

**WHOSE WAR IS IT ANYWAY: A STUDY OF GENDER AND SPACE IN
CORASANTI'S *THE ALMOND TREE***

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ABSTRACT

Perceived as inherently masculine in nature, War Literatures suggest the 'supportive' female presence on the margins/periphery of the system of international confrontation. The socially perceived complimentary role of femininity to reinforce the masculine construction of 'man as warrior' is emphasized by the portrayal of tensions and their underlying assumptions of gender roles and manifestations. Moreover, delineation of conflicts exposes the gender subordination and violence as being normalized in a war system. In literatures of the kind, the concern of gender fails to be foregrounded when posited against the larger international political scenario.

The paper is an attempt to question this serious short-sightedness by an analysis of the novel *The Almond Tree* authored by the Jewish American female writer Michelle Cohen Corasanti, zeroing on how the literature of war serves the dominant power structures in normalizing the socially constructed gender identities by making it seem 'natural' and transparent. The paper also attempts to expose the various ways in which the denial of a space to women is justified through the use of the apparently more significant domain of political confrontations.

Keywords: war literature, gender, space, Almond Tree, normalization

Several scholars have identified the centrality of gender based behavior as justification and explanation in narratives of war. The incidence of war histories recounted in terms of brave ‘masculine’ warriors defending or saving innocent ‘feminine’ women have been observed by feminist critics. One of the most prominent epic wars of Greek mythology, the Trojan War, is often told in terms of a ‘just warrior’ (Odyssey) saving a kidnapped innocent woman (Helen). Helen is at once the justification for the war as well as its victim who is without agency and needs saving.

Explicated as inherently masculine in nature, conflicts often posit the ‘supportive’ female presence on the margins/periphery of the system of international confrontation as war literatures suggest. Although gender relations have been altered and the degree of agency executed by women in the making and fighting of wars have increased since the mythical Trojan war and the contemporary political confrontations have witnessed their integration into its various domains women as active entities continue to be a minority.

The minority status of women in the making and fighting of wars however does not ensure a proportionate reduction in the victimization of women as a consequence of war. Gender subordination and sexual violence has become symptomatic of war to the extent that concerns over these are sidelined as the inevitable ‘necessary evil’. Recent developments have exposed gendered violence in conflict as a product of the idealized militarized masculinity in its attempt to emasculate the enemy by exposing their inability to protect their own.

Narratives of war and their scrutiny expose them as being complacent in the normalization of gender subordination and violence in a war system. As Julie Mertus notes in her *War's Offensive on Women, The Humanitarian Challenge in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan*, citing Susan Brownmiller, "in military culture, sexual abuse of women has been described as 'standard operating procedure.' Rape of enemy women is expected."⁽⁸⁾ *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane contends Violence to be an integral part of ‘masculinity’.

The Almond Tree, a novel that attempts to be objective and neutral in its representation of the Israel-occupied-Palestine, by Michelle Cohen Corasanti, is chosen for this purpose. Published at a politically charged juncture in the brewing Israel-Palestine conflict, the novel claims to recast the Palestinians in a new light, focusing on the life of the male protagonist Ahmed Hamid and his venture into success from a war hit Palestine. Divided into four parts based on the progressing phases of the protagonist’s life in a chronological sequence, the narrative begins and ends in Palestine.

The novel takes off with the death of Ahmed’s toddler sister Amal in a land mine when she wanders into one after a butterfly. Ahmed’s and his family’s life progressively begin to worsen as each of their possessions are appropriated by the Israeli occupational forces beginning from their abundant orange orchards and their home to even the one room house that they shifted to later. The last straw is reached when Ahmed’s Baba is accused of terrorism and arrested by the Israeli soldiers. Ahmed and his younger brother Abbas, at the age of twelve and ten, shoulder the responsibility of providing for the family by working on construction sites.

In a world where the Palestinians have no stronghold over their homes, their belongings and their lives, Ahmed’s father directs him, through correspondence, to take the more peaceful route, and not to harbor hatred in the face of extreme adversity. His mother, understandably on the other hand, holds the Israelis responsible for everything inflicted on the family.

Ahmed, a math prodigy, obtains a scholarship to an Israeli University for further studies and in the end is awarded the Nobel Prize for his achievements. Ahmed’s maturity sees a

transformation from an Israeli antagonist to the more acceptable stance of normalization and acquiescence of Israel and their atrocities. However, the redeeming action by Ahmed comes in the end as he acknowledges his own roots and resolves to do his bit for the Palestinian cause. Corasanti, a Jewish American female author, chose to write in the persona of an Arab Palestinian Muslim male character thereby facilitating the questioning of the problematic relation between the identity of the author and that of the protagonist.

The Feminist concern with the notions of ‘conditioning’ and ‘socialization’ include the questioning of the normalizing of the constructed gender image through literature. Narratives of conflict have by far escaped this inquiry due to their delegation as ‘man’s wars’ and also due to their overtly political nature. The silencing of women’s experience and knowledge in conflicts is now recognized as being a consequence of the complacency to the dominant discursive practices.

In the almond tree this normalization of gender and as a consequence its conditioning is ensured in a number of ways. Primarily, this objective is achieved through the representation of the thought processes of the protagonist as well as through their unquestionable and omnipresent status. Analysis reveals the disproportionate dichotomy exhibited in the novel through its portrayal of the roles played by Ahmed’s Mama and Baba, major representatives of either gender, on his road to success.

Baba, the embodiment of selflessness who advocates forgiveness and cooperation to the same force that inflicts cruelty on them, is construed as the beacon in Ahmed’s life and his endeavor to succeed. The protagonist’s obsessive pursuit of his father’s ideals of life and support of science is demonstrated to be the cause of his ultimate success in life; a success on the road to which his mama is revealed to be a constant stumbling block as her remark on his transfer to an Israeli university shows, “Man doesn’t need to know more than is necessary for his daily living” (128).

The protagonist’s thoughts revolve around the father straying occasionally to his mother, often to condemn her lack, and very rarely to his sisters underscoring the established hegemonic familial structure. Ahmed is often seen to quote his father’s words and his mother’s verbal or physical protests have no effect on him.

The gendered portrayal of the characters in the novel exposes the weighted internalized power dynamics of the author. At the beginning of the novel Ahmed’s family consists of his Mama, three sisters, Baba, three brothers and himself ensuring an unbalanced power struggle between the two ‘normative’ genders. This lack of balance progressively worsens as one after the other two of his sisters are killed and the remaining sister is often diseased. The only active voice of femininity in the novel continues to be his Mama’s who is often perceived to be a lack and seldom given attention to.

The allocation of gender roles in the novel also exposes internalized patriarchal assumptions. Baba and later Ahmed and Abbas are the head of the families surviving great hardships to earn bread and put a roof over the family. Nadia is viewed as a potential mother figure from the very beginning as Ahmed attests, “Mama always said she’d make a good mother because she was very nurturing.”(21) and towards the end of the novel this prophecy is achieved as we see Nadia with her brood of eleven children.

The replication of Mama as the epitome of impediment-motherhood in Ahmed’s life as she pulls him backward from ‘progress’ even as she conforms to the constructed image of the passive and helpless mother whose only function is deemed to be staying at home and cooking.

Her actions alongside the image conferred on her, even in times of extreme adversities, validate the imbibed notion of the idealized mother.

The only exceptions to this norm are Nora, Ahmed's first wife and Justice, Prof. Sharon's second wife, who are human rights activists and execute an agency of their own. However, the author's tendency to silence active female voice is apparent even in the case of Nora as she is eliminated by an Israeli bulldozer from the novel shortly after their marriage. In a different vein, Justice is also transformed from an active voice to one of silence and invisibility with her shift of identity from a human rights activist to a culinary expert.

Cultural justifications for this normalization is demonstrated by the practice of identifying parents with the names of their first born son as Ahmed's parents are known as Um Ahmed and Abu Ahmed. A poem recited at Ahmed's wedding also reveals this cultural validation. "We pray for the almighty/to defeat your enemies and bless you with many boys" (259)

Space, both geographical and metaphorical, has always been a concern of feminist theory as evidenced by Joan Tronto,

"Spatial metaphors abound in feminist theory. Virginia Woolf expressed her desire spatially in wishing for 'a room of one's own.' Standpoint theories and epistemologies begin from a spatial, positional metaphor. Feminist theorists rely heavily upon the conceptualizations of 'public' and 'private' as separate, if mutually constructed, realms."(119)

The denial and restriction of space to a particular gender in times of conflicts as illustrated by narratives of war deserves to be foregrounded due to its role in the implementation of the established power dynamics. A close analysis of *The Almond Tree* results in the conclusion that the justification of this denial is accomplished through various means.

The chief means through which this denial is realized is through the physical incapacitation of the majority of the female characters in the novel thereby ensuring their passivity and lack of agency and visibility. Two of the protagonist's sisters and his wife are thus immobilized by the end of the novel calling to mind the Shakespearian tragedies where the stage is littered with dead bodies towards the end, the only difference being that in this novel even death is gendered as it is the female corpses that outnumber that of the males, an irony since war is delineated to be masculine in nature. This tendency of the author to silence and immobilize the female body and agency exposes the author's incapacity to escape the entrenched assumptions of patriarchy.

An attempt to question the silencing of women's voice of experience and knowledge is a major concern of feminist studies and is also one of the approaches resorted to by the author in order to achieve the desired effect of the restriction of the metaphoric space. This gendered denial of voice reveals a deep-rooted amalgamation of the constructed gender and its accompanied power structures. Throughout the novel majority of the female characters are refused any sort of voice as can be evidenced by the tragic victimization of Amal, Sara and Nora and Ahmed's Mama, the only female character who attempts to voice herself and assert her own experience and knowledge, is promptly suppressed which is justified through her championing of Abbas, the equivalent of a villain. The narration of the protagonist does not give any opportunity for his mother's voice of protests to be heard above that of his father which the author champions as the ideal.

The restriction of public space by war even as conflicts result in the blurring of the distinction between the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ demands a scrutiny of the manifestation of this restriction in literatures of war. The female counterparts of Ahmed, Abbas and Baba are conformed to the house and their surroundings and are shown to require the assistance of the male protagonist as evidenced by the narrator, “as soon as the curfew was over, I walked mama to Um Sayyid’s tent.” (106)

Denial of identity and thereby of space is manifested in the novel through the objectification and materialization of the female body. Yasmine, Ahmed’s second wife, is denied subjectivity by the author and exploited as an instrument to promulgate the established ideologies. The protagonist and thereby the reader observes Yasmine purely from a physical dimension as she is represented in an unfavorable light by the author reminding the reader of the “the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body” as suggested by Bartky. “Everything about my bride screamed ignorance. Her veil, her thick unplucked eyebrows, her traditional robe...her teeth were yellow and crooked and she was plump.”(278) Nora, Ahmed’s second wife, one of the female characters with a degree of agency and voice is labeled by the protagonist as ‘my beautiful wife, my Jewish angel with golden hair’.

The socially perceived complimentary role of femininity to reinforce the masculine construction of ‘man as warrior’ is emphasized by the portrayal of tensions and their underlying assumptions of gender roles and manifestations. In literatures of the kind, the concern of gender fails to be foregrounded when posited against the larger international political scenario. Set in a contemporary relevant backdrop, the novel facilitates the assimilation of the stereotyped gender roles and images through normalization and justification. This tendency of the reader to comfortably overlook or imbibe the standardized gender constructions faces the danger of being validated when the gender of the author is taken into account. The centrality of space, political, geographical and metaphorical, in confrontations necessitates an analysis of its utilization in the implementation of culturally homogenized gender and identity in times of war exposing the novel as complicit in the gendered denial of space.

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