REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININITY IN LAWRENCE DURRELL'S "THE ALEXANDRIA QUARTET"

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Abstract: *The paper presents the most important feminine characters in Lawrence Durrell's* "The Alexandria Quartet". *These characters illustrate various hypostases of femininity, such as the femme fatale, the woman as man's subordinate and "servant", the mentor or the woman that is man's soul mate. In addition to that, we shall also examine the main character of the novel, the city of Alexandria.*

Keywords*: femininity, portrait, love.*

The city of Alexandria as presented by Lawrence Durrell in *The Alexandria Quartet* is inhabited by many people, of different nationalities. Among these people, women play a particularly important part. Whether we speak of main characters like Justine, Melissa, Clea, Leila or of rather secondary ones like Semira or Liza Pursewarden, they all are endowed with specific identities and traits, with specific personal histories that make them memorable to the reader. Thus, we are presented with a complex image of femininity, that includes the femme fatale (Justine), the woman as man's subordinate and "servant" (Melissa), the mentor (Leila) or the woman that completes man and makes him feel "right" (Clea). To this, we can add the ultimate feminine character of the tetralogy, the city of Alexandria itself.

The central character of the first volume of *The Quartet* and the one that gives the volume its title, Justine plays in the book the role of the femme fatale, the man-eater, the woman who exists only to twist men's heads and in the end destroy them. According to Anna Pratt, Durrell's method of characterization "consists in the presentation of an initial portrait, later supplemented by other descriptions and confirmed by events." (p. 13) Consequently, his characters, though elusive and impossible to know completely, have certain constant features that make us recognize them. Justine's initial portrait shows her walking idly towards the town, below the narrator's window, wearing white sandals and half asleep, fanning her cheeks with a reed fan. She smiles, "a smile which I shall probably never see again for in company she only laughs, showing those magnificent white teeth. But this sad yet quick smile is full of a quality which one does not think she owns – the power of mischief." (Durrell, 1968: 22) Justine's smile, showing her teeth, brings to mind the image of an animal baring its fangs, preparing to attack. The woman embodies destructiveness, mischief and narcissism. Throughout the book, she is often compared to birds and animals of prey, like an eagle, a panther or a leopard.

Justine is the enigma of the book. Nobody knows exactly her age or her origin, except for the fact that she is a Jew. Even though Darley (and the reader with him) has access both to her own diaries and to a novel written about her by her first husband, even though we are given several explanations along the book, we do not actually get to understand fully the reasons behind her behaviour, the feelings she had for the various men in her life or, in fact, her real, true self. Many times we see Justine looking at

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herself in a mirror and this becomes a symbol for her identity. We never get to see her completely, fully, we have access only to various facets of her, to various reflections of her. In Darley's opinion, she is "a true child of Alexandria; which is neither Greek, Syrian nor Egyptian, but a hybrid: a joint." (Durrell, *op. cit.*: 28). Their relationship begins as an intellectual one and is for a while at a mental level, he being surprised, but admiring about her the fact that she talks and thinks like a man. Though he is aware of her negative parts (she is vanitous, arrogant, exigent), he remains fascinated with her for a long while.

Justine's existence is marked by two tragic events: her being raped by a relative when she was a child and the disappearance of her six year-old daughter. Both left traces on her, whether we speak of her nymphomania or her obsession with finding the child. Both her first husband, Jacob Arnauti, and her second, Nessim, try to help her solve her problems, but are not successful.

The real reason behind her marriage to Nessim also remains a mystery, though we are offered several explanations for it. Darley is baffled by the fact that although she cheats on Nessim, he is faithful to her. Balthazar will tell him later that the marriage was one based on interest, and Nessim was not only aware of this, but also accepted it. He put his money and his connections at her disposal to help her find her child, hoping that love would come. But it does not, though they keep the façade. Balthazar also discloses to Darley that Justine's real love was Pursewarden. She was fascinated by the fact that he could do well without her and did not know whether to cry or to laugh at his insults. However, it is the third volume of the novel that brings us new insight into what might be the real reason behind the marriage, which is presented as a political alliance between the representatives of Egyptian Jews and Copts, who are conspiring against the British and smuggling arms into Palestine. Thus, Justine agreed to marry Nessim and started feeling a certain desire for him after he confessed to her that all his money and energy were put in an attempt to offer freedom and power to Palestine. He and other Copts saw the Jews as the only nation capable to dominate the area and to offer them the liberty to exist on their own terms. He asked for her help with Darley and Pursewarden, the two people who might cause trouble. Thus, in having relationships with the two men, she acted as a secret agent.

In the fourth volume of the novel, after the failure of the conspiracy, we find Justine almost defeated. She is under house arrest at the Hosnanis' summer residence, she has had a stroke and her left eyelid drooped slightly, she is bitter and hateful. Darley feels only disgust for her and looks forward to leaving.

Still, like a phoenix bird, Justine manages to be reborn out of her own ashes. She breaks house arrest and announces the police about it in order to force a meeting with Memlik Pasha, the Minister for Interior. He becomes her latest conquest, following her like a dog. The last pages of the novel picture her radiant and beautiful, again happy to be with Nessim and in for something bigger, a conspirator at international level.

To a certain extent, Melissa is the opposite of Justine. She does not inspire passion, but compassion. Her initial portrait presents her as fragile, diffident, young, fresh and candid, in spite of her sordid occupation.

> She would come a few minutes late of course – fresh perhaps from some assignation in a darkened room, from which I avert my mind; but so fresh, so young, the open petal of the mouth that fell upon mine like an unslaked summer. The man she had left might still be going over and over the memory of her; she might be as if still dusted by the pollen of his kisses. Melissa! It mattered so little

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> somehow, feeling the lithe weight of the creature as she leaned on one's arm smiling with the selfless candour of those who had given over with secrets. (Durrell, *op. cit.*: 18-19)

Melissa is Darley's girl-friend and she is a dancer who sleeps from time to time with her admirers for money. For Darley this does not seem to matter, as it does not seem to matter for her that Justine is his lover as well. Both dream, however, of the time when she would be able to give up prostitution and they could have a normal life together.

Melissa comes to Darley rather out of gratitude and he comes to her rather out of pity. When they meet they are both "fellow-bankrupts" (*ibidem*: 25), both at a dead end and in need of somebody to breathe life into them. So they get together.

She is sick with tuberculosis, is pale, slender and shabbily dressed. She is a dancer, but she does not have a great body that would inflame the imagination of those who see her dance, nor does she dance well. She has periods when she becomes depressive. She likes to serve Darley, like a true Oriental woman, though she is Greek, and never behaves as if she had any right on him. But even if she seems passive and defeated by life, she plays an active and decisive part in the events in the novel. Melissa is the one who tells Nessim that his wife is unfaithful to him and she is also the one who tells Pursewarden that Nessim is smuggling arms to Palestine.

Clea is Darley's third girl-friend, and she appears rather late in the narrative, because, as Darley himself confesses, for him she is difficult to catch, to define. Her initial portrait connotes the ideas of gracefulness, compassion, kindness and warmth.

> Everything about her person is honey-gold and warm in tone; the fair, crisply-trimmed hair which she wears rather long at the back, knotting it simply at the downy nape of her neck. This focuses the candid face of a minor muse with its smiling grey-green eyes. The calmly disposed hands have a deftness and shapeliness which one only notices when one sees them at work, holding a paint-brush perhaps or setting the broken leg of a sparrow in splints made from match-ends.
>
> I should say something like this: that she had been poured, while still warm, into the body of a young grace: that is to say, into a body born without instinct or desires. (*ibidem*: 107)

Clea is a painter and besides painting her own paintings, she also paints Balthazar's patients in various degrees of illness, as he prefers this kind of recording to photographs. It is in this hypostasis, at the clinic, that Darley first sees her. Later on, she will be asked by Amaril to record various kinds of noses from which he could choose one for his love, Semira. This, and the image of Clea setting the broken leg of a sparrow in splints make her appear as a healer, a shaman. She is the one to whom all characters turn when they have problems, and she does her best to offer them advice or comfort. Melissa asks for Clea when she is dying and Justine asks for Clea to visit her too when she is at the kibbutz in Palestine.

Her relationship with Darley starts as friendship and develops into love only in the last volume of the tetralogy, after he has got over his feelings for Justine and Melissa. But her importance is obvious from the fact that all three volumes that are narrated by Darley end with letters from her.

In spite of her good parts, Clea is alone for most of the novel. However, she is happy with living by herself and does not consider that she denies herself anything. She

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has had two noteworthy relationships, one with a man, with whom she got pregnant, but she had an abortion because she did not want to force him into something he might not have wanted, and one with a woman. She confesses at one point that the woman was Justine, while the great love of her life will be identified later by Darley as Amaril. She will continue to have nice feelings for both of them, since she will draw the nose of Amaril's future wife and will support Justine's decision of getting married to Nessim, who is also a friend of hers.

Clea is loved dearly by Narouz Hosnani, but he does not have the courage of confessing his feelings because of his terrible ugliness. When he does confess, Clea is horrified by this love that she does not want. She is even afraid to come to his deathbed. However, they have a connection that extends after his death. They both have shamanic features, and before the accident that leaves her without her hand, Clea senses that something wrong is about to happen to her as if she had been sent signals by Narouz. Furthermore, she spends paradisiacal moments with Darley on Narouz's island, the place where he used to go and fish. But it is also there that she has the terrible accident. Moreover, the object that pierces through her hand and nails it to an underwater wreck making it impossible for her to set free is Narouz's harpoon.

But Clea's rebirth after her near-drowning and Darley's struggle to free her hand "prepares them to enter an existence that rises above the claims of individual identity." (P.M. Bynum, 1995: 94) Their relationship does not exactly start afresh, after it has almost ended because of her premonitions, they are still separated in the end of the novel, but the fact that they write and send letters to each other almost simultaneously is a good sign for them. They have both discovered their "voice", she as a painter with a steel and rubber hand, he as a writer, and are about to meet in France, the country of love.

Of the four human female characters discussed in this paper, Leila is the only one that does not have a love affair with Darley. Maybe that is the reason why she is mentioned for the first time only in the second volume of the tetralogy. This first mention is not exactly a portrait either, though it does present certain aspects of her life at the time the action of the novel takes place.

As a character in its own right, Leila appears only in the third volume of the tetralogy, due to the very important role that she plays in the life of its eponymous character, Mountolive. She is not only his lover, for a short period of time, but also his mentor, for many, many years. Thus, a great deal of the third novel of the tetralogy is dedicated to Mountolive's relationship to Leila and to the way in which it shaped the young man.

And she does qualify for her position as mentor. She is an educated woman, who had studied in Cairo for a few years and dreamt of continuing her studies in Europe. She had been to Paris several times with her parents. She could read in four languages and she does read extensively, books and periodicals for which she subscribes. For Mountolive, she is at the beginning "a beautiful enigma" with a temperament "which had been denied its true unfolding, had fallen back with good grace among compromises." (Durrell, *op. cit.*: 407) Indeed, Leila seems the victim of the narrow and conservative convictions of her times. For the rich Egyptians of the period, Europe was only a shopping centre, and a young girl was not expected to study there, but to stay in Egypt and get married. And Leila does what she is required to do. Her marriage is an arranged one, a union of fortunes, but her parents do choose for her the most able and the kindliest rich man they could find among their acquaintances. Thus, she gets confined to the Hosnani estate and accepts her life there, without even thinking whether

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she is happy or not, dedicating herself to her husband's affairs, like a loyal and obedient wife, and living her life for a while through Nessim, the son who is closer to her and who is sent to study abroad.

Mountolive appears in Leila's life when she is quite bored with it, a boredom that is sensed by her old and sick husband who advises her to take the young man for a lover, but not to fall in love with him.

Leila's relationship to Mountolive unfolds on two levels, one physical, the other mental, intellectual, emotional. When he has to leave, she is aware that this will be a problem more for him than for her because he is hers anyway. Indeed, the physical relationship lasts for a short period of time, but this is apparently an advantage for Leila because she does not get to become an unwanted lover whose beauty starts fading. Instead, she becomes "his only mentor and confidant, his only source of encouragement." (*ibidem*: 430) Mountolive learns to write well in English and French to meet her demands in this respect, he learns to appreciate painting and music in order to inform her on exhibitions and shows to which she sends him, he even writes to her about his love life and she gives advice and consoles him.

However, this strategy backfires. When they meet again in person, after many years, he is shocked to see that the woman he has idealized and preserved in his mind unchanged has actually aged. He simply cannot recognize his former beloved in the woman smelling like an old Arab lady, unable to formulate one clear sentence, ugly and old and showing it. She looks to him like a "cartoon creature" (*ibidem*: 620), like an animal dressed up as a human, grotesque, fat, with the skin of an elephant. To this is added the fact that now she is the mother of Nessim the conspirator, a confirmed traitor, caught plotting against the British. And she is not gracious at all when she begs Mountolive to protect her son. She whimpers and whines and almost gets to kiss his feet, which angers and horrifies the diplomat, who runs away. But the change in his way of seeing his former lover brings about a change in his way of seeing Egypt. "In a sense, she had *been* Egypt, his own private Egypt of the mind; and now this old image had been husked, stripped bare." (*ibidem*: 623)

Freed from Leila, Mountolive marries Liza Pursewarden and will leave this Egypt that he no longer loves, while his former lover will die of heartsickness. Before dying, she confesses however to Balthazar that it was this love that she sensed he started feeling for somebody else and not the loss of her beauty that actually made her afraid of meeting him after his return to Egypt.

The city of Alexandria is the main character of the novel, and the only real part of a work that is otherwise declared to be entirely imaginary. The note to the first volume of the *Quartet* reads: "The characters in this story, the first of a group, are all inventions together with the personality of the narrator, and bear no resemblance to living persons. Only the city is real." (Durrell, *op. cit.*: 14)

Hence, we discover Alxandria ever since the first page of the novel, from the memories of the narrator that has left it, has "escaped" to an island to "heal himself". It is "the city which used us as its flora – precipitated in us conflicts which were hers and which we mistook for our own: beloved Alexandria!" (*ibidem*: 17) And, then, a little later,

> In a flash my mind's eye shows me a thousand dust-tormented streets. Flies and beggars own it today – and those who enjoy an intermediate existence between either.

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> Five races, five languages, a dozen creeds: five fleets turning their greasy reflections behind the harbour bar. But there are more than five sexes and only demotic Greek seems to distinguish among them. The sexual provender which lies to hand is staggering in its variety and profusion. You would never mistake it for a happy place. The symbolic lovers of the free Hellenic world are replaced here by something different, something subtly androgynous, inverted upon itself. The Orient cannot rejoice in the sweet anarchy of the body – for it has outstripped the body. I remember Nessim once saying – I think he was quoting – that Alexandria was the great winepress of love; those who emerged from it were the sick men, the solitaries, the prophets – I mean all who have been deeply wounded in their sex. (*ibidem*: 17-18)

This first initial portrait of Alexandria contains the key to the narrator's perception of the city. It is a city with a life of its own, whose inhabitants do not enjoy any freedom but become mere manifestations of the place, which lends them its own conflicts. It is a city of dust, flies, beggars and similar beings, but a cosmopolitan city, inhabited by five races, in which five languages are spoken and many more faiths have found followers. The key concept that dominates Alexandria becomes apparent only towards the end of the passage and that is love. Or better said sex. Sex is dominant in the city, it is bought and sold freely, it is not only the prerogative of prostitutes, children or adults, but of every person that lives here. That is why Darley sees it as "a city of incest" (*ibidem*: 82) or an "impossible city of love and obscenity" (*ibidem*: 338). People get involved in physical relationships with an easiness and naturalness that is a little shocking for the Western reader. But they see it as something normal.

The idea that Alexandria influences its inhabitants' life in a decisive manner and even determines it to a certain extent will appear several times throughout the novel. Thus, the city is presented as a creature with "a will too powerful and too deliberate to be human" (*ibidem*: 22), choosing certain people as its exemplars and then throwing down about them its gravitational field. Darley considers that "We are the children of our landscape; it dictates behaviour and even thought in the measure to which we are responsive to it." (*ibidem*: 39-40), while Justine claims: "We are not strong or evil enough to exercise choice. All this is part of an experiment arranged by something else, the city perhaps, or another part of ourselves." (*ibidem*: 28)

Justine is actually the character that is most influenced by Alexandria and, like Justine, the city is compared to several creatures. Thus, it is like an old tortoise, an old reptile basking in the light of the lake, a curse, a princess and a whore.

The similarity between the city and the woman can also be seen in the fact that in order to start a new life Darley has to free himself from both. At the beginning of the novel, Darley is on an island, away from Alexandria, meditating on the events that happened there. At the end of the novel, after having visited Alexandria, he is again away from it, on the same island, but this time no longer fascinated with the city or with Justine. Thus, he can truly leave and start a new life with Clea, presumably in France.

Alexandria is seen in all seasons, all hours, all kinds of weather, in peace and war, in periods of calm but also during various manifestations like the carnival or certain processions. It has a real dimension, given by Lake Mareotis, the port, the desert, but it is also a world of fantasy. Like a historical founder, Darley rebuilds it from memory and imagination and realizes that if he wants to get freed of it he must visit it one last time. "I must return to it once more in order to be able to leave it forever, to shed it." (Durrell, *op. cit.*: 659)

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Like a human being, Alexandria has positive and negative traits. Egypt's capital in summer, Alexandria seems like Europe, being cosmopolitan and Occidental:

> Alexandria was still Europe – the capital of Asiatic Europe, if such a thing could exist. It could never be like Cairo where his whole life had an Egyptian cast, where he [Mountolive – our note] spoke ample Arabic; here French, Italian and Greek dominated the scene. The ambience, the social manner, everything was different, was cast in a European mould where somehow the camels and palm-trees and cloaked natives existed only as a brilliantly coloured frieze, a backcloth to a life divided in its origins. (*ibidem*: 509)

But it also has an ugly side, obvious for instance in the following passage, which combines visual images with auditory and olfactory ones.

> Streets that run back from the docks with their tattered rotten supercargo of houses, breathing into each other's mouths, keeling over. Shuttered balconies swarming with rats, and old women whose hair is full of the blood of ticks. Peeling walls leaning drunckenly to east and west of their true centre of gravity. The black ribbon of flies attaching itself to the lips and eyes of the children – the moist beads of summer flies everywhere; the very weight of their bodies snapping off ancient flypapers hanging in the violet doors of booths and cafes. The smell of the sweat-lathered Berberinis, like that of some decomposing stair-carpet. And then the street noises: shriek and clang of the water-bearing Saidi, dashing his metal cups together as an advertisement, the unheeded shrieks which pierce the hubbub from time to time, as of some small delicately-organized animal being disemboweled. (*ibidem* : 26)

The war does not change Alexandria much. It is now full of soldiers, trucks, ambulances and barriers, the harbour, which is actually the target of the enemy and the war scene, is full of warships and wrecks, the sounds that can be heard, like sirens or the stamping of iron-shod boots, are also those associated with war. The brothels are flourishing and the city has a carnivalesque air. People are inclined towards satisfying their physical needs even more than before. But apart from that, and the fact that some characters die tragically, life goes on undisturbed.

As we can see, the novel displays a variety of human feminine figures. They belong to different nationalities, embody different types, have various destinies, and play a decisive part in the life of the male characters, whether Darley or Mountolive, shaping their personalities in various degrees. The city, on the other hand, is more than the setting where the action of the novel takes place, being also like a living being that shapes personalities and influences lives.

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