

DELEGITIMIZE OF THE “RAPE CULTURE” IN THE NOVEL “STARS DON’T DRESS UP LIKE THAT” BY ELVIRA DONES

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Abstract

The tendency to break taboos (literary and social ones), sometimes is associated with the appearance in the artistic work of various forms of sexual relationships, such as rape, prostitution or even child abuse. Because of the complex relationship of man with sex in the Albanian context, a considerable number of writings arise over the tension that comes from forced or strained relationships (sexual condemnation). So, for example, the novel “Stars don’t dress like that” by Elvira Dones, can be considered as a provocative display of the deformities that sex may take in an unprepared society for the opening after the long night of totalitarian regime. Rape, prostitution, etc., appear as forms of punishment for the female sex in a fierce masculine world.

Key Words: Rape culture, taboo breaking, denaturalized relationship, etc.

Introduction

In Albanian literary context, sexual relationships do not often appear in novels. They were mostly considered inappropriate, so the description of the naked human bodies or sexual desires / fantasies were banned from Albanian literature. The reign of totalitarian regime for over 45 years in Albania dried out the “rich soil” of the Albanian art. The writers were obliged to follow the strict rules of social - realism that produced poor literary works. Sex and sexuality were considered taboo and the writers could get imprisoned or even executed for having foreign influences in their art. After the fall of the totalitarian regime, in the literary works written after the year ‘90s flourish not only topics related to love, but also many taboos were broken regarding sex and sexuality.

A changing revolution took place in the works written by Elvira Dones “Stars don’t dress up like that” (“Yjet nuk vishen kështu”), Mimoza Ahmeti “Hallucinating Woman”, (“Gruaja haluçinante”), Agron Tufa “The duel” (“Dueli”), Aurel Plasari “Ten days that did not shake the world”, (“Dhjetë ditë që nuk tronditën botën”), etc.

The novel “Stars don’t dress up like that” (“Yjet nuk vishen kështu”) by Elvira Dones, can be considered really provocative, because it deals with unusual topics in Albanian literature like sexual abuse, rape, prostitution, etc. Although these topics were strongly related with the new dramatic reality the Albanian people had to live in (abduction of young girls, gender violence, rape, obligation to prostitute, etc.), they rarely appear in the literary works.

That is the reason why the novel “Stars don’t dress up like that” by Elvira Dones pushed many boundaries, turning into a special phenomenon. Rape, prostitution, etc., appear in the novel as forms of punishment for the female sex in a fierce masculine world. Through the transgressions of violent sexual relations, a stifling atmosphere is created that prevents reading the text easily. The text is covered with explicit details from the sexual scenes, the “brutality” of which creates a sense of natural narration. (The presence of the natural narration in the prose of Elvira Dones cannot be ignored, because her field experience as a journalist).

This sensation doubles the shock experienced during the description of rape. The novel deeply provokes anxiety feelings, especially in female readers that find it difficult to cope with meticulous descriptions of rape scenes.

The “compression” of such scenes within the work is intended to present the “deformities” of the male psyche in a society that the transition does not only happen on the political level, but also on the human one. The novel draws attention to the so-called “rape culture” in the Albanian context. This term begins to be used in America in 1970 by feminist writers and was rapidly spread worldwide.

Rape culture is a sociological concept for a setting in which rape is pervasive and normalized due to societal attitudes about gender and sexuality (Flintoft, 2001, p. 134).

Behaviors commonly associated with rape culture include victim blaming, slut-shaming, sexual objectification, trivializing rape, denial of widespread rape, refusing to acknowledge the harm caused by sexual violence, or some combination of these (Herman, 1994).

Although our literature does not have frequent works on such provocative topics, the Albanian point of view tends towards the extreme legitimization of this culture by blaming the sexually abused women. On the one hand, the women are seen as guilty of aggression, while on the other hand they are also considered as the beings that must live forever with the shame of the happening. For these two reasons, acts of sexual violence remain undeclared in a society that condemns the weakest or the victim. According to scholars, the roots of this culture are found in societies that encourage male violence against women, in a society where violence is considered seductive and sexuality as a form of violence. In such cultures, it is considered a norm of "physical and emotional terrorism" against women. Women as well as men agree that sexual violence is an inevitable vital fact (Buchewals, 1994).

Delegitimize of the gender violence

Although the narrative experience in the novel "Stars don't dress up like that" ("Yjet nuk vishen keshtu") rises from the systematic sexual violence happening over all female characters, this violent male culture is not legitimized. Elvira Dones uses the "renewal" of the conception of narrating for the world, casting unexpectedly into different confessional perspectives. Simultaneously, sometimes the focus lies on the confession of words, be it in the confession of thoughts or in the narrative of actions, not leaving the recipient the necessary time to "recognize" / "equalize" the confessed experience as a descriptive remnant.

Put your hands back, the men say. She does. Put them on the head. She does so. Wallow. She obeys. They contain dizziness. She puts her ear in the street, but here the road is not heard; she did not know she was so far away from the city center. Turn to profile. She obeys. She thought that the palace was in the center of the city when she came here with Mira. The unvoiced now growls. If there was any noise, Soraya prayed, whatever (Dones, 2009, p.27).

The sentences are broken, because of the change of viewpoint from one subject of narration to another. The narration of the words is done through the elliptical sentences; the narration of the orders given by one of the unnamed men who enter into the Soraya's room, follow the same model. None of them speak long.

First, their lacking language is strongly related to the **emphasis of the order**, the sentence equates to the obligation.

Secondly, it is a sign of the loss of human traits (no word / language is needed in the reign of the wild).

Thirdly, one-main-clause sentences create an atmosphere of anxiety and fear. While the reader (generally female) gets familiarized with the idea of horror that conveys the first command, the second one hits.

On the other hand, the suggestion created by the silent sentences of the "male gendarme" gets answered by the obedience of the victim. Missing sentences at this level mark the story about the actions. If the story about the words equates to the orders given by the anonymous voices; The story of action is the story of the victim's submission.

The female character (Soraja) is unable to react. She is under the effect of fear and horror, so she is wary of her cruel fortune.

The elliptical sentences of the two levels of narration (words and actions) contradict third-level full sentences: the narration of thoughts. The latter, is the only level that is computed with full sentences, even periods. This is because the mind is still functional and under the pressure of danger, it seeks to "catch" somewhere to find salvation.

According to psychologists, the man under the risk stimulus tends to think faster than usual. The duality between the desperate attempt of the mind to find the way out, while the body "obeys" to the horror, increases the suspicion and feeling of fear at the recipient, which creates empathy for female sufferings.

From the foregoing, though it is the rape that is narrated, the conviction of the body against violence contrasts sharply with the removal of the mind / spirit from the "crime" scene. The functional independence that comes to mind in relation to the body is related to the activation of a protective mechanism that is drawn to the female psyche. By doing so, the aim is to reduce the psychological damage caused by sexual violence. Thus, the identity of the raped woman is not completely destroyed because of this dramatic moment.

This approach is not related to the devaluation of the rape. It does not even relate to a kind of Foucault point of view (Cahill, 2000) according to which sexual violence equates to any other form of physical violence and as a result its consequences are not so dramatic. Instead, the functional division of the mind and body of a raped women aims to "save" the essence of total destruction, which is considered to be expected. "This is just meat, just meat and it does not have to do with this filth" says Delina, one of the female characters (Dones, 2009, p.126). Using the third person "she" (though Delina speaks for herself) Delina expresses the distance created between the individual's being and the bodily "molding", which is a merely physical matter. Consequently, corporality in the novel is seen as a feature of a woman and not her identity.

This strong disconnection between the body and the soul may be seen in different situations, when a huge difference would be made between the body (a prostitution), the mind (of a poet) and the trembling soul of an innocent girl.

For ten months the heart has gotten into the habit of bumping through the walls, car windows of customers, and even getting under the wheels of cars. This would happen when Soraya would be between other prostitutions and would see one of the bosses who was passing for control. Even though this was regular and there was no reason why they should punish her, even though so the heart would make a terrible "boom" and would come out of the body.

In this perspective, the novel contrasts the Albanian worldview, which characterizes the woman only through her gender identity. The alignment of the female to the body is in fact a derivation of what Chasseguet - Smirgel calls phallic monism, according to which all the psycho-social development of women stems from their bodily features. This concept of the psychoanalyst of Chasseguet-Smirgel rises to Freudian theory, according to which only masculinity exists, while a woman is seen as a castrated male. So, on the one hand, identity is determined by the body, while on the other hand the female body is defined in absent compared to the male one. The identification the female with the body, in the Albanian worldview brings the mentality that the raped woman is treated as being finished and irretrievably profaned of identity.

Whereas, Dones' novel rises against this approach. Its opposition is noticed in several respects:

Firstly, most female characters refuse to consider themselves as human beings that do not deserve the life after their denaturalization. Their everyday hell is a masculine product. Women are raped, forced to prostitute, verbally marginalized; consequently, they are considered as "lightning-reception" of male brutality.

"They beat us for their defamation, revenge on us for their crippled souls" (Dones, 2009, 109) - one of the characters points out. So, in the novel there is a great psychological shift, in relation to the Albanian point of view.

The feminine world, because is different from brutality and extreme barbarism, has special human values. Grieving is no longer considered to be the attribute of the female raped body but of the empty soul of men. Their actions are strongly related to necrophilia, so death is a feature that belongs to the inside (the void of the soul) and is brought out (rape, murder). In this sense, instead of the abuser - victim relationship (closely related to them, according to Stockholm's syndrome), Elvira Dones proposes another binomial, that of between good and evil, where evil despite the savagery is temporary. So even though the narrative experience arises over the violent process of returning women abducted to prostitutes, the rape culture is not legitimized.

Secondly, although in the novel the male-female relationship has mainly hierarchical features, there is also no egalitarian relationship. For this, it is enough to mention the fact that the novel opens with the return of the body of Leila to Albania, where as a companion on the ship has his father's figure. This figure is very different from the strong authoritarian figure that kills its creature for honor (even today in Albania of the 21st century).

On the contrary, he appears as a father hunched by the weight of the pain that he could not protect his "Pearl" from the atrocities of men. The distancing of the father from this culture constitutes the first sign of oppression of violence against women. Generally, solidarity is noticed within gender; the father is imposed on the son in the model of authority, while the mother sides with the girl in patience against suffering. Father who experiences a family drama (suffers from the pain and not the shame) is an important sign how the novel does not feed the gender hatred but it highlights a painful phenomenon.

Thus, the chain of violence inherited by the generation breaks off. Such relationships arise between mother and son (Mynyrja and Bledi) or between two lovers (Suela and Mauro), as to prove that the DNA of life is very strong within the human being and life may revive from scratches.

Conclusions

As a conclusion, the novel "Stars don't dress up like that" is a complex novel which pushes the boundaries of Albanian literature and mentality related to the topic of sexual abuse, rape and prostitution. The novel has detailed rape scenes which may put the readers (especially the female one) into a continuous discomfort during the reading process. The narration of the rape through the eyes of the victims brings forward the tragedy that happens inside the human soul. However, the novel delegitimizes the rape culture because there is a huge inner strength that is highlighted in every woman that is depicted in the book. Also, there is an evident division that is done between the body and the identity; meanwhile body suffers, the soul does not accept to give up. The division between corporality and identity is an important issue that is highlighted in the novel. The raped girls in the novel do not hate themselves, do not hate their life but they hate abusers refusing so to be victims of Stockholm syndrome. They are strong women who try their best to have their lives back, because life is precious and it always is worthy living.

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