



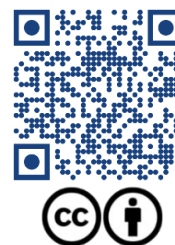
The Woman Upstairs: A Struggle for Recognition and A Longing for Invisibility

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Abstract— Claire Messud's novel *The Woman Upstairs* (2013) presents a distinct perspective on the post-9/11 era, focusing on the hidden social anxieties and strategic silences of Americans. While not explicitly political in a conventional sense, the novel is deeply imbued with the ethics and social tensions of the time. Through the narrative of Nora Eldridge, a teacher and artist the novel captures the era's socio-political upheaval through allusions to the terror attacks and the resulting policies of otherizing. Nora's inner self-doubt mirrors the collective anxiety of a nation that lost its sense of invulnerability. It highlights a paradoxical shift where victims and oppressors, observers and the observed, constantly swap roles, mirroring a climate characterized by fragile trust. This raises uncomfortable questions about whether we can recognize the humanity of our worst enemy and meet our obligations to those who attack us. This paper argues that the novel acts as a unique, intimate archive of the post-9/11 America, portraying a furious American identity that brings to light a core ethical responsibility.



Keywords— Claire Messud, Post-9/11 America, Responsibility, *The Woman Upstairs*

Claire Messud's novel *The Woman Upstairs* published in 2013 represents the aftermath of terror attacks in a significantly different manner than other post 9/11 novels. It unravels realities of social insecurities through the silence that some Americans have strategically adopted. The narrative spans half a decade from 2004 to 2008. Though it does not explicitly deal with politics, the social and political upheavals of the times find reference in Messud's allusion to the 9/11 attacks and the American otherizing policy. The self doubt of the protagonist reflects the self doubt of a nation which had considered itself invulnerable. Messud's references to the 9/11 attacks, politics and ethics make her novel socio-politically imbued, though she doesn't confirm explicitly its political nature. *The Woman Upstairs* makes a portrayal of the lack of trust among Americans, and the fear of the other after the 9/11 attacks.

The novel opens quite meaningfully with an expression of anger. The first line "How angry am I? You don't want to know. Nobody wants to know about *that*" (3)

which sets the tone of the novel is attributed to the protagonist of the novel, Nora Marie Eldridge. Victoria Brownworth reviews Messud's novel with reference to Nora. The novel, she says "takes the heart of a woman whose heart has been long-dormant, opens it up, layer by layer, and by novel's end, sets that heart on fire. Messud takes us on that journey via art and politics...". Annasue McCleave Wilson in the PW talks with Claire Messud, "An Unseemly Emotion: PW Talks with Claire Messud" inquires about the guiding force behind the creation of a character like Nora filled with all rage. In reply Messud answers how as a reader, she has always felt exhilarated reading the rants of angry narrators, from her first encounter with Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* in her senior year of high school. "There's a literary lineage down from characters in Dostoevsky through those of Beckett and Camus to Philip Roth or Thomas Bernhard-magnificent, unseemly narrators or protagonists. But they're all men." And Messud felt it was time to fill the gap, to write in the voice of a rage-filled woman.

Nora is the “woman upstairs,” who, as the author will later note is disconnected from the others, she would never be the first to be addressed. She is not quite pretty or smart or funny or sexy enough to be memorable. And yet she is pretty, smart, and funny and sexy. Just not enough. In her words:

[Women like us are] always upstairs. We’re not the madwomen in the attic. ... 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. ... Not a soul registers that we are furious. We’re completely invisible.(6)

Nora, although is invisible as the “woman upstairs,” she is self-contained. The ‘goodness’ in her is satirically explained in her words “When you’re the Woman Upstairs you don’t make a mess and you don’t make mistakes.” (279) She laments, “nobody thinks of you first. Nobody calls you before anyone else, or sends you the first postcard. Once your mother dies, nobody loves you best of all”. (256) Nora’s mother, Bella Eldridge, who had encouraged her to cultivate a yearning for independence and individual identity had been her only true love. She had, however, suffered a slow and terrible death. To Nora, hiding her true feelings had never seemed worthwhile. She had realized that as the ‘woman upstairs’ her life could never be acknowledged as authentic. It was rather unreal, an illusion, a maze of distorted mirror images and hallways with multiple entries and exits, like the Fun House that she used to visit as a child during summers. Nora observes, “Life itself is the Fun House, all you want is that door marked EXIT, the escape to a place where Real Life will be; and you can never find it.”(5)

Nora would fall in love with an Italian artist, and her life as the woman upstairs would alter drastically. Away from her husband, Skandar, a Lebanese who was now in Harvard on a fellowship, Sirena Shahid had come from Paris to live in Cambridge, Massachusetts for a year. Skandar who was a history scholar and working on the ethics of history had, as a child, been witness to Beirut bombings and genocide. Sirena meets Nora through her son, Reza, who was a student in Nora’s class in Appleton school. Reza undergoes an ugly experience when some boys in the school attack him in the playground with cruel comments about terrorism. They remark that “the playground was for Americans.” (30) There Nora comes to his rescue and takes him to hospital. This violent incident with Reza because he was not an American, breaks the myth of America as a safe place, the ‘melting pot’ of all races.

Nora longs to have all three of the Shahids. To Nora the Shahids are her “Black Monk” (126). The “Black Monk” is a reference to Anton Chekhov’s story about a ghostly figure who assures an insecure scholar of his worth and brilliance, but that turns out to be a figment of the scholar’s own imagination. Nora confesses, “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 and the great seductive promise that I *wasn’t nothing*, that I could... leave a trace upon the world”. (281) The three Shahids motivate her to explore her inner self. They encourage Nora to rediscover her frustrated desires.

Despite the social and cultural differences Nora’s loneliness draws her towards Sirena, and she enters into a bond with her. During the interactions it is discovered that Nora, a teacher is also an artist. Sirena wishes Nora to share a studio space that she has taken in Somerville. Nora, however, uses the second bedroom in her apartment as a studio. As an artist she works on miniatures. Her miniatures are complex dioramas modelled on the lives of female writers and artists. She had just completed Emily Dickinson and was working on Virginia Woolf when she met Sirena. Her immediate interest was also in the artist Alice Neel. Sirena’s new installation to debut in Paris next June is titled “Wonderland” and incorporates Alice’s adventures with the viewers’ engagement in the work. Sirena in her Wonderland was mixing together Lewis Carroll and 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”.(152) She has mixed the antique Eastern mysticism with a different kind of modern Western wonder, that was “Alice in Wonderland’s: a place where reason- and the ground- didn’t remain stable, where the imagination confused good and evil, friend and foe.”(156) For Sirena it was about trying to see things as they are:

about believing that such a thing as clarity was possible; and the other was about relativism, about seeing things from different perspectives, and also about being seen, and about how being seen differently also changes you. Both possibilities were amazing and frightening at the same time; but only one of them, she said, could lead to wisdom.(156)

Sirena and Nora share an unusual bond. Both seem to complement each other. In Sirena, Nora sees her alternative self, all that she is not, but everything that she has always

wanted. Nora had always hoped for a family and children. She had also always wished to foster the artist in her, a passion that intimately bound them. For Sirena, art was not a mere pastime, a mere amusement but was a way of life. She believes that as an artist Nora must give expression to her passion. Sirena's approval and validation of her talent encourage Nora to live in a life for which she had earlier never had the courage.

Skandar similarly instigates Nora's confidence, her passions. She is charmed not only by his physical appearance but also by his intellect. Their discussions, when Skandar walks to her place after dinner, often verge on the intellectual rather than on the personal. He talks to her about Beirut, about growing up in Paris instead of Lebanon or the U.S., like many of his compatriots. They talk about history and politics, "[Skandar] talked about their time in America, and global politics and Paris, a bit; but often about Lebanon, its history—bits of history over centuries, millennia, Phoenician history, Roman history, Ottoman history". (186) The range of intellectual discussions stimulated Nora's imagination. Although Skandar's primary concern is with Lebanon, his distress at Rafiq Hariri's assassination makes him deliberate upon the politicization of history and the psychological impact of violence and war upon citizens anywhere in the world:

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. (179)

To know better, Nora searches the internet for "Lebanon war." She is shocked at how little she knows about the third world countries. Even the teacher of students from different parts of the world such as Liberia, Oman Haiti and other parts, she barely knows anything about the history or culture of these people. Her ignorance as a citizen of the First World is proof of the marginalized reality of other races in America. She realizes the truth of Sirena's opinion, about the reality of the American's protected and secure life that is dependent upon the economic exploitation of other nations: "the cotton wool of her [Nora's] American life" that has "protected [her] from the world".(180) She now views 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". (180)

Messud aptly portrays 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 to know was something else, "how would it change things if nobody were allowed to know anything about Hitler, about the war rather first learn about Brahms, Beethoven and Bach, about Hegel and Lessing and Fichte, one of those things to know and appreciate before learning about the Nazis." (185) To Nora's question of Skandar's feelings about his research at Harvard, he responds satirically, "there's a way of being in exile, for the educated of any non-European country, that can be very comfortable in its worldliness." (136) Skandar narrates a parable about a non-existent panther and a sheep to illustrate the relations between Americans and outsiders in the US. The panther in the story exists only to rationalize the sheep's death:

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 other. ... I'll ask the questions about what is ethical, about who decides what is ethical, I'll ask whether it is possible, really, to have an ethics in the matter of history. (184-5)

This process of othering becomes more prominent after the 9/11 attack. Every immigrant is seen as a potential threat to the existence of America and Americans. The continued violence is shown when Reza is assaulted once again "more surreptitiously, more brutally" in school. This neo-colonial marginalization of the diaspora is summed up by Sirena's monologue as she is 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... I was anxious about America.... I wanted for Reza to have a

childhood ... No rage, no hatred, no cry for vengeance.... There's time enough for all that." (105)

For Skandar the history of Europe, in comparison to America is always in the present context. We come to know a lot about Skandar from his own words, "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 Ecole Normale." (137) He is aware of the reality of how his identity will be 'fixed' in several parts of America, like that in Harvard. More than social origins, his philosophical ideas, his academic affiliations are considered in places like that. He is known in a certain way. Although he might be accepted as a scholar or an intellectual, he realizes that as a neocolonial other, he must be viewed differently. If a person on the street is said all the same about Skandar, he might wonder, "How is this possible?" (138) And yet, it is true of American history that the process of Americanization involves ethnic participation. Even if it is a Lebanese student who is here in the university for a degree, s/he is accepted, but is "given an entirely new suit of clothes, a new outline, that has no context, and you must grow to fit it ... You come with no baggage." (138)

Tracie Padal in her book discussion guide for *The Woman Upstairs* reflects upon Nora and Sirena as artists. Their cultures, and therefore, their perspectives are different. Nora's art, which is based on real female artists who have suffered psychological alienation, serves as an outlet for her own frustrations of a lonely life, "the woman artist so fundamentally isolated".(174) Her painting "A Room of One's Own?" shows her regard for such canonical figures as Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Alice Neel and Edie Sedgwick. The series of her dioramas are concerned with "what actually was or had been". (152) Sirena's art, on the other hand evokes rich imagination. She is unafraid to give public expression to private moments and personal relationships. As she gets more acquainted with Sirena, Nora becomes aware that loneliness is a matter of one's feeling, to be surrounded by people is no proof of companionship. Just like one's soul, and innermost desires, sense of loss would not be visible even in the midst of society. It is only art perhaps which is the source of redemption for the woman. Her fourth work on Edie Sedgwick, is the answer to Nora's newfound knowledge: "When as a woman, you make yourself the work of art, and when you are then what everyone looks at, then whatever else, you aren't alone. Edie was never, on the outside, alone... Never invisible. Arguably, also, never seen; and in that sense, more than alone: annihilated". (174)

Sirena, in contrast to Nora, is a "Purveyor of Dreams" (153). Although Sirena is a successful artist her success comes at a heavy price. Nora perceives "the desire to be that, to do that, to be the fittest at artistic survival requires ruthlessness. Maybe that, really is as good a definition as any of an artist in the world: a ruthless person." (153) Sirena films Nora's masturbatory experience in wonderland and displays it at the exhibition without her permission. Nora reflects, "I had been filmed in that most private moment. Somehow, I had been seen and could then be displayed, an object, like one of the artists in my own dioramas. I could be sacrificed".(297) Nora feels betrayed. Her experience with the Shahids, she had believed would have helped her escape the Fun House of her childhood. She had hoped that she would find the way to salvation. Now, the dreams that the Shahids had pictured for her become mere illusions. She now feels the experience of the victim, as someone who as the 'other' must suffer the gaze of the privileged other. The problem was: "How do I survive other people making art out of me?" and reflects:

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. (4)

Nora feels that she has been abused, her emotions betrayed. Her narrative of the social and political reality of America post-9/11 becomes a paradoxical illustration of role reversals between the observer and the observed, of victim and victimizer, the politics of trust and betrayal. Her personal experience with the supposed intruders who secretly invade into her private space symbolically demonstrate international political scenario of cross-national friendships, where all trust is superficial.

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".(38) Nora expresses the exclusion policy toward others as she devalues foreignness as she describes her family memories and root:

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. (38)

Nora's entire life is consumed primarily by her responsibilities as a teacher and daughter. She teaches and when she is not teaching, she is visiting and taking care of her elderly father, who lives nearby. Though she has left art as a career path she makes art when has time. Similarly, she comes up with her ethical responsibility in the approach of Reza and the two Shahids. Messud draws a picture of a multiracial community in America, as a miniature replica of the globe, in his American wonderland. Ironically, it is seen towards the end of the novel that Nora feels betrayed, all love lost, friendship smothered, and a festering anger within her that would edge on vengeance and enmity. Relationships are no more real but illusory, with little possibility of bridging the cultural distance between the East and the West. Nora believed that she dwelled in a wonderland that can not be interrupted. But the bubble burst as two planes dived into the WTC.

Still Nora is not setting the world on fire rather shows Emmanuel Levinas's concept of subjectivity and responsibility. From Levinas's perspective humanity is tested in the worst situations of a person. Judith Butler also, similarly argues a peaceful community devoid of violence. She believes that certain feelings can be directed towards stimulating ethical responses of collective responsibility. Compassion and responsibility should form the basis of every decision-making process. Violence only intervenes in an individual's choice of what s/he otherwise would never have made. Levinas says:

In the trauma of persecution it is to pass from the outrage undergone to the

responsibility for the persecutor, and, in this sense from suffering to expiation for the other. Persecution is not something added to the subjectivity of the subject and his vulnerability; it is the very movement of recurrence. ... the subjectivity of a subject is responsibility of being-in-question in the form of the total exposure to offence in the cheek offered to the smiter. This responsibility is prior to dialogue, to the exchange of questions and answers, to the thematization of the said, which is superposed on my being put into question by the other in proximity, and in the saying proper to responsibility is produced as a digression. (111)

Ethical responsibility is not easy. It does not assure favourable consequences. Levinas answers to questions like whether the violence experienced by a victim can justify the lack of, or refusal of responsibility. In the face of violence, pain, deprivation, terror and fear for one's life, it is challenging to hold onto moral principles and remain responsible. But, difficult though this path is, it can help us reformulate a world that is free from violence.

Ethics means responding to and taking care of that Other who seems the most strange, threatening, incomprehensible, illogical and absolutely different to me, never to be understood or accepted. This horrible alien, from whom I want to distance myself, in whose place I can never imagine myself, whose perspective I can not share and whose motives I cannot understand, is the Other who makes one responsible, demanding help, asking for maternal care. It does not imply that Nora is a model of Levinas's radical giving. Rather Nora's encounter with the Other points toward the basic ethical duty. Fatemeh Bornaki and Ali Salami in their article, "Neocolonial Agonistic Feminine Identity in Claire Messud's *The Woman Upstairs*" highlights the "socio-political ruptures between Americans and 'others' who are considered as the source of threat to one's security".(2) And it raises questions like, Are we able to listen to our worst enemy and hear his claim of life, and Can we comply with our ethical obligation towards our defiant aggressor. These questions are meant to leave us feeling weak, ignorant, angry and responsible after all. By calling for corporeal obligation, Levinas means that it is integral to humanity and that therefore comes without being offered as a choice. The corporal obligation is characterized by an impossibility of cancelling responsibility for the other, "an impossibility more impossible than jumping out of one's skin".(Levinas, *OB*)

Terrible inhuman situations and sufferings do not suspend responsibility but reveal its difficulty. I am still responsible even if I am the one experiencing violence. Messud's post-9/11 narrative represents 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. The resonations of 9/11 terror and trauma are felt in Nora's disgust of others who have disturbed her privacy and success. Instead of surrendering to emotional states of insecurity and vulnerability, and reacting against it with violence, Nora accepts reality with an open mind. Nora acknowledging her ethical responsibility avoids revenge and "tolerates 'others' who are stigmatized in the post 9/11 American stage".(2) The ethical obligation is something that comes "before culture" as a "contact anterior to knowledge". It is something which we can not reject if we are to remain human.

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