

CONFLICTING ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMAN IN *ON THE ROAD AND TROIA: MEXICAN MEMOIRS*

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Abstract

Jack Kerouac and Brenda Frazer are two Beat generation writers longing for the lives far away from suppressed thoughts of society. They both seek freedom, experience by being on the road and choosing different lives. However, while looking for experience, these two writers own disparate points of view and contradictory attitudes towards women. Throughout Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Brenda Frazer's *Troia*, it can be grasped that depiction of women undergoes a change according to the view of man and woman. The ideas comprising women's passivity and their being perceived as a sex object in *On the Road* clash with the notion of women's activity and sexuality in *Troia*. This paper aims at comparing these two memoirs within the frame of women's portrait. Handling of women depiction in these memoirs in a different way is the focal point of this paper.

Key Words: *Woman Portrait, Clashing Ideas, Beat Generation.*

ON THE ROAD VE TROIA: MEXICAN MEMOIRS 'DA KADIN PORTRESINE KARŞI ÇELİŞEN TUTUMLAR

Özet

Jack Kerouac ve Brenda Frazer toplumun bastırılmış düşüncelerinden uzakta bir yaşamın özlemini yaşayan iki Beat kuşağı yazarlarıdır. Her ikisi de yollarda farklı hayatlar seçerek özgürlük ve tecrübe arayışına girerler. Fakat tecrübe arayışındayken bu iki yazar kadınlara karşı tamamen farklı düşüncelere ve çelişkili tutumlara sahiptir. Jack Kerouac'ın *On the Road* ve Brenda Frazer'ın *Troia* adlı eserlerinde baştan sona kadar kadın ve erkeğin bakış açısına göre kadın tasvirinin değiştiği anlaşılır. *On the Road*'un kadının pasifliğini ve onların sex objesi olarak algılanışını içeren düşünceleri *Troia*'daki kadının aktifliği ve cinselliği ile çatışır. Bu makale kadın portresi çerçevesinde bu iki biyografiyi karşılatırmayı hedeflemektedir. Bu biyografilerdeki kadın tasvirinin farklı şekillerde ele alınışı bu makalenin ana noktasıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kadın Portresi, Çelişen Fikirler, Beat Kuşağı.*

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Beat generation consists of some writers who were against some conventional beliefs, and who experienced drugs and sex in 1950s. Male writers took the lead of this generation while female writers did not have crucial roles in that generation which is full of male voice. However, some female writers have succeeded in making a name by embracing their past experiences. Jack Kerouac and Brenda Frazer are the writers who left their marks on that generation. Without any hesitation, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* is one of the most outstanding works of Beat Generation unlike Brenda Frazer's *Troia* which is a largely unknown work of the same literary circle. However, both of them are the writers yearning for another life which is different from the one encompassed with a wide range of taboos. They have both produced memoirs out of their experiences which were far from decent life. Like Kerouac, Frazer wrote this text for self-expression and a form of relief by being on the road. What differentiates them slightly from each other is Kerouac's getting over his experiences without pain in contrast to Frazer. Both of the works can be analyzed within the frame of the portrayal of women. However, these two portraits do not overlap with each other.

To start with, Kerouac's *On the Road* is a kind of autobiographic novel whose characters and stories are real even though the names are different. The novel revolves around two young people, who seek liberation through their nomadic journey. Sal Paradise and his friend Dean Moriarty are on the way to find out the limits of freedom by obtaining new experiences such as engaging in cars, drugs, jazz music, and abusing women. Actually, it focuses on the struggle of men for new experiences. Sal and his friends constitute a masculine "homosocial" group. Their friendship is based on "male

bonding" without having any women influence (Olsson, 2005: 4).

In Kerouac's *On the Road*, objectivity and marginalization of women which are mainly the results of men's superiority are obvious. Women are treated as inanimate objects rather than subjects. Women cannot insert their voices into patriarchal society which imposes passivity upon them. Since the Beat culture was dominated by men, it would be absurd to suppose that females were viewed as their equals (Skerl, 2004: 3). Likewise Skerl, it can be claimed that it was not possible for women to obtain equality, liberation in male dominant society. The effect of American society's values on Kerouac's writing about the female sex cannot be rejected, so the fictional society in the novel itself involves a certain view of the woman (Griffith, 2006: 34). She becomes "the other" in the novel.

She is simply what man decreases; thus she is called "the sex," by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him, she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other (de Beauvoir, 1997: 16).

Female characters in the novel are left outside; they have no other social function apart from being a housewife. Their position is peripheral; they are the marginal ones contrary to men whose position is generally related to intellectual sphere. Not only can men engage in cars, drinking, girls which are attributed to masculinity but also they can be the educated ones whereas women are defined just as housewives or sex objects.

We can see the silence of women's voice. According to Beat men, world revolves around them as a leading power. All active characters are men in the novel while the thoughts, feelings of women characters are opaque. Women are mentioned with short descriptions in reference to their appearances and their characters (Resimci, 2010: 19). "*One of Ray's sisters was a beautiful blonde called Babe – a tennis-playing, surf-riding doll of the west. She was Tim Gray's girl*" (Kerouac, 1976: 41). This short description about Babe diminishes her quality since what is emphasized in this description is her relation to man and her externals rather than her character. Some certain and restricted roles for women are determined to be performed by sexist ideology. To a greater extend, many women roles are devalued which makes them incompetent and invisible. Their position coincides with Freud's notion of "Dark Continent" which represents darkness of women to be explored (qtd. Cixous, 1976: 341). This darkness confines their actions and makes them passive in men's sight. As well as their passivity, like their roles, woman herself is devalued in the novel. To exemplify, Lee Ann is described as a kind of woman who looks for a rich husband and uses men to get money in the novel; however, the author doesn't question the underlying reason for this action. Unfortunately, the author doesn't realize the fact that women depend on men to obtain luxury (Resimci, 2014: 20).

It is demonstrated that American women seem to be in a troublesome situation in *On the Road*. If they are married, the "square" marriage means a restriction for their freedom which gives rise to dispute among family members. If they try to sustain their lives on their own, their position as breadwinners seems problematic in society inasmuch as only

men are expected to work outside the home. Therefore, even though they prefer working or not working, their position may stay opaque because of the society's pressure (Olsson, 2005: 9). Given that Beat men look down on women, they admire the women who act in a masculine way. A striking example can be seen that Frankie, Sal's friend, is respected by the Beat men because of her having male manners.

The mother was a wonderful woman in jeans who drove coal trucks in winter mountains to support her kids, four in all, her husband having left her years before when they were travelling around the country in a trailer. [...] After many a good time and a big Sunday-afternoon drunk in crossroads bars and laughter and guitar-playing in the night, the big lout had suddenly walked off across the dark field and never returned. Her children were wonderful (Kerouac, 1976: 214).

Frankie is a kind of woman that enjoys music, parties, drinking which fascinates Sal and his friends. Hence, one might as well say that the acceptance of women by the Beat men is possible as long as they act in a masculine style. Otherwise, women are treated like passive objects.

What is more significant in the novel is that women lose their human qualities because in many parts of the book, women are used for sensual pleasure. However, men are regarded as important individuals. In *On the Road*, women are described as disposable objects inasmuch as whenever the Beat men are on the way to seek for the new adventures, they can leave women that they have met without any hesitation.

In the novel, Beat men are on the way to explore “kicks” which is the representation of their sexual partners. Tim Cresswell claims in *Mobility as Resistance* that the search for “kicks” is connected to Sal’s and Dean’s journey. He says that, in *On the Road*, leaving of a woman is related to the arrival of a male friend and that almost every place and town is connected with the meeting and leaving of a woman (Cresswell, 1993: 258). Thus, it can be deduced that traveling means reaching their new “kicks” that are perceived as exchangeable objects. In some parts of the novel, Dean pursues women for fun. Here is a quotation which explains Dean’s desire for “kick” to obtain pleasure. “*He told me that Dean was making love to two girls at the same time, they being Marylou, his first wife, who waited for him in a hotel room, and Camille, a new girl, who waited him in a hotel room*” (Kerouac, 1976: 42). He engages in having sexual intercourse with two women at the same time to get pleasure. They are exposed to be treated as inanimate objects, replaceable tools. He constantly searches for “kicks” as a means of sexual stimulation because sex is one of the most important basic instincts that should be carried out. Wherever he goes, he tries to seduce women rather than being faithful to a single woman. In one scene, he says “*We’ll go dig all the crazy women in Rome, Paris, all those places; we’ll sit at sidewalk cafés, we’ll live in whorehouses*” (Kerouac, 1976: 189). In brothel, they are free to try drugs, have intercourse with prostitutes which are expected to give an experience for these boys. This behavior is the symbol of freedom, but they have difficulty in understanding that their search for “kicks” corresponds to the whores’ lack of personal freedom because they sell their bodies (Holton, 1995: 273). This situation is not weird for them. They abandon women for another woman which represents absolute

enjoyment. Descriptions of Dean generally reveal his attitude towards women. “*His specialty was stealing cars, gunning them for girls coming out of high school in the afternoon, driving them out to the mountains, making them, and coming back to any available hotel bathtub in town*” (Kerouac, 1976: 39). His having a family doesn’t prevent him from addiction of sexuality. According to him, there is a strong relation between women and pleasure; women’s objectification as “kicks” is the evidence for that thought. According to his point of view, women are sexual stimulation, and they are like exchangeable, dehumanized objects. What Mackinnon speaks out about that issue is evidential reasoning. “*All women live in a sexual objectification the way fish live in water*” (Mackinnon, 1989: 124). Another striking example from the novel is Dean’s thought about his wife. Dean wants Sal to have an intercourse with her wife as for him it is the only way to preserve his dominance. Nonetheless, he is not aware of the fact that the situation is very insulting for his wife. He accepts sharing his wife which puts her in a pejorative situation. In fact, his attitude towards women and relationships can be seen as the essence of a life without responsibility for others. For him, hunger and sexuality are the cores of life. Consequently, he lives for collecting as many experiences as possible. He lives in the moment and is looking for erotic adventures (Myrsiades, 2002: 61-62).

As mentioned above briefly, descriptions for women in the novel have a tendency to diminish the qualities of women since these descriptions mainly consist of physical appearance of women which demonstrates the sexist gaze clearly. One of the Sal’s descriptions about Dean’s third wife Inez focuses just her body: “*a big sexy brunette [...] and generally like a Parisian coquette*” (Kerouac, 1976: 246).

Here readers witness woman's being diminished to a body whose main features are just color and ethnical origin (Olsson, 2005: 10). Not only women are exposed to sexist construction but also they are classified according to male worldview. In other words, a woman's being labeled as a "moral girl" or an "immoral girl" is determined by the male gaze in the novel. To a large extent, descriptions of girls are superficial, and sexist. "*I saw the cutest little Mexican girl in slacks. [...] Her breasts stuck out straight and true; her little flanks looked delicious; her hair was long and lustrous black; and her eyes were great big blue things with timidities inside*" (Kerouac, 1976: 81). In this quotation, it is obvious that objectification of women is vivid. Outer description of women focusing on some certain parts from a strictly male point of view is a fate of women. Women are gazed by Dean and Sal actively which leads to objectification of women. They spend their time looking for attractive women in Chicago instead of going round the city. Gazing at women is a subsidiary part of their life. Here is a description about that situation. "*What a weird town – wow, and that woman in that window up there, just looking down with her big breasts hanging from her nightgown, big wide eyes. Whee*" (Kerouac, 1976: 238). Therefore, it can be stated that women's appearance is more important than their inner beauties. It is the body of women that catches attention of Dean and Sal, women's characters are not taken into consideration.

Contrary to Kerouac's portrayal of women, portrayal of women in *Troia* is utterly disparate. One of the important women names of Beat movement is Brenda Frazer which is the author's birth name. Bonnie Bremser is the author's

married name. Frazer has contributed to create a new community as a Beat woman by reflecting on her past experiences. She has made her voice heard by transforming her personal experience into literature by touching on complex, insolvable relations among romantic and maternal love, sexual expression, the double standard, responsibility and creativity in *Troia: Mexican Memoirs*. She has established a place for herself among Beat's men by sharing her experiences with the readers. Unlike women in 1950s, Frazer is not a typical housewife. She becomes the family "breadwinner" due to the pressure of Ray, her husband. Responsibility for her child, Rachel, and for her fugitive husband pushes her into prostitution. She goes to the streets to provide money as a "breadwinner". Family obligation overbears her personal desire. At first glimpse, mentioning her damaging marriage, and her being sexually, emotionally diminished make her experience bleak. She states "*It was not at all for fun or experience that I was forced to be a con artist-pure necessity sent me into town to try my luck*" (Frazer, 1969: 32). But later, she looks for self-discovery, freedom to release her pain. Her seeking freedom to bottle her energy makes her admit the fact that she doesn't regret for her experiences. "*Most of [the Beat women] never got the chance literally to go on the road. Our road instead became the strange lives we were leading. We had actually chosen those lives*" (Johnson, 1983: 14). Hence, not being able to go on the road paves the way for unconventional life for Frazer like Johnson. Frazer has to sustain a strange lifestyle to exhilarate her experience as it is the only way for her to be free and change the society's point of view towards women.

We can see that Frazer objects to conventional female passivity in her novel. She gets liberation from social limitations by judging her sexual partners and expressing her sexual satisfaction. Frazer separates her sexual labor from her role in relation to her child and her husband. Having sexual intercourse ensures both financial security for her family and satisfaction. Actually, she becomes a skilled businesswoman by being on the road for Mexico City to raise money. At one scene, Ray is sent to jail in Laredo. Frazer is the one who undertakes legal and financial responsibility. She sells her body to achieve a modicum of satisfaction and to earn money to buy peaches for Ray. However, she is confused because she feels both pride and shame. She writes "*I have to take care of the baby, and I am proud that I can do it independently of American law, but... I am so close to the brink of being ashamed, maybe because I liked it*" (Frazer, 1969: 104). It is clear that she stands against the customs of 1950s by selling her body and getting sexual pleasure. She insists on getting gratification from her sexual partners apart from earning money. Her satisfaction isn't limited by social pressures.

In the late 1950s, young women-not very many at first- once again left home rather violently. They came from nice families, and their parents could never understand why the daughters they had raised so carefully suddenly chose precarious lives. A girl was expected to stay under her parents' roof until she married, even if she worked for a year or so as a secretary, got a little taste of the world that way, but not too much. Experience, adventure-these were not for young women. Everyone knew they would involve

exposure to sex. Sex was for men. For women, it was as dangerous as Russian roulette; an unwanted pregnancy was life-threatening in more ways than one. As for art-decorative young women had their place as muses and appreciators (Johnson, 1983: 32).

Among women, sex was dangerous, writing about sex was threatening. Frazer broke this circle of taboo of sex for women by granting her experience and memoir to other females entrapped by sexual judgments. Her spontaneous life has left mark on women who couldn't resist the pressure of society.

As mentioned earlier, Kerouac calls the women who he has a tendency to have sex with as "kicks". Like Kerouac, Frazer gives a name for the men who she has sex with by calling them as "cats". When she questions the meaning of being a whore, she wonders who is using whom in the exchange of sex for money. Hence, for her liberation, her safety, using men is not an extraordinary experience. "[...] *the cat is going down on me, and I am trying to get him off of me cause I just want to fuck and get it over with...*" (Frazer, 1969: 140). This quotation from book shows her freedom for sex and taking advantage of sex. By this way, Frazer enters the world that men suppose blessed to them. At this point, Irigaray's thoughts about exchange value of women can be connected to Frazer's position. She states that "*The society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women*" (Irigaray, 1985: 170). What she generally expresses is that women have social value which is equal to exchangeable body apart from their natural body. Like commodities which cannot make exchanges among themselves, women also can only be exchanged among men.

When she touches on prostitution as an exchange value, she states the reason of the usefulness of the qualities of woman's body. What she indicates is that these qualities own value because they are appropriated by men (Irigaray, 1985: 186-187). Hence, in *Troia*, Frazer demolishes this notion related to exchange value of women. She inverts this value for her own benefit by exploiting men both sexually and financially, so she sees no harm to have sexual intercourse with her "cats". What is more, Frazer stands against this thought: "*Neither as mother nor as virgin nor as prostitute has woman any right to her own pleasure*" (Irigaray, 1985: 187). As a both mother and a prostitute, she gets her own pleasure. Therefore, in *Troia*, the irony of exchange value of women is clearly reflected.

She makes her experience public by writing. She says "*Damn the pain; it must be written. Damn reality that all the present infections have to be drained from a stopped hole. Damn the metaphors and the scariness; it is the fever taking over*" (Frazer, 1969: 43). With these words, what she wants to emphasize is that writing is curing her pain related to Ray. She writes to release her pain, and releasing her pain to the pages has made her creative for writing. Writing is liberating, and publicizing her private voice is necessary for her by breaking the shell of silence. What writing makes her is that she looks at her past and learns from her experience. "*In looking back, what's important is not the technique or lack of it, but those few minutes when you overcome frustration, bridge the gap, and hold something incredibly beautiful to you: the point where you don't see yourself anymore but you are there and OBOY, that's the way you really are*" (Frazer, 1969: 2). Frazer has created a space by revealing her experiences and

acting in a Beat style. Not only does she share her voice, but also she makes readers to identify her feminine journey in *Troia* which demonstrates her freedom as a woman. She offers a new sense of Beat.

Another point that can be touched on is her attitude towards stereotyped family structure. In Texas, Ray finds a rich couple to adopt Rachel so that she can be safe. Given that it is a very tough situation for Frazer, Rachel is adopted. With this event, she demolishes social forces that bound her. Losing their child dissolves their relation. Ray's dependence on Frazer makes him vulnerable. After lots of angry rehearsals, Frazer leaves Ray by saying that "*Ray, don't you think that I can get along myself, I have to prove something*" (Frazer, 1969: 187). She gives a message that she is ready to survive on her own contrary to all societal values and norms. She can overcome adventurous life peculiar to masculine world even though she knows the fact that women who choose alternative lives apart from family lives are labeled as marginal.

There were women, they were there, I knew them, their families put them in institutions, they were given electric shock. In the '50s if you were male, you could be a rebel, but if you were female, your families had you locked up. There were cases, I knew them, someday someone will write about them (Osterweil, 2010: 33).

Frazer is one of these writers who write up her overlapping experiences. She embeds her voice into male dominated world where women have been overshadowed up to that point.

All in all, throughout the history, women were the submissive ones, and in the Beat generation, their position did not show an alteration. They were “the other”; they were no other function apart from being a mother or a wife. They didn’t have opportunities to gain experiences and publish them equally. Otherness of the women in a society was the fate of women. In the novel, *On the Road*, this condition of women is the same. *On the Road* includes the rejection of conventional life by the Beat men. Given that Sal and his friends are against society’s conventional point of view, they continue treating women as society expects. It contains traditional view towards women. Sal and his friends travel to have experience, especially, they are on their way to search for women who supply the most crucial experience for them. However, Frazer illustrates that women can have adventurous soul like her male counterparts. Having a sexual intercourse for money and pleasure makes Frazer belong to Beat Generation unlike the stereotypical thoughts for women. *Troia* is

a vital book to shape society’s consciousness, and it stands for individual and communal experiences. Frazer gained her own experience that pushed her to the literary world; hence, it can be stated that she is productive and creative inasmuch as she struggled for the lives that she desired and for the art she wished to print. She has broken her silence through making her voice heard. She has offered a rethinking of the Beat movement with the help of *Troia* which mentions female sexual desire, experience of motherhood, and economic independence. To put it bluntly, both memoirs involve freedom of will by being on the road and choosing unusual lives. Nonetheless, what makes them differentiate from each other is their definition of women. They both clearly prove the fact that thoughts about sexuality vary with the viewpoints of man and woman. And thanks to her female gaze, Frazer gives a new impulse to literary which has been influenced by male gaze. She transcends conventional views by highlighting her experiences in *Troia*.

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