



A SILENT RESISTANCE: OBJECTIFICATION AND A CLASH OF EMPOWERMENT IN DORIS LESSING'S "A WOMAN ON A ROOF"¹

SESSİZ BİR DİRENİŞ: DORIS LESSING'İN "ÇATIDAKİ KADIN"
ADLI KISA ÖYKÜSÜNDE NESNELEŞTİRME VE GÜÇ SAVAŞI

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Abstract

Doris Lessing's 1963 short story "A Woman on a Roof" centers on three men from different ages repairing the roof of an apartment on a hot summer day. The only distraction for the men is a lady who is sunbathing on a nearby roof "stark naked". The woman comes out every day to lay out in the sun, so the men begin to watch for her. The men feel that she is a distraction and are obviously bothered by her presence. They are not happy that she is out there on display and illustrate feelings of discontent by constantly whistling and yelling at her. The men try so desperately to get her attention; and, as the more the woman chooses to ignore them the more upset and angry they become. Although the woman is subjected to verbal abuse and constant gaze, she manages to retain her composure and even obtain the upper hand in the end. In order to give voice to all women suffering the same malaise, Lessing employs such a character who is bestowed with few words but great impact as she somehow displays a passive aggressiveness towards the men and triumphs over men's expectations and desires with little response. Conducting an analysis under the guidance of issues like the male gaze, objectification, body and power, it is possible to focus on how the woman becomes victorious against the three men in the end and in what ways the story illuminates how easily men can be threatened by female independence and how they can respond violently when their sense of control and mastery is challenged.

Öz

Doris Lessing'in 1963 tarihinde yayımlanan kısa öyküsü "Çatıdaki Kadın" sıcak bir yaz gününde, bir apartmanın çatısını tamir eden, farklı yaş gruplarından üç adamı merkez alır. Ancak yakınlarıdaki bir başka çatıda "cırılçırıl" bir vaziyette güneşlenen bir kadın bütün dikkatlerini dağıtır. Her gün güneşlenmek için çatıya çıkan bu kadını izlemeye başlayan adamlar bir süre sonar nedense kadının varlığından rahatsızlık duyarlar. Öyle ki, bu memnuniyetsizliklerini sürekli ıslık çalarak hatta kadına bağırarak göstermeye başlarlar. Fakat kadının umursamaz ve sakin tavır erkeklerin kadının daha çok dikkatini çekmeye çalışın çabaları ve gittikçe artan öfkeleriyle sonuçlanır. Maruz kaldığı sözlü taciz ve rahatsız edici bakışlara rağmen kadın, soğukkanlılığını korumayı başarır ve sonunda bu adamlara karşı adeta üstünlük sağlar. Lessing kadın karaktere söyleyecek çok az sözcük vermesine rağmen kadının pasif agresif tutumu ile yarattığı etkinin büyüklüğü, erkek karakterlerin beklenti ve arzularına gereken cevabı verir niteliktedir. Bu çalışmada da erkek bakışı, nesneleştirme, beden ve güç dengesi gibi konular ışığında kadının bu erkeklere karşı kazandığı zafer merkeze alınarak özgür, dilediğini yapan bir kadının erkekler için adeta bir tehdit unsuru olarak algılanışı, sahip oldukları kontrol ve güce meydan okunduğunda erkeklerin nasıl şiddete varacak bir eğilim gösterdikleri irdelenecektir.

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Introduction

Women's objectification and subjugation reflected in literature has always been a controversial issue for writers and critics. Doris Lessing with her novels and short stories has a long career of writing that demonstrates her preoccupation with related issues. "A Woman on a Roof" centers on a minimalist plot in which Lessing tells the tale of three men working on a roof on a hot summer day and their seeing a woman sunbathing on a nearby roof. The story begins with these men's first notice of the woman as it becomes a sort of distraction for them. Their desperate efforts of

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trying to get her attention turn into constant acts of yelling or whistling as the woman simply does not respond or even look at them. The more the woman chooses to ignore them the more upset and angry they become. Being exposed to such irritant gaze and verbal abuse does not deter the woman and her indifference grows into a silent resistance as she gets the upper hand against those men in the end, so to speak. Therefore taking male gaze, objectification, body and power into account, it is possible to make an analysis focusing on how the story illuminates men's acting violently when encountered with such female independence as their sense of control and mastery is challenged.

The story begins with the men's act of looking at a woman which could be a source of pleasure for them. *"Then they saw her, between chimneys, about fifty yards away. She lay face down on a brown blanket. They could see the top part of her: black hair, a flushed solid back, arms spread out"* (1). However this could also be associated with taking people as objects and subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. Objectifying women merely for display and possession, and assuming that it is completely normal brings the male gaze into question. First introduced by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay *"Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"*, the concept of male gaze is a key idea to feminist film theory. Mulvey especially questions how the film industry portrays women as objects for men. Mulvey states that *"the gender power asymmetry is a controlling force in cinema and constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses"* (840). The dominant popular discourse, for instance, only accentuates the fact that women, in the majority of societies around the world, live lives of spectacle. Mulvey categorizes women as, *"the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning"* (843). As Mulvey's statement suggests, unlike males, females seldom find themselves in the role of spectator, or in the case of film, in the role of control. They are the objects while males are generally the subjects. In film, the camera almost always assumes the gaze of the male. As Mulvey wrote, women are characterized by their *"to-be-looked-at-ness"* in cinema. Woman is *"spectacle"*, and man is *"the bearer of the look"* (837).

The subjects of Lessing's story are the three men and the whole action of the story is actually based on their gaze on a woman who has no name and simply symbolizes all women suffering the same malaise. Mulvey might be focusing on how in visual media, the women are sexualized for the male viewers, however in the story the three men also assume the role of the camera and become 'the bearer of

the look' while the woman is in the position of 'the looked at' object. The way the male gaze controls the camera carries parallelism with the men's feeling that they have the control over the woman. The pleasure in looking is generally thought to have been split between active male and passive female. As Edward Snow remarks in his article *"Theorizing the Male Gaze: Some Problem"*, masculine vision is almost invariably characterized as patriarchal and ideological (30). The *"male gaze"* invokes the sexual politics of the gaze and suggests a sexualized way of looking that empowers men and objectifies women positioning them visually as objects of heterosexual male desire.

Sexual objectification relates to the *"male gaze"* in the fact that the male gaze views a person as a sexual object for fetishistic fantasies disregarding the person's personality. In their article *"Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks"*, Frederickson and Roberts argue that *"the common thread running through all forms of sexual objectification is the experience of being treated as a body (or a collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by others)"* (174). The theory of objectification assumes that women are culturally assimilated to internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves. That sort of objectification could be attributed to Mulvey and her concept of the male gaze as sexual objectification is portrayed in visual media like films or advertisements/commercials in which women are displayed as body parts alone. In the story Lessing puts emphasis on the woman's body as the first reaction of the men upon seeing the woman is *"she is stark-naked"* (1). The way the three men see the woman at first glance is simply oriented to her body, how she looks like a poster or magazine cover *"with the blue sky behind her and her legs stretched out"* (2). For the workmen, the body is all about an object of sexual desire in the first place. *"... the woman, still lying prone, brought her two hands up behind her shoulders with the ends of her scarf in them, tied it behind her back, and sat up. She wore a red scarf tied around her breasts and brief red bikini pants."* (1). The workmen are physically dazed by the summer heat, as well as by the symbolic *"hotness"* of their sexual tension. The fact that the woman is lying prone symbolizes her vulnerability, in opposition to the men, who are moving actively about, free to do as they please. When she turns on her back, it makes them think of sex, as a contributing factor to the male perception of women.

Frederickson and Roberts agree that sexual gaze is what enables sexual objectification, and when these acts occur, women's body parts are that define her as a person rather than her personality. This perspective on self can lead to habitual body monitoring, which, in turn, can increase women's opportunities for shame and anxiety, reduce opportunities for peak motivational states, and diminish awareness of internal bodily states (173). Women might adopt an observer's perspective on their physical selves. Most importantly, the women that are affected by sexual objectification can actually experience psychological problems throughout their lifetime. Some women experience shame, anxiety or nervousness. However not all women experience and respond to sexual objectification in the same way. Likewise what makes Lessing's story distinctive is the woman's attitude against the men. The woman is completely cool and does not care whether she is watched or exposed to the men's gaze let alone feel shame or anxiety.

She lifted her head, startled, as if she'd been asleep, and looked straight over at them. The sun was in her eyes, she blinked and stared, then she dropped her head again. At this gesture of indifference, they all three, Stanley, Tom and old Harry, let out whistles and yells. (2).

The way she is looked at is typical of how women are reduced to mere objects in society. Yet, because she deviates herself from social norms with her cool defiance or boldly refuses to take the men into the range of her eyesight, the men become even more propelled by the fanatic masculinity. The woman delivers a strong statement on the inequities suffered by women who are blindly enclosed in man's fantasies and expectations.

Speaking of objectification and body, the opposition between mind and body has also been associated with an opposition between male and female, with the female having a bodily existence unlike the male whose existence is defined within rationality. Therefore, according to usage and conventions of society which are at last being questioned but have by no means been overcome, the social presence of a woman is different in kind from that of a man. On the other hand the true female body is also about the politics, ideology, representation of women and their bodies in the culture. For Susan Bordo, the body is a text of culture, but also a locus of social control. She examines cultural metaphors, norms and values that have been imposed on the female body by the dominant discourses that actually mark and constitute the *female* body as feminine. She writes, "*through the organization and regulation of the time space and movements of our daily lives our bodies are trained,*

shaped and impressed with the prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity and femininity" (165). In the story what the woman wears is equivalent to a bikini and in the middle of the day when probably most of the women are doing housework, she is sunning herself in an outer space. The society and the culture she is born into might be entailing a coded social role for the woman; the sexual function of nudity and general perception that woman is there to feed man's appetite creates an impression that man "*deceives himself believing that she is naked for him*" (Berger 24). Nevertheless, smoking her cigarette and reading her book, the woman challenges the cultural inscriptions of the patriarchal culture. "*They whistled. She looked up at them, cool and remote, then went on reading. Again, they were furious*" (2). She liberates herself from patriarchal understanding and acts against patriarchal notion of female that is passive and vulnerable.

In that sense, each of the three male characters in the story represents a different point of view, enabling the writer to develop her theme of gender inequities and misconceptions from a variety of angles. As the oldest, Harry seems most indifferent and he decidedly expresses his firm assumption that "*If she's married, her old man wouldn't like that*" (Lessing 3). For him a woman's place is being in the house serving rather than sunbathing on an open rooftop. On the other hand Stanley who is newly married demonstrates the dominant, often brutal, stance taken by men who feel a need to control women. He says, "*If my wife lay around like that, I'd soon stop her. I would never let my wife do what she is doing*" (Lessing 2). Ironically he actually gives himself away as he knows in such a situation men like him would do the same whistling or subject his wife to an obtrusive gaze. Stanley's attitude toward women was extremely popular before and during the women's liberation movement in the west. At that time, women were often contemptuously cast into a disadvantageous social position in the male-dominated society. Naturally, when Stanley discovers that the indifferent sunbathing woman refuses to submit to his self-willed expectation, he scolds her angrily, because she is deviating from the social norm about female behaviors of that time. The second day when he sees the woman sunbathing on the rooftop again, he grows even more outrageous since she acts more uncaringly than she did the first day. The situation takes such an intolerable dimension for him that he even considers reporting the woman: "*I've got a good mind to report her to the police*" (3). Having seen her holding such a cool manner or, in other words, returning his gaze and challenging him with his own weapon, Stanley now responds with ferocious whistles and outrageous yells. Stanley's progressive anger and resentment because of the woman's ease carries

parallelism with the level of his harsh reactions as his whistling turns into calling her a “*bitch*” (2) and then the yelling is followed by a mad anger.

As the youngest, Tom is so immature about women, love and sexuality that, his objectification of the woman turns into a lust. Through Tom the reader is allowed to see self-indulgent and voyeuristic fantasies many men entertain about women. He even wishes to take up the responsibility of protecting the woman against being harassed by the other two men. He heartily imagines that he is not her harasser and that she must have realized his passionate love for her. On the third day when they eagerly climb up to the roof but can't find the woman there, Tom feels “*she had betrayed him by not being there*” (3). But he also feels a sort of pleasure surmising that she is more his when the other two can't see her. He then dreamily imagines that she has become his lover, fantasizing with his tender emotion how she had once held him in her arms and stroked his hair (3). At the end of the story he even plucks up his courage to talk to her. But, beyond his expectation, she stares angrily at him, saying bluntly “*what do you want?*” (5). When he tries to start a conversation with her, she promptly brushes him aside:

She raised her head, set her chin on two small fists. "Go away," she said. He did not move. "Listen," she said, in a slow reasonable voice, where anger was kept in check, though with difficulty; looking at him, her face weary with anger, "if you get a kick out of seeing women in bikinis, why don't you take an sixpenny bus ride to the Lido? You'd see dozens of them, without all this mountaineering." (5).

She allows no idle talk but orders him to go away. In return to his confession that he has been watching her, the woman simply says “*thanks*” in a scoffing tone and drops her face again turning away from him (5).

The reactions of these men give important clues about the perceptions of the society they are living in and the real reason behind their obsessive, rude attitude towards the woman. The whole action takes such a direction that rather than sexual appetite, the men actually try to maintain feeding their male ego and power as they feel threatened by a woman's power because, when they pay attention to a woman, they expect her to be flattered and pleased. They have been so conditioned in that way by social roles that when it is withheld, they feel confused, frustrated, and angry. Coming from different ages, the men display different reactions although they all feel that their gazing is a rightful pursuit of their pleasure and the woman

with her physical display and also behavior towards them injures their male pride and breaks the conventions of the society.

Feminist literature stresses the importance of seeing women not as passive victims uniformly dominated but as agents mediating their experiences (Hekman 223). How the woman manages that is manifested through an invisible power struggle between her and the men. Drawing on the traditional model of power as repression, many theories in feminism have assumed that the oppression of women can be explained by patriarchal social structures which secure the power of men over women. However this view might be oversimplifying the debate and implicating that women are passive and powerless victims of male power. Foucault's work on power has been used by some feminists to develop a more complex analysis as it is an understanding of exercised power rather than a possessed one. According to Margareth MacLaren:

Foucault's notion of power illuminates both its negative aspect (domination) and its positive aspect (production of new objects, discourses, resistance). Power functions ambivalently for Foucault. In its negative aspect it serves to limit, to dominate, to normalize; this traditional understanding of power is akin to what feminists call "power over". In its productive, positive aspect, power creates new possibilities, produces new things, ideas, and relations; this is akin to what feminists call "empowerment". (41).

Having power over could be synonymous with domination; however, domination might fail to explain man's power over women as the ability to exercise power could invert the situation. Foucault's famous remark "*where there is power, there is resistance*" (95) corresponds with the relationship between the men and the woman in Lessing's story. Among the specific types of resistance that Foucault mentions are "*violent resistance, deception or strategies capable of reversing the situation*" (96). Reversal takes place when the balance of power shifts and ends one's domination, increases possibilities for freedom. In her article "*Feminism and Empowerment: A Critical Reading of Foucault*" Monique Deveaux points out that: "*In order for a relationship of power to exist, a subject must be capable of action or resistance and be recognized as a person on whom force or "conduct" is exercised: thus, agonistic power is "a set of actions upon other actions"*" (233).

The men think that they hold a certain form of power against the woman however with her ignorance and indifference, the woman gradually exerts her own power. The male power might be inseparable from domination and hence could be transformed into violence in many cases. Rather than a physical one, the men conduct verbal violence against the woman as a means of making the woman feel complicit, victimized and powerless. The woman comes off as a character of remarkable strength and courage as she demonstrates a determination through her own individual attitude. During the course of the story, the woman does not take the trouble to respond to the men. The few words she utters in the whole story, display a major challenge with her scolding and belittling tone. The woman's tone of speaking to Tom is graceful, cool, and dispassionate as if in a peaceful confrontation against her opponent; yet, her brief remarks empowered by potent action are powerful enough as a dynamic weapon to conquer all men's bigoted chauvinism in this fireless war. The woman in the story presents a unique example in that she achieves freedom through passive aggressiveness and silent resistance.

Michel Foucault's argument in *"Truth and Power"* which is an excerpt from Alesandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino's interview in 1977 is also important in examining how society treats power, the effect of individuals, institutions and social structures on people. Foucault points out how mechanics of power have never been fully analyzed and the concrete nature of power has actually never been made visible (116). *"But it seems to me now that the notion of repression is quite inadequate for capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power"* (119). Within the whole social body the negative, narrow sense of power could be replaced with a productive aspect as according to Foucault, power does not flow in just one direction. In doing so Foucault makes use of history and how events or actions in history prove that they actually depend on a relationship of exchange. In that system truth also operates in connection with *"power:"*

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (131).

What determines truth is also based on certain values which somehow cannot get out of some social constraints. So, what must be taken into account is the person occupying a specific position rather than being “*the bearer of universal values*” (132). In the story just like being ‘the bearer of the look’, the three men could also easily be categorized as the bearers of universal values. The time of the story’s publication which is 1960s of sex revolution and how men and women were supposed to behave could give insight into what those universal values could be. In a time period such as the one this story takes place in, males were considered far superior to women, and comments such as the ones the men make would not be considered out of the ordinary. However 1960s was also an era that ushered in a new sexual freedom which was the inspiration of many female novelists. Lessing’s woman does not just occupy a literally specific position on that roof which is regarded totally unacceptable for many, but she also manages to obtain a valuable and promising position in society as she reject a universal value that allows men to see women as objects of display and possession.

Lessing builds such a story that everyone is acting the way they are supposed to according to social norms except the woman on the roof. The men are following the norms of the society they are living in and expect the woman to fulfill her mission of first appeasing the men’s sexual urges and then making the men feel that they have the power and control. The crisis point in the story and its resolution allow the writer to demonstrate how little the woman's response corresponds to the men's expectations and desires. In order to give voice to all women, Lessing employs such a character who is bestowed with few words but great impact as she somehow displays a remote and uncaring manner towards the men. Her remarks are powerful enough to explore the idea of free woman and prove that the masculine mentality cannot produce the desired effect for every woman. The woman is very bold, totally in control of herself, individualistic, independent and not easily intimidated.

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