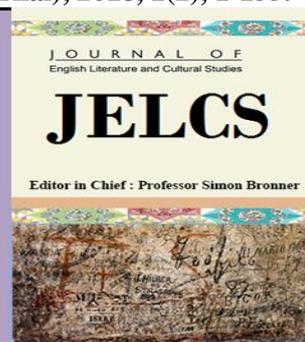




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Original Research Article

Neocolonial Agonistic Feminine Identity in Claire Messud's *The Woman Upstairs*

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 10 October 2018</p> <p>Received in revised: 18 October 2018</p> <p>Accepted: 19 October 2018 Available online: 20 October 2018</p> <p>DOI: 2018, 1(2)</p> <p>KEYWORDS</p> <p>First world women vs. Third World women</p> <p>Transnational Feminism</p> <p>Ethics of Care</p> <p>Agonistic Identity</p> <p>identity construction</p> <p>Socio-cultural Neocolonialism</p> <p>9/11 trauma</p>	<p>Messud's <i>The Woman Upstairs</i> as a post-9/11 craft makes use of transnational characters to emphasize the hidden bigotry and hypocrisy in the current age. The dominance of feminine figures in <i>The Woman Upstairs</i> highlights the significance of 'Agonistic feminine identity' in the twenty-first century America that reflects how the interactions among women are socio-politically flavored. Messud's feminine setting in <i>The Woman Upstairs</i> sketches out Nora as a woman who constructs her life in accordance with the socio-cultural norms her mother and the society promote. Yet women's friendship that bridges the sociocultural gap between women of the First World and women of the Third World reveals to be a fake friendship that covers the antagonisms. Thus, although multiraciality is constantly represented in Messud's oeuvre, the tension against the 'others' who are to be neocolonially subjugated in the postcolonial America is symbolically represented through Messud's 'Wonderland'. Decoding the sociocultural behavior of women in the twenty-first century America through Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic pluralism, it can be concluded that a new form of feminine identity, that can be well labeled as 'agonistic feminine identity', is constructed in the twenty first century America due to traumatic events such as the 9/11. Hence, intolerance and revenge that is flooding between the two women of two different worlds is agonistically controlled through the construction of <i>The Woman Upstairs</i>.</p>

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1. Introduction

Feminine identity in the 21st century America within its sociopolitical context that claims for equality and freedom for all is a crucial issue that can be symbolically interpreted while being investigated through novels written by females. As a post 9/11 novel, Claire Messud's *The Woman Upstairs* (2013) symbolically deciphers the sociocultural identity women have adopted in the political democratic America under the shadow of the 9/11 trauma. Anger as reflection of sociopolitical oppression is threaded in Messud's craft to reflect neocolonial policy of otherizing those of other nations and races who may be of some probable threats to the security of one's life and the United States. Nora Eldridge, the female protagonist of Messud's *The Woman Upstairs*, opens the novel through her furious self-introduction: "How angry am I? You don't want to know, Nobody wants to know about that" (9). Feminine fury that is kept silent represented in Nora as an American Woman can represent women of the First World enraged against women of the Third World or diasporas, thus depicting the paradoxical nature of multiracialism in the post 9/11 America. As a post-9/11 literary work, the novel provides a unique representation of terror and its aftermaths and how the American prefer to silence their fury to keep the social or individual safety. The characterization of Nora as an ideal self-made obedient and kind woman depicts the satiric struggles between a woman's individuality and her social responsibility. Messud's depiction of such furious American self-made feminine identity ironically represents a contradictory type of feminine identity that the American patriarchal hegemony has engendered.

Considering the September 11th as a paradigmatic terror-making event, its resonations are felt in Nora's disgust of 'others' who have disturbed her privacy and success. Hence, *The Woman Upstairs* signifies the sociopolitical ruptures between Americans and 'others' who are considered as the source of threat to one's security; however, under sociopolitical lenses, this article investigates Messud's feminine characters to represent how they agonistically tolerate 'others' who are stigmatized in the post 9/11 American stage.

2. First World Women Vis-A-Vis Third World Women: A Sociopolitical Paradox

Claire Messud's *The Woman Upstairs* narrates the individual and social experiences of Nora Eldridge, a single teacher in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who is nicknamed "Mouse" by her mother. Nora's mouse invokes to mind the subterranean life her feminine identity suffers that is highlighted through the literary allusions Nora makes; however, she ironically considers her silence and her retreats as her feminine strength:

Numerous in our twenties and thirties, we're positively legion in our forties and fifties. But the world should understand, if the world gave a shit, that women like us are not underground. No Ralph Ellison basement full of lightbulbs for us; no Dostoyevskian metaphorical subterra. We're always upstairs. We're not the madwomen in the attic—they get lots of play, one way or another. We're the quiet woman at the end of the third-floor hallway, whose trash is always tidy, who smiles brightly in the stairwell with a cheerful greeting, and who, from behind closed doors, never makes a sound. In our lives of quiet desperation, *the woman upstairs* is who we are. (10)

What have led Nora to this seemingly paranoid state are the juxtapositions socio-politically fabricated for her that makes her keep silent and kind outside whereas she is bursting of anger inside. Nora's antagonistic feelings toward 'others' or 'foreigners' reflects what Spivak asserts as the clash between Third World women and First world feminism in her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?". The way Nora internalized the social milieu and its threats reflects Betty Friedan's *The Problem That Has No Name* that talks about the hidden frustrations women endure (2001, 24). Nora, entangled in what Friedan has labeled the "mystique of feminine fulfillment," trades her courage, happiness, and her art to her career ambitions. Thus Nora's public life intrudes into her personal life resulting in her abhorrence of culturally other females. Messud's craft then would be the unsaid side of the feminine identity in the twenty first century as Margaret Atwood considers it as feminism's mission:

Feminism has done many good things for women writers, but surely the most important has been the permission to say the unsaid, to encourage women to claim their full humanity, which means acknowledge the shadows as well as the lights. (24)

Accordingly, this article engages with Messud's representation of paradoxical forms of feminine identities that make women endure the antagonists due to the fact that the social hegemony advocates hidden neocolonialism rather than bold colonialism of 'others'.

The society Messud has constructed through *The Woman Upstairs* has given voice to female characters while marginalizing the male characters and patriarchal hegemonic motifs. Surpassing the fact that patriarchal hegemonies are still in play though neocolonially hidden, the main encounter throughout the novel is between a woman of the First World, Nora Marie Eldridge, and a woman of the Third World, Sirena, who is an immigrant to the United States and her country of origin is under scrutiny by Nora in the novel. Messud is Born in Greenwich, Connecticut, growing up in the United States, Australia, and Canada, returning to the United States as a teenager. Moreover, Messud's mother is Canadian, and her father is ethnic French from French Algeria. Hence, her multicultural feminine identity has made her able to characterize women of different cultures vis-à-vis each other.

Nora and Sirena as foil characters are presented in their personal and social lives, while both are around the same age being visual artists. However, Nora considers Sirena as the characters she desired to achieve as Sirena is married with a son and is successful in her art profession. Nora herself consciously asserts her points of difference from Sirena:

I'm not exactly not an artist, and I don't exactly not have children. I've just contrived to arrange things very poorly, or very well, depending how you look at it. I leave the kids when school gets out; I make my art—I don't have to use the kitchen table, because I have a whole second bedroom, with two windows no less, for that purpose—evenings and weekends. It's not much; but it's better than nothing. And in the Sirena year, when I had my airy studio to share, when I couldn't wait to get there, my veins fizzing at the prospect, it was perfect. (15)

However, the novel opens with Nora's furious introduction on herself and her life. Nora's trouble, as she describes, has begun the arrival of the Shahid family to Cambridge. Nora meets his new student, Reza, who is seven years old. Soon Nora meets Reza's sophisticated parents: Skandar, a visiting scholar at Harvard Who has a one-year fellowship to write a book on ethics and history, and Sirena who is an

installation artist. Nora likes all of them and gradually she breaks her self-made boundaries and trusts the Shahids getting friend with Sirena as she proposes to share her studio with her. Nora's intimacy with Sirena invigorates her own artistic desires that she had almost abandoned as she was a teacher. Sirena is working on her new video installation named 'Wonderland' alluding from Lewis Carroll's dream-world constructed for Alice. Inspired by Sirena's vision and creativity, Nora initiates her own art project in Sirena's studio while working with Sirena as well. She is so much exhilarated that she desperately wants to go back to the studio any time she is not there: "I was wondering when I could next get to the studio, and how long I'd be able to stay. I was wondering, as I often did, whether she or anyone else could tell the difference in me, whether my revelation, my awakening, had any outward mark" (93). But Nora's exaltation does not last long as her relationship with Sirena and the Shahids becomes vague as Sirena behaves so much reserved:

There was, in these months, a new side of Sirena, obsessive and imperious, one I hadn't seen in the fall, and it might, I suppose, have seemed to me selfish. But I was in thrall to her passionate singlemindedness, not least because, as her virtual assistant, I was included within it. Like a madness, her Wonderland was everything to her, and while she didn't care to talk about it generally, she did talk about it with me. (94)

The dichotomy between Nora as a first world woman and Sirena as a third world woman that was caringly overpassed by Nora's feminine caring emotions is proved to be unwise as Nora feels to be cheated by Sirena at the end of the novel. Nora due to her feminine constructed identity tries to put into practice what Nira Yuval-Davis accentuates as the importance of dialogue between women beyond national, cultural, religious, and ethnic boundaries. Yuval-Davis believes that such dialogues among women offer a way of exploring different positions and experiencing different negotiations that lead to the creation of alliances among women (130–131) Nora who has previously not trusting others thus living in her feminine loneliness, begins to communicate with Sirena against their sociocultural differences. Nora's life is once again shed with light and happiness as she befriends Sirena and begins to work in the art studio. Nora and Sirena who both share their artistic instincts have points of difference regarding familial and social success. Nora's being a single woman having no child is

contrasted with Sirena's being married having a son. Moreover, Sirena is on the verge of a great fame in her profession whereas Nora has not been able to devote her life to her art. Nora's trust to Sirena, as a foreigner is proved to Nora to be wrong as the Shahids move to Paris soon and when Nora travels to Paris ones to meet them, she gets so shocked as she by accident notices that while she had been alone in Sirena's studio in Cambridge, Sirena has secretly recorded Nora's private affairs and hallucinations using them as part of her constellation. Nora gets so furious of her own trust to Sirena but she decides to say nothing and leave them to live her own life.

Though the Spivakean theory of the double colonization of the Third world women considers that the Third world women are once colonized by men and one by the first world women and criticism who do not understand the Third world women, Messud's narration of the encounter of a third world woman's diaspora with a third world woman proves the opposite. This is Nora whose caring trust and emotion to Sirena is abused. Nora's narration of the life of herself in the post-9/11 era socio-politically makes one doubt the satiric reality of trusting 'others' as others are probable intruders to one's privacy and safety as Sirena intrudes Nora's secret life. Nora's ultimate fury inside and silence outside symbolically reflects the paradoxical politics of not trusting others while still pretending to be friend with them. Nora's ferocious and furious self-introduction at the onset of the novel is an assertion to the gap between women of the third world and women of the third world that Nora has trespassed by wrongly trusting Sirena.

3. Maternal Caring Identity: A Paradoxical Sociopolitical Construct

The Woman Upstairs, with its American setting, recounts the story of Nora's trust to others that transforms her innocence into experience. Throughout the sociopolitical milieu Messud has constructed, motherhood is epitomized and this maternal identity constructed accords with the American trend of feminine identity construction that prioritizes motherhood whether through biological mothering or through adoption. Susan Maushart, in *The Mask of Motherhood*, says: "The 'problem that has no name' for today's mother is the struggle to reconcile the rhetoric of equal opportunity with the stubbornly unequal realities of family life...." (53). The hegemonic trope of maternity, and the care and security it features, is also contended by Susan Faludi as she regards motherhood and family formation as what secures the country in the turbulence of the

United States in the post 9/11 era (*Terror Dream* 162). Nora as a free socially unconstrained character well represents the interior life of a female artist whose keen eyes feels some sociopolitical realities others are unaware of. However, what is conspicuous is that her desire for family and child represents the sociocultural standard of making family. Nora, though being single, feels she is a potential mother as she cares for her students as her children. Her maternal wishes reflect feminine caring nature advocated by Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice*, 1982) and Virginia Held (*The Ethics of Care*, 2006). Nora's mind is obsessed with her dream of being a mother as she contrasts herself with Sirena and others who are mother. Still she lives and cares for others as a mother. In her self-introduction, Nora sketches out her caring character: "I'm great with kids and I held my mother's hand when she died, after four years of holding her hand while she was dying, and I speak to my father every day on the telephone—every day" (9). The maternal feelings are valued in the novel as Nora describes the maternal caring a mother should have when Reza is hit by three bullies in his class and Nora calls Sirena to come to school. Nora is "somehow furious also with Reza's mother ...for leaving him unprotected in a strange land, for having entrusted him to a system and to people she knew nothing about". She further emphasizes the maternal caring she longs for stating, "If he were mine, I would never have done such a thing: I would have cherished him [Reza]" (22). Being interviewed with NPR's Jacki Lyden on Nora's suppressed dreams, Messud accentuates the bitter truth that motherhood that Nora desires for is what makes them forget their ideals:

My mother was, perhaps, I mean, she was absolutely a feminist in her heart, but by 1970 when the *Female Eunuch* was published and *Ms. Magazine* came out, she was a 37-year-old mother with two children who had been moving around following her husband's career. And the idea that she could realize her dreams was not possible. So it was something that was very much instilled in me by my mother that I needed to be financially independent. So for Nora, she has a similar message from her mother that you can't necessarily earn a living being an artist. (Messud, 2013)

Nora's narration of her memories of her family and her mother in the first part of the novel also emphasizes the significant role of the mothers as she once narrates her mother saying: "I make a house a home. That's what mothers do" (32). However,

Messud also points to the paradoxical features of motherhood as Nora's mother has left her social success due to "the consuming demands of motherhood" (32). Nora's mother's unfulfilled life due to her marriage and child bearing makes her desire an independent life for Nora so that she tells Nora, "I want you to have it all.... You won't live off pin money, off any man, no matter how much you love him. You won't depend on anyone but yourself. We agreed, right?" (31). Nora feels an edge of anger in her mother's voice that is accompanied by her own despair. Nora as an independent woman still is socially an individually unsatisfied and she wishes to have experienced a maternal life. Sirena, as Nora's counterpart in the novel and as a woman of another race, is a working mother who complains of the burden of motherhood stating, "But for me, it's always running against the clock. Someone always waiting, Sirena you're late, you're late...it's always too much" (48). Nora undeniably dreams of a life more like Sirena's life: successful in social and familial life as she is a distinguished artist who is married with a son. Messud's Nora explains how come she is 37 and still single:

I told him ...about how I'd grown up with my mother's longing and had never found a way to fulfill it, how I'd always thought there were rules about what was possible and allowable, even though I hadn't known, really, who'd made those rules. How in high school, art had seemed the way to break the rules, to get around them; but how it hadn't, then, seemed properly grown up, afterward.
(104)

However, Nora herself has also caringly looked after her parents devoting her life to them. Though Nora was in love with art, her mother persuades her that art needs no education and she can follow art for herself and she'd better study another major t university as art makes no money. Her social life thus has been constructed by the social values inculcated by her mother. This social construction of a feminine caring character who is successful in her profession as well has made Nora have different layers of life as she says,

I lived multiple lives: in the first, I had every appearance of a modestly accomplished young woman in her early thirties, capable if not interesting, easy to get on with, prompt, efficient, with unnoticeable clothes and a serviceable hairstyle, and a voice a bit higher, perhaps a bit breathier, I was told, than one was led to expect by my frame. A woman without notable surprises. But my first

life was a masquerade,... though in my second I was not a heroine at all: ... in that second life I was no lover or huntress or martyr, but a daughter, just a dutiful daughter. Then there was my third life, small and secret: the life of my dioramas, the vestiges of my artist self. (38)

Nora's caring character makes her adopt a teaching profession to keep her feminine caring fresh. It's after her mother's death that she meets Reza and Sirena and Skandar and Nora considers this as nature of life's passages since "every departure entails an arrival elsewhere, every arrival implies a departure from afar" (39). The Shahid family is all that Nora desires. The feminine caring character epitomized in the American hegemony makes Nora confess that,

Skandar, Sirena, Reza—each of them was, in his or her way, my Black Monk. I had a veritable monastery inside me! Each one, in my impassioned interior conversations, granted me some aspect of my most dearly held, most fiercely hidden, heart's desires: life, art, motherhood, love. (150).

Sirena as a role model for Nora confesses that Reza is their only child and they couldn't have any other child and she envies another friend who has three children. Furthermore, the notion of motherhood is what is also highlighted through adoption as the families in the novel are mostly either parent biologically or they have adopted a child as Lili, the girl adopted from china. However, Nora has reached an age that makes her face the bitter reality of her unfulfilled maternal aspirations:

The age of thirty-seven ... is a time of reckoning, the time at which you have to acknowledge once and for all that your life has a shape and a horizon, and that you'll probably never be president, or a millionaire, and that if you're a childless woman, you will quite possibly remain that way. (26)

Thus what Messud portrays throughout the novel is the multilayered identities of women who value motherhood and caring though they mostly have to sacrifice their desires and social success for their caring roles.

Messud's Post-9/11 novel, *The Woman Upstairs*, represents forms of feminine identity in the twenty-first century that consider caring as the feminine feature that ensures the familial union as well as the social integrity. As Claire Synder maintains, "traditional family is central for neoconservatives because they view it as the 'seedbed of virtue' that undergirds democratic self-government" ("Allure of Authoritarianism"

18). Hence, the relationship between Nora and the Shahid family is based on Nora's desire to have a family though she does not want to consciously confess it:

I have to be clear about this, because otherwise you might think that I was fond of a family, that their family-ness was a pleasure to me; and you might infer from that that there was trust between us (a fact really true only about Reza), a mutuality the existence of which I always doubted. (78)

However, this is the same doubted trust that leads Nora care for Reza, Sirena and Skandar to the degree that She does not consider Sirena as stranger or a rival to her, thus resolving the previously existing fractures between them as women of two different worlds, one from America and the other one from Italy or more accurately from middle east as it is ironically states in the novel that “You'd be forgiven for thinking Sirena was herself from the Middle East” (21). The feminine caring in the novel is thus a socially constructed identity to maintain the familial and social integrity and safety.

4. Messud's Sociopolitical Otherizing Policy

The narrative in Messud's *The Woman Upstairs* spans half a decade from 2004 to 2008 after the 9/11 attacks. Messud satirically alludes to the 9/11 trauma which has augmented the stigma of 'others', those of other races or colors. *Though The Woman upstairs* does not explicitly deal with politics, Messud's allusion to the 9/11 attacks and the American otherizing policy reflects the sociopolitical turmoil of the era. The way Nora is lacking self-confidence, thus following life as an obedient silent girl, reflects the fact that the self-doubt of the novel's protagonist echoes the self-doubt of a nation which had considered itself invulnerable” (Schiefer 2011, 70). However, this furious girl and her antagonistic feelings towards those of other races resonates Sally Haslanger's constructionist interpretation of gender and race that would justify the underlying roots of Nora's feminine identity socio-politically constructed (*Resisting Reality* 41). Through the protagonist's desire for family and the themes of family construction and multiracialism, the novel depicts an otherizing policy lurking in the social hegemony. Though Messud herself does not confess the political implications of the novel, her references to the 9/11 attacks and politics and ethics makes her novel socio-politically imbued. The relationship between politics and literature is not something new, yet the way politics is intermingled with the private lives of people who are not aware of it is

something worth scrutiny. Messud's novel, hence, reflects the post-September 11th life in which the Americans hardly dare to trust others.

4.1. Messud's Post 9/11 Stage: Violence and Terror Stigmatized

Messud's *The Woman Upstairs*, while narrating a feminine psychological turmoil, propels the enigma that what has made Nora so much furious. When helps the reader decipher the reason of her anger through her narrations, the reason doesn't match the fury in play. Messud's portrait of the intimate relationship between two women visual artists, Nora and Sirena presents a dichotomy between two different forms of feminine identity in the postcolonial era. Nora as an American "woman upstairs" is caught up by reality thus having to marginalize her art in her life. On the other hand, Sirena as an Italian immigrant to the US, though Nora doubts her Italian-ness and ascribes her to be a middle easterner, is "a ruthless person" who connects east to the west through her "wonderland". However, other than being just a manifesto of feminine west versus feminine east, the novel has a political subtext, though it is not explicitly expressed, neither by the novel nor by the novelist.

The Political subtext of the novel would be symbolically leaked out when Nora considers politics as the "behind-the-scenes sort of way" (80) and makes references to the FBI and 9/11 at times in the novel. The political exposition is further advances as Skandar, Sirena's husband, turns out to be a visiting professor at Harvard who is scholar on ethics and history and her ethical descriptions reflect political implications promoted by ethics. Having been written in the post 9/11 era, Messud represents the political plot of the novel through describing the city sky as "the spotless 9/11 sky, though immediately satirizing this spotless description by inquiring "How could the leaves stand out so distinctly? Why was the sky such an impeccable blue? How could this ordinary afternoon suddenly fill me, not with the indignation I'd felt earlier, but with elation (23). Politicization of the novel is schemed as Nora further considers the United States as a place of fun and peace that is traumatized by outsiders in the 9/11. Nora hears about the history of other countries as Skandar narrates them as private tutor who make's Nora aware of the Middle East history and lebenon. When Skandar gets upset on the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, He accentuates the stigma of violence and how history is politicized:

Violence is very upsetting, wherever it takes place, whomever it hurts. But my poor Lebanon is a special case, a very particular story. To be still recovering from our terrible war, to be trying to create our skin all over again, to make a whole body—and then, this. Sometime I’ll try to explain. But where would I begin? My beginning? The war’s beginning? The century’s new beginning?

Here, with Hariri? Depending where you begin, you’ll tell a different story. (98)

Nora as the female protagonist of the novel googles "Lebanon war" to know more about it as she feels as a teacher she should know about the history of the country where Reza comes from (98). She further notices that she knows nothing of other countries like Haiti, Oman, Liberia, et al though some of her students are from those countries. Nora’s lack of knowledge of these Third World countries accredits the marginality of Third World people in America. In fact Sirena was right about “the cotton wool of her [Nora’s] American life” that has made [Nora] “swaddled and protected from the world”(98).

Hence she describes the United States as “a Fun House of its kind, this strange place of safety into which 9/11 could erupt as if from nowhere, as if without logic, to our utter surprise” (23). Throughout this post 9/11 subtext, there enter Reza Shahid and his family to Cambridge to live there for a year. The Tragic shock in the postmodern era is when Reza is called as “a terrorist” by one of his class mates and he is told that “the playground was for Americans” (22). Reza’s non-Americanness being emphasized reflects the American hegemonic belief that “the intrusions of September 11 broke down the dead bolt on our protective myth” (Faludi 15), and so the result is otherizing the ‘others’ or ‘foreigners’. In *The Woman Upstairs*, Skandar’s parable of a panther that does not really exists and is an illusion to justify the death of the sheep metaphorically represents the gruesome relationship between Americans and the foreigners and the anger kept silent:

And yet how can you look at the panther, how can you look him in the eye, when he won’t stay still? When he’s nowhere and everywhere, belongs to no one and to everyone? So if you’re me, how you deal with this is that you say, I’ll look at how we talk about the panther. I’ll study the history of history, the ways that we tell the stories, and don’t tell other stories, and I’ll try to understand what

it says about us, to tell one story rather than another, to tell it one way rather than another. (100)

This otherizing policy is what has been institutionalized after the 9/11 attacks as the immigrants from other countries specially the Asians and the blacks are considered to be sources of probable threats to the American land. Reza that was once bully by three boys at school is attacked again at school “this time more surreptitiously, more brutally”. Nora beckons the reason of the attack stating “it shows how long-lived anger is, the desire for vengeance: it has a nuclear half-life, and it teaches people patience in the most sinister way” (56). This otherizing policy adopted out of the anger against others who may be the cause of some probable terror augmented after the 9/11 attacks is what keeps the female characters of the play act as puppets in the neocolonial otherizing platform. This neocolonial marginalization of the diaspora is what is well summed up by Sirena’s monologue as she is so worried of her son being excluded from the American society:

Now Reza knows he lives in a world where people can throw rocks at you just because of who you are, just because they don’t like your name or your skin. ... When you’re an Arab or you have a Middle Eastern name, it’s never personal, but it’s always there. I was anxious about America. ... I know it’s important for Reza to take all this in, to know about it—but later. I want—I wanted—for Reza to have a childhood ... where all you have to know is how to be a child. No rage, no hatred, no cry for vengeance. No stone-throwing. There’s time enough for all that—for history—later; ... And now, this. You see? Everything’s changed because he can no longer be free of it. Because this, now, is the beginning.”

Subsequently, the psychological state of Nora and her relationship with Sirena would be socio-politically interpreted as the two juxtaposed poles of the novel would be ‘Americanness’ and ‘otherness’.

4.2. Messud's Multinational ‘Wonderland’: A Web of Others

What crystallizes in Messud’s narrative of neocolonially excluding others is an spectrum of people of different nations who portray the multinational setting of America. The main female characters of the novel are friends on the outside whereas their sociocultural contradictions signals the antagonisms inside. Significantly, the way

the two women protagonists differ is ascribed to their Americanness and non-Americanness. Nora as an American woman represents a character who is cautious of getting friend with strangers. On the other hand, Sirena, seemingly being Italian, is a ruthless woman who amiably tries to climb the social ladder of success in her profession as an artist.

The multinational network of the novel, and accordingly America, is cast out through the characters from different nations and more importantly through Skandar's ethical and historical narrations as he is a professor of ethics and history. However, throughout the strata of people of different nations in America what is conspicuous is an otherizing policy that keeps the people of other nations and races as 'others' thus not being socioculturally accepted as Americans though they are American Citizens. The Shahids as the emblematic figures of being non-American receive brutality and anger in the American society that is exemplified in the way schoolchildren mistreat Reza, the eight-year-old boy as an American boy "called Reza 'a terrorist' and told him the playground was for Americans"(22). Nora Eldridge, the novel's protagonist expresses the same exclusion policy toward 'others' as she devalues foreignness while she describes her family memories:

But foreignness: there was nothing foreign about my father, with his unconsidered Brooks Brothers wardrobe and his upbringing in Wenham, Massachusetts. Nothing foreign about my mother but an Italian grandmother, of whom she possessed a single photograph, the ancestor having died when my mother was two; and a deeply Catholic sister who had contemplated taking orders, which seemed fairly foreign to us. As a boy, my brother Matt was so American he hated vegetables and all kinds of ethnic food—Indian, Chinese, Thai, he'd spurn it all "There have been Eldridges here since almost the beginning," my father was known to say. (25)

Even Nora's aspirations follow a security check not to endanger herself by travelling to countries whose people are otherized in America: "I always thought I'd live in Paris, Rome, Madrid—at least for a while. It strikes me now that I didn't dream of Zanzibar or Papeete or Tashkent: even my fantasy was cautious, a good girl's fantasy" (22).

Throughout the novel, the Shahids as the typical exemplification of diasporas are sarcastically condemned as 'others: "they're [those of other races and colors are] bush

pigs. Raised by wolves. No big deal. That describes half of America and probably more than half of the world at large.” (65). More sarcastically, even European countries are not excluded from the otherizing policy of the American hegemony that regards others as negative and Americans as positive. Messud aptly portrays this American otherizing policy inquiring “What does it mean, you see, that the first thing every American child knows about Germany is Hitler?” and she further discusses,

What if the first thing you knew was something else? And what would it do, how would it change things, if nobody were allowed to know anything about Hitler, about the war, about any of it, until first they learned about Brahms, Beethoven and Bach, about Hegel and Lessing and Fichte, one of those things you had to know and appreciate before you learned about the Nazis. (101)

Still, Skandar talks about his education at an American boarding school and then at an American university and narrates to Nora how half of his Lebanese friends at university went to “the American University there, in Beirut; and then they ended up coming here, to the States, for graduate school or whatever. Which means their lives are in English, at least, or are American” (75). When Nora inquires him how’s it different for him as he is in America now researching at Harvard, Skandar satirically responds: There’s a way of being in exile, for the educated of any non-European country, that can be very comfortable in its worldliness ...” (75). The American universities at a miniature of multinational globe is what is referred to by Nora’s friend as “The land of silly accents” since they are full of people of other nations (75). Skandar confirms this otherizing outlook of Americans stating,

... your friend is exactly right. In this country, there are pockets like this, almost like low-lying clouds. We’re in one here. They are in America ... but they have very little to do with it, and we—the brown, the black, the yellow, the Jews and Arabs from all over—we congregate, each in our diaspora, and make a world of familiar conversation, a small life in our ivory towers.(75)

Skandar further compares the America with Europe emphasizing that,

In Europe, for good or bad, history is always there, the context is always present. When I say I’m Lebanese of Palestinian extraction, from Beirut, that I’m predominantly a Christian by heritage, and then that I went to university in Paris, that I teach at the *École Normale*, a great deal is immediately known about me—

of what I am and what I am not...and I will be placed by these things. ... [But] in America, there are places like Harvard, where I walk in the door and some version of this happens and I think no more about it. Not, here, so much about my social origins; more about my philosophical ideas, my academic affiliations. I'm known, in a certain way.

Whereas in America there's a matter of neocolonial otherizing which has made Americans not include the immigrants:

But mostly... in America, I'm a cipher. If, to a person on the street, I say I'm from Beirut, he might ask me where that is. If I say I have Palestinian relatives and that I was raised a Christian, he may wonder 'How is this possible?' And if I explain that I went to university in Paris, he might wonder that I've done such an illogical thing. In America, Europe and the Middle East seem very far away indeed.

And there exists the Americanization policy and those who are not Americanized would be marginalized, yet Americanization equals crossing out your ethnic identity:

If you're a Lebanese who comes here for university, to study, then you become immediately American. You're accepted, which is wonderful, but you're given an entirely new suit of clothes, a new outline, that has no context, and you must grow to fit it, or fit it to shape you, or whatever. You come with no baggage."

Hence within the multiracial America that resembles a globe in miniature, Messud's American 'wonderland' portrays whatever American as peaceful and great, so that even the blue sky in the novel is described as "vast and blue and impeccable and American, the very canvas of possibility, the gray highway stretching out before us" (86).

4.3. Nora vs. Sirena: Antagonistic Friendship

Messud's symbolic sociopolitical portrayal of America focuses on two female characters whose identities represent the hegemonic culture. Nora Eldridge who has always been a "good girl" turns to be an angry woman at the age of 42. Her dreams of being a successful artist are held in abeyance to undertake other practical individual and social activities: teaching at school and taking care of her sick mother. At the age of thirty seven, Nora, who is not married yet, comes to know the three members of Shahid family, Reza, Skandar, and Sirena. Sirena is also an artist like Nora but she is successful

in her art profession while Nora is not. Sirena as Nora's foil character is ruthless and confident while she is well aware of the discriminations in America, thus she behaves amiably to Americans while she feels thwarted from them. She criticizes Americans stating, "Americans see everything too simply" (98). Sirena's presence in Nora's life story distracts Nora from the sorrow of her mother's death and encourages her to live her life fully and appeal to her art as she says, "[M]y dream in my head of being an artist, and my dream in the world of being an artist, I couldn't—until Sirena, I couldn't—connect them." But then Nora frets, "As was so often the case—we Women Upstairs!—[Sirena's] life would be shown to be more important than my life" (105). However, she envies Sirena though they are friends. Nora desires to have Reza as her son and Skandar as the husband. Sirena's profession as an artist is also what Nora dreams of. When Nora and Sirena meet for coffee, and Nora is thrilled by knowing that Sirena is also an artist: "this! Of course! we shared" (33). These envious feelings however are kept hidden and she nurtures her friendship with Sirena though she is otherizing Sirena:

Even though she lives in Paris, Sirena isn't French; she's Italian. This isn't obvious because her last name is Shahid and her husband's first name is Skandar, and her son has the same name as the last shah of Iran—not that any of them is remotely Persian. They simply liked the name. Skandar is from Lebanon, from Beirut. One part of him is Christian and another part is Muslim, which surely explains a lot about all of it to someone. ...I was talking about Sirena, to whom he was—and is—married, who is Italian and an artist. You'd be forgiven for thinking Sirena was herself from the Middle East, on account of her skin, that fine olive skin. (21)

Nora is always cautious of Sirena's "foreignness" (30) since "there was nothing foreign" about Nora herself. (30).

However, due to her feminine caring character, Nora stays friend with Sirena and cares for Reza, Sirena's son, and trusts her to work in her studio. Nora and Sirena decide to share their artistic projects: Sirena makes "installations [...] lush gardens and jungles made out of household items and refuse" (35) and then makes videos of the installations:

... the story of the videos was precisely this revelation that the beautiful world was fake, was made of garbage. But that first she had to film it in such a way that it looked wholly beautiful and that sometimes this was hard. (35)

Sirena is mixing Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* with “the vision of a twelfth-century Muslim named Ibn Tufail, who wrote a story about a boy growing up alone on a desert island, discovering everything—including himself, and God—for the first time” (83). Inspired by Sirena, Nora who is “constrained by reality” tries to make a series of “Joseph Cornell-scaled dioramas”, beginning with a “miniature replica” of Emily Dickinson and her room. She dramatizes to make similar boxes for Virginia Woolf, Alice Neel, and Edie Sedgwick in their rooms (46). Still, all these similarities between the two female characters of the novel does not resolve their sociocultural differences as Sirena seems to be an intruder in the American world of Nora. Nora herself confesses the sheer truth that her friendship and intimacy with the Shahids seemed more a fabrication than reality:

Let me explain that ...this state of fantasy was, in the wake of ... “the Fabrication Weekend,” the country to which I largely decamped and in which I preferred to stay.

I knew it was potential rather than actual,... I didn't see that I'd made it up. When Sirena ... said, “What would I do without you? You are my angel, my heart's best love,” I believed her. When Reza said, “I never want you to go away,” I believed him. ... If you'd told me my own story about someone else, I would have assured you that this person was completely unhinged. Or a child.

(92)

Ultimately, Nora's fabrication reveals to be antagonistic rather than friendly since Sirena crushingly betrays Nora by violating secrecy of Nora's personal affairs. So when Nora calls Sirena "a ruthless person" (127), she is satirically criticizing her rudeness in filming Nora's underground life secretly. The novel's ending then that represents Nora in great anger is an ending that changes everything. Nora's trust to 'others' is totally smashed down and her friendship with Sirena turns into some hidden enmity and vengeance.

5. Conclusion: Agonistic Feminine Identity: 'The Woman Upstairs'

The Woman Upstairs sets the motif of art as what bridges the gap between two women who represent different worlds. Satirically the friendship that unifies the opposites turns out to be non-real and fake. Nora's life is turned into art without her permission and now "there's no telling what I [Nora] might do" as she is "murderously furious", so enraged that she may "set the world on fire" (160). Messud accentuates on the symbolic state of the fury and despair in the novel as she responds to Annasue McCleave Wilson who asked the question "I wouldn't want to be friends with Nora, would you?" Messud hit back with scrutiny:

For heaven's sake, what kind of question is that? Would you want to be friends with Humbert Humbert? Would you want to be friends with Mickey Sabbath? Saleem Sinai? Hamlet? Krapp? Oedipus? Oscar Wao? Antigone? Raskolnikov? Any of the characters in *The Corrections*? Any of the characters in *Infinite Jest*? ...If you're reading to find friends, you're in deep trouble. We read to find life, in all its possibilities.

Messud's portrayal of feminine life in all its possibilities is not the freedom and happiness postcolonial postfeminist era advocates. Throughout Messud's narrative, the dichotomy between reality and what exists is portrayed through art. Cruelty and untrustability of friends acquire a sociopolitical shade because Sirena, "the ruthless friend," who betrays Nora is a woman of other race whose husband is constrained in the colonial outlook of Americans toward Lebanese and whose son, Reza, gets accused of 'terrorism' though he is just eight years old. As the novel represents the 2004-2008 time-span in the post-9/11 era, "foreignness" is stigmatized as foreigners may cause a trauma like the 9/11. The way Messud's Nora trust the Shahids though she doubts the reality of this friendship and how she remains patient though she is furious accords to Mouffe's idea on 'agonistic pluralism' (*Democratic Paradox* 102). Accordingly, Nora and Sirena as postmodern women in America have acquired an agonistic identity that makes them pretend friendship against the distrust in between. So Nora's silence as "a good girl" is turned into her agonistic silence to convert antagonistic feelings toward "foreigners" to agonistic feelings that safeguard herself and her nation from probable threats.

The prospect of a stable society and family necessitates constructing a national structure devoid of antagonism as Chantal Mouffe elaborates it through her theory on “agonistic pluralism” (*Democratic Paradox* 102). Mouffe believes that there is no democracy without antagonism. Yet, the antagonism is to be neocolonially transformed to agonism through patience and by giving the antagonists some social space. Thus by giving the 'adversaries' some social space, they can be neocolonially controlled.

Messud's *The Woman Upstairs* as a post-9/11 craft makes use of transnational characters to emphasize the hidden bigotry and hypocrisy in the current age. The dominance of feminine figures in *The Woman Upstairs* highlights the significance of forms of feminine identity in the twenty-first century America and how the interactions among women are socio-politically flavored. Nora's “goodness” at the beginning of the novel undergoes a radical change so that she comes to a furious anger at the end of the novel due to her being cheated by the ‘foreigners’. Thus her developmental identity that is constructed within the transnational world in America makes her adopt a new feminine identity whose sincerity is not assured as she is inside enraged but she keeps silent outside behaving agonistically toward foreigners, as Nora aptly states “how long-lived anger is, the desire for vengeance: it has a nuclear half-life, and it teaches people patience in the most sinister way” (56).

However, patriarchal hegemonies are lurking behind Messud's plot as Skandar is the one Nora dreams of and her union with Sirena is partly stirred by her motivation to more communicate with the Shahids to dream of Skandar as her husband and Reza as her son. So caring and family making as feminine dreams are what women innately follow as Carol Gilligan's Ethics of Care connotes. Nora comes to the conclusion that she cannot trust foreigners while she should pretend she likes them, thus behaving agonistically as Mouffe's agonistic democracy justifies such agonism in pluralities. This ‘agonistic feminine identity’, as I have termed it, has made Nora “veered between fantasies of intimacy and of bleak rejection” (79). Hence, Nora's narrations of her life story reveals how women are subjugated by the colonial hegemony and their dream are fabricated due to social frameworks. Nora's opening words in the novel, “*How angry am I? You don't want to know*”, thus signifies her pulsing rage due to her being betrayed and being constantly secondary to a woman of other race who is socio-politically considered as a source of terror and this signifies the revival of colonialism.

Accordingly, Anger is justified as a sociopolitical necessity: “But to be furious, murderously furious, is to be *alive*” (160). However, transnationality and globalism avoids liberal countries to ban those of other races. As Chris Weedon accords in her article in 2016 that “identity, subjectivity and agency formed in specific western locations ... are also sites of the ‘glocal’ in which the boundaries of the nation state become fluid and transnational forms of imagined identity and belonging become paramount” (Weedon 107). Messud portrays these transnational feminine identities constructed in the fluid nation state contradiction that has been supposed to blur the differences. What is constructed then in this sociocultural amalgam is an ‘agonistic identity’ that all women share to unconsciously guard against those of other races:

Don’t all women feel the same? The only difference is how much we know we feel it, how in touch we are with our fury. We’re all furies, except the ones who are too damned foolish, and my worry now is that we’re brainwashing them from the cradle. (9)

Subsequently, following what Sally Haslanger has discussed in her *Resisting Reality* that the race and gender are being socially constructed, it would be justified that borderizing those of other races and colors is what is socioculturally constitutionalized in the construction of the feminine identity in the twenty-first century, hence bespeaking the revival of racial neocolonialism.

Messud’s post 9/11 narrative would be concluded then to represent the female characters in the American society who interact amiably with each other while the trauma caused by Sirena, as a ‘foreigner’ proves ‘others’ to be a threat rather than friends. Nora explicitly scrutinizes the neocolonial feminist politics stating, “How did all that revolutionary talk of the seventies land us in a place where being female means playing dumb and looking good?” (9). Hence she affirms the politics of feminine identity in the twenty-first century America engendering her anger:

That’s why I’m so angry, really—not because of all the chores and all the making nice and all the duty of being a woman—or rather, of being me—because maybe these are the burdens of being human. Really I’m angry because I’ve tried so hard to get out of the hall of mirrors, this sham and pretend of the world, or of my world, on the East Coast of the United States of America in the first decade of the twenty-first century. And behind every mirror is another

fucking mirror, and down every corridor is another corridor, and the Fun House isn't fun anymore and it isn't even funny, but there doesn't seem to be a door marked EXIT.

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