful exile" (My translation of Mosteghanemi 399). Nevertheless, he suspects that Catrine "avoids to be seen with him in public" because he is an Arab and she is "ashamed of him" (My translation of Mosteghanemi 71), but he cannot be certain because she might be ashamed of his amputated arm, or of the age difference between them.

IV. Conclusion:

Lessing's Mary and Mosteghanemi's Ahlam/ Hayat both fail to find themselves, to speak out their trapped voices, and to establish their own independent identities. Because they are "involved in the male world, they cannot peacefully establish themselves anywhere" (Beauvoir 724). According to Audre Lorde, women are exposed to "various forms and degrees of patriarchal oppression, some of which we share, some of which we do not" (qtd. In Minh-ha 101). Both writers express such oppression, along with the agony of "woman in exile with herself" (Minh-ha 20). The tragic experiences and the lost identities of Mary and Ahlam are representations for many other women who are unable to make sense of themselves. For Lessing, "it was not the voice of Mary, the individual... but the voice of suffering female" (73) as it is for Mosteghanemi, Ahlam is "not an individual woman" but "a city; a city of many contradicted women" (My translation 141).

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