

Discursive Construction of Female Victimhood in Conflict Narratives: A Feminist Narratology approach in Anthony Doerr’s Novel All the Light We Cannot See

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Abstract

Language is not only a crucial tool for constructing social and cultural narratives, but it also defines women’s roles. A complicated and multidimensional concept of victimhood arises at the intersection of language, culture, and power, profoundly and permanently influencing the identities and lives of people, especially women. This research aims to investigate the linguistic and narrative construction of victimhood in conflicted contexts, by taking Anthony Doerr’s novel All the Light We Cannot See into consideration. By adopting a qualitative and interpretive paradigm, this study employs textual and narrative analysis methodology. Drawing upon Female Narratology theory, proposed by Susan S. Lanser, the research critically explores the rationale for reinforcing how language constructs and heightens gender inequalities, specifically disempowering women. The selected novel serves as a primary source for the data. The text is examined through close reading and thematic analysis and the data collected from the relevant bases is in the form of excerpts, dialogues, and linguistic patterns which reveal the adversity of women molded via language. Scholarly Literature is also referred to support the theoretical framework and contextual grounding of the research. The findings reveal that these women, perceived as frail and jeopardized, are shaped by conflicts, wars, and hostilities of any society. The critique reveals that while the text offers nuanced portrayals of resilience, it also reinscribes certain silences around female agency, as a result it invites interrogation of gendered politics in storytelling. Consequently, this research contributes to emerging feminist literary criticism, offers a deeper understanding of how language produces narratives that prioritize suffering over agency, and presents women as victims of the conflicted situations in literature.

1. Introduction

As a fundamental constituent of human lives, language serves a significant role in communication, social interaction, and conveying thoughts and emotions. Not only does language have a significant role to play in communication, but it is similarly essential in the construction of narratives as well as recounting of the experiences. It is primarily via language that individuals get to exchange their narratives with another. Van Dijk, in his research study, argued that narratives of the individuals that incorporated debates, arguments, and influences are ordinarily shaped by society and its language (2009). These arguments and debates are not confined to some particular society, instead they are relevant across both local and global boundaries. However, as much as language interplay is seen in influencing discourses within cultures, it also plays a requisite role in the region concerning gender discourses. A research study by Robin Lakoff proposed that in gender discussions, language highly frames the narratives of people (1975). Language is also carried out by narrative strategists in order to embed certain viewpoints. Taking into account the current considerations of the twentieth century men, it is evident that language is treated as a vital instrument in molding the figure of males as prevailing whereas that of females as subjugated bodies. It is essentially via language that certain narratives, implicating some genders as powerful while other as victims, takes its form.

Language, in addition to constructing discourses, plays a pivotal part in determining the role of genders with reference to their contextual circumstances. The nature of context significantly determines the nature of a constructed viewpoint. In sight of this particular research, the notion supremely emphasized is the work of language in forming the roles of females, regardless of their age dynamic, in conflicted circumstances. Experiences of women, specifically those who survived or witnessed conflicted circumstances such as wars, genocides, or hostilities, are primarily mounted by discourses that objectify them as victims. These adversarial environments seem to affect women tremendously no less than men. Considering the context of warfare circumstances, as said by Cockburn, they frame women as victims in terms of physical damage, mental instability, and financial disruption (2004). This victimization of females using warfare contexts is often framed via language. It vocalizes women victimhood by building discourses on subjugated women's behalf (Ní Aoláin, 2000).

The construction of narratives with the help of language is frequently achieved through literature. As suggested in the book, *Living to Tell About It* by Phelan, literature acts as a bridge to connect narratives with the real world (2009). With the operation of multifaceted diction and exclusive narrative practices, literature underpins the communication of voicing the victims to the world. Within the scope of this research, the primary emphasis is on the literature as the mechanism of language for exhibiting the victimization of females in conflicted circumstances such as warfare. Discourses maintained in literature represent the vulnerable positionality of women, underlining their roles as primary victims of warfare.

A work of literature that builds upon this manufacture of female victimization via language in warfare circumstances is Anthony Doerr's novel *All the Light We Cannot See*. Doerr is an American author who wrote this historical fiction inspired by the then ongoing World War II and its aftermath. The novel is set in France as well as in Germany during the times of Second World War. It explores mental, emotional, and physical turmoil people, particularly women, went through in destructive war context. The novel reveals the story of a young French blind girl, Marie-Laure and a young German enthusiastic boy Werner

Pfennig. Marie-Laure lives with her father, while Werner with his sister Jutta Pfennig. Mozaffor Hossain, in his research article writes that Marie-Laure's father, Monsieur LeBlanc, was enormously determined to assist his daughter be self-reliant, and he understood what he must do for that purpose, that is why he did everything possible to put Marie-Laure's day-to-day life at ease (93). LeBlanc was a locksmith as well as keeper of the keys at a French Museum. The German attacks on France that initiated the WWII had worsening impacts on the lives of Marie-Laure and her father. Daniel had to leave his daughter for duty purposes not knowing he would never see her again, a daughter who never spent a single day without her father not around. Eventually, after the WWII ended in the novel, Marie-Laure continued with her life without a father. On the other hand, the orphaned boy Werner was living a life in Germany with his younger sister Jutta. Werner was an inquisitive boy with curiosity for the world of physics particularly. Later in the novel, he was made to go to the military German force. His journey as a soldier then started where he struggled immensely as a young military. He, in later part of the novel, got himself killed and left his sister Jutta alone to grief. Jutta suffered tremendously as her only family left was dead because of the warfare. This delineates the basic story framework of the novel which explicitly presented females as victims of the war conflicts in various ways.

The exclusivity of the objective of this research makes it extremely significant in academia. So far, the existing body of literature related to women's victimization is mostly focused on the psycholinguistic aspect of these accounts and critically analyzes the impact of warfare contexts on the psychological health of individuals. In other words, no such research is made visible to highlight the sociolinguistic aspect of the entire discourse. This research builds upon the sociolinguistic aspect i.e. how language is shaping narratives in light of their contexts which interconnect the language hegemony in constructing narratives in warfare circumstances. It contributes to the literary as well as gender studies by foregrounding intersection of language and female victimization.

1.1 Aim of the Study

The objective behind this research is to examine how language constructs females as victims of the intense and destructive warfare setting as portrayed through literature taking Doerr's novel *All the Light We Cannot See* as primary text. The narrative technique which Doerr used in this novel is directly implying the character of female bodies as victims of their surroundings. Taking this piece of literature as the primary source, this research examines how its language used to represent emotional burden of females, their physical delicacy, and dependence of on other individuals, ultimately constructs them as victims of their surrounding circumstances, in this particular study, the World War II. With critical enquiry of the stances from the novel, this research aims to emphasize the role of language in shaping narratives. The theoretical framework this research is grounded on, is the theory of female narratology proposed by Susan S. Lanser, (1992), this research aims to rationalize how language frames role of females as victims with the help of this theoretical evidence.

1.2. Research Questions

This research is guided by two central questions:

- i. In what ways language, as a fundamental medium of communication, constructs the roles of females as victim of their conflicted warfare contexts, in literature?
- ii. How these female victimhood portrayals are reinforced through narrative strategies, through the lens of female narratology theory?

2. Literature Review

Over the years, Language has been considered not just as a means of communication but also as a tool for communication but also constructing identities. Within this shift in discursive construction of identities, the role of language in gendered communication has emerged as a field of research as gender has been a significant variable (Anjum et al., 2018). Numerous scholarly works have examined the novel *All the light we cannot see* from different perspectives. Novel's thematic construction has been examined by Evelyn Beck and Judy Murray. They provide valuable insights to novels' themes and intersection with gender, violence and victimhood. Their research aids this study in understanding female victimization. Building on Egie Danarko's study of gendered narratives, this study further examines the ways in which narrative discourse contribute to the construction of female victimhood. The portrayal of the protagonist explored by William T. Vollman (2014) supports this study's argument and explores how linguistic frameworks structure identities and contribute to the construction of victimhood. This novel has been examined from the lens of postmodern aesthetic by Dave eagle (2014). He studied the fragmented narrative structure and storytelling technique. His study helps to understand how victimization dynamics are established through such aesthetics. Pandit (2019) employed psychoanalytical lens on the novel. This work not only provides the psychoanalytic inquiry on female characters but also highlight the notions of emotional dependencies and vulnerabilities. Judith Butler theory of performativity argues that repetition of linguistic acts plays a crucial role in creating and reinforcing gendered hierarchies. This theoretical perspective helps us analyze hoe language is reinforcing the traditional representation of female victimhood. Mills (2002), also highlights the crucial role of language in constructing gender roles and gendered narratives. His theory aids in understanding language a s a powerful tool. Another work on gender discourses by Sunderland (2004) investigates the gendered ideologies embedded in cultural discourses. Her findings support the notion that narratives can construct women as victims. In parallel to this study, another work by Litoseseli (2004) foregrounds this ideological purpose of discourses and implies that such notion not only reflects the hierarchical structures but also reinforces gender power plays. The contribution of language in reflecting patriarchal norms and societal patterns was studied by Esteal et al (2012) who posits that linguistic frameworks can reflect the patriarchal norms and also hints at the broader culturally embodied ideological patterns. Litosseliti (2014) provides a broader perspective on the interrelation of language and gender, illustrating the linguistic discourses actively take part in shaping narratives. Similarly, Hussain's research examines the intersection of blindness and language used through the character of Marie Laure. The study reveals how her physical condition influences her linguistic expression, ultimately portraying women as victims. Existing

researches focus on thematic analysis or psychoanalytical concerns. of the novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, but a little attention has been paid to framing the role of women as victims, and sociolinguistics perspective This study attempts to bridge this gap by adopting Susan S. Lanser's (1992) feminist narratology theory as an analytical lens to foreground the role of language in portraying women as victims through discursive construction female victimization.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research method by employing textual and narrative analysis as its primary methodological approaches. Textual analysis is best defined by Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009, 2010), as an analysis, identifying signs and critically analyzing them. On the other hand, Narrative analysis gives space for subjective yet systematic exploration of text's structure, and its connection with language and meanings. The primary data source for the study is the novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, from which different passages have been selected for close reading and analysis with a focus on framing of women as victims. Secondary sources for the study include different scholarly articles, journal papers, thesis that engage with relevant framework and aims. This novel suits best the respective argument since its story revolves around a female protagonist who is directly exposed to war conflicts, where the language is directly portraying her as a victim. There are numerous instances in the novel that could be used to explore the research objectives. This study creates categories of instances or excerpts from the novel for thematic analysis. The events and excerpts our study incorporated in the research were categorized on the basis of content relevancy, and similar implications, where the victimization of females in the war conflict is explicitly unveiled. First among them is the treatment of a female by the society. The next category is familial relationships, the way the protagonist is emotionally dependent on her father, and how the relationships are built to construct her as a victim. Third is the personal account of a female that implies her role as a victim. These three categories were selected on the basis of their different yet interconnected aspects of victimization.

In this study, the data taken from the novel; *All the Light We Cannot See* is analyzed at different linguistic levels. The words, phrases, clauses, sentences and passages are used to deconstruct the role of language in framing women as victims. The primary focus is examination is linguistic structures that construct the identities of victims. As a result, language appears as a powerful tool that reflects and constructs the reality and identities. To support the aim of this study, Susan Lanser's (1992) feminist narratology theory is being used. Lanser's work reimagines the narrative theory by incorporating feministic notions. It is actually an interdisciplinary methodology which blends the descriptive methods with the narratology domain and exposes gendered dimensions of narratives. As Singh (2019) studies the subject and offer similar view points, he mentions that feminist narratology enables us to view the standpoints if women as victims within texts. Thus, by incorporating this theoretical framework, this study tries to examine doers' use of linguistics patterns that support female victimization.

To systematically extract, organize and analyze the data, the research design is structured around four step qualitative approach, to critically examine the discursive victimization of women in literature. First, a close, comprehensive and critical reading of the primary text is

done for its deep analysis. Second, the most relevant and specific instances from the text were selected, where language reflects or constructs the female identity as subjugated or victimized. Third, the selected data is categorized based on its relevance to research objectives. Finally, for the nuanced interpretation of data, the analysis is situated within the theoretical framework of female narratology. Through these above mentioned steps, this study ensures both textual specificity and theoretically grounded methodology that aids in critical examination of victimization of women through discourse narrative.

4. Data Analysis

This study set out to explore the ways in which the female characters are represented and subjugated under the influence of World War II, hence portraying them as victims specifically through the lens of female narratology by Lanser. For instance, the female protagonist Marie-Laure, in the early years of her life, was intensely attached to her father. She depended on him as any other kid depends on their parents. This connection is reflected in the novel's lines when Daniel says to his daughter "i will never leave you, not in a million years" (Doerr, 2014; 31), which underscore the relation of Marie-Laure and her father. Marie-Laure, out of her unwavering incorruptibility, took these words as literally. Marie-Laure and her father were never subjected to leave each other's side before the conflicted war circumstances of WWII. A dialogue in the novel implying their strong relation says, "have we ever spent a night apart? "No" (Doerr, 2014; 190). These conversations between Marie-Laure and her father underscore their strengthened bond. However, the initiation of World War II in the novel caused chaos for all individuals including Marie-Laure and her father. That was the period when their relationship started to go in a downward spiral where the father had no choice but to leave his daughter due to increasing threats around. Marie-Laure, forever yearning for her father, was left alone to live the rest of her life without the person who was her everything. This was the point when the diction of this novel molded the role of Marie-Laure being as a female, victimized due to the war horrors.

Focusing on the first research question regarding the ways in which language constructs the role of women as victims. By employing the close reading method, in the light of Lanser's Female narratology theory, this study demonstrates that the linguistics device used in the novel are not just narratives, but a reflecting of culturally embedded ideologies which ultimately frames women as victims. This is evident in the character of Marie-Laure. She is portrayed as a victim of war as well as the societal and cultural structures which construct her identity. Her physical disability, emotional dependence on her father, and her emotional turmoil on her separation from her father is narrated through linguistic device which convey a sense of hopelessness, darkness and consequently victimization. Her interactions with the society, and her inner voice exemplifies how she is subjected to victimization. For instances when narrator describes her situation as she has lost all her colors, on her father's disappearance, it is not just a linguistic element, but the actual reality of her life that foregrounds the emotional turmoil and situates her as a victim. Marie-Laure lost her only support of life, i.e. her father, because of war like situation. This narrative pattern perfectly aligns with the female narratology theory proposed by Lanser, which interrogate how language and narrative structures are inherently gendered. By examining the language and voices attributed to characters, and critically analyzing how the female experiences are framed within the story, female narratology theory provides a lens through which portrayal

of women victimization can be uncovered. Hence it reveals that through language and narratives, not only reflection of the cultural ideologies of victimhood is traced, but we also examine how discursive patterns reinforce or resist them.

Additionally, another instance is examined where female victimization in the novel takes place. Zhornokui puts it in his research that in order to seek protection and refugee from Nazis invasion in 1940, Marie-Laure and her father escaped towards coastal city of Saint-Malo, to Marie's grandfather's brother named Monsieur Etienne. After a short period of time, Marie was left alone with Monsieur, as her father got arrested by Germans and he disappeared forever (83). Marie-Laure, as innocent as she always was, kept looking for her father. The words, "I will never leave you, not in a million years" (Doerr, 2014; 31) were dancing in her mind. This anxious state of Marie-Laure depicted through the language of the novel implies how she is gradually subjected to victimhood under the war mayhem. At another instance in the novel, she recollects, "if only she had begged him to stay" (Doerr, 2014; 226) underlines how she yearned for her father to come back who left her because of the conflicted war situation they were facing. She was particularly affected severely because this was apparently the first time she had to live without her Papa, and that alone for this long. Another occurrence when language revealed Marie-Laure as a victim of her surroundings was when the novel says, "every second it feels as if her father slips farther away" (Doerr, 2014; 226). The absence of her father for this long implied for Marie-Laure that she was on her own, and that she had to live through these hard times all by herself. Thus, the female victimhood framed with the help of language in the warfare circumstances is depicted via the relationship of Marie-Laure and her father. Ultimately, Lanser's theory of female narratology is reflected through these instances where the perspective of Marie-Laure is given prime emphasis via novel's diction that how war situation is affecting her personal life.

Secondly, the portrayal of females as victims in the warfare circumstances with the use of language in the novel is represented through the encounter of Marie-Laure with a group of children. The encounter takes place in a street near the house of Marie-Laure. The lines are,

A group of children comes tramping through the leaves. A boy's voice says something; several other boys laugh. Marie-Laure lifts her fingers from her novel. The laughter spins, turns. The first voice is suddenly right beside her ear. "They're mad for blind girls, you know." His breath is quick. She extends her arm into the space beside her but contacts nothing. She cannot say how many others are with him. Three or four, perhaps. His is the voice of a twelve- or thirteen-year-old. She stands and hugs her huge book against her chest, and she can hear her cane roll along the edge of the bench and clatter to the ground. Someone else says, "They'll probably take the blind girls before they take the gimps." The first boy moans grotesquely. Marie-Laure raises her book as if to shield herself. The second boy says, "Make them do things." "Nasty things." An adult's voice in the distance to her left calls out, "Louis, Peter?" "Who are you?" hisses Marie-Laure. "Bye-bye, blind girl." Then: quiet. Marie-Laure listens to the trees rustle; her blood swarms. For a long and panicked minute, she crawls among the leaves at the foot of the bench until her fingers find her cane (Doerr, 2014; 69).

The narrations of this novel strips women from their individuality, identity and merely reduce them to the identities constructed by their disability or their imposed gendered role.

In the above stated instance taken from the novel, it is apparent that the character of Marie-Laure is subjected to victimhood by some bullies. The horrors of war are reinforced through the speech of the boy who was trying to scare Marie-Laure for being a 'blind girl.' The language used by the boy is offensive since it is objectifying the blindness of another child making it appear as if someone with abnormal trait is the target of Germans. In the lens of female narratology theory, androcentric narration is identifiable and Lanser highly critiques such notions where women subjectivity is displaced. Furthermore, the words like "They will probably take the blind girls before they take the gimps", exemplifies how the identity of protagonist Marie Lurie is reduced to just her physical disability. Her whole presence as an individual and a girl is nullified and she is confined to her identity given by her blindness. The possessive tone of the word "take" reduces her autonomy over her life and dehumanizes her to a subject of possession or utility. Such narration finds its parallel in wartime discourses where women are portrayed as voiceless and active and passive victims of conflicted situation. Similarly, in the selected passage there is another instance where the boys utter phrases like "make them do nasty things"(69). This kind of narration reinforces the idea of dehumanization of women, where female is victimized through make adolescent humor. The language of the selected novel reinforces the trends where female victimization is normalized and taken as mean of entertainment. It perfectly aligns with Lanser's assertion in her feminist narratology theory that language in itself is never neutral; it is gendered and politically charged. This theory dwells upon the idea of patriarchal storytelling where males' voices often dominate in different levels of narration. The suggestive language here positions female body as a site of violence, entertainment, spectacle, and ultimately leads to broader discourses if patriarchal notion of language. Furthermore, the phrases like "anything that can be used must be used, just like all of us" equal females with some material or object that should be "utilized". The boundary between human and object is collapsing her. It solidifies the notion of female victimization in warlike situations.

Lastly, the language used by Doerr in the novel to represent female characters as victims in the conflicts of warfare is the interaction of male protagonist Werner and a letter given to him by his younger sister Jutta. Since Werner was in the military and Jutta in Germany, she used to communicate with her brother via letters. In a letter she wrote to her brother, she mentioned,

Dear Werner, why don't you write? The foundries run day and night and the stacks never stop smoking and it's been cold here so everyone burns everything to stay warm. Sawdust, hard coal, soft coal, lime, garbage. War widows and every day there are more. I'm working at the laundry with the twins, Hannah and Susanne, and Claudia Förster, you remember her, and we're mending tunics and trousers mostly. I'm getting better with a needle so at least I'm not pricking myself all the time. Right now I just finished my homework. Do you have homework? There are fabric shortages and people bring in slipcovers, curtains, old coats. Anything that can be used they say must be used. Just like all of us here. Ha. I found this under your old cot. Seems like you could use it. Love, Jutta. (Doerr, 2014; 264).

Through this excerpt, it is evident how language is portraying Jutta, a female, as victim of the warfare surroundings. The selection of the words reflects women's subjugation due to the unjustifiable war crises. Jutta expressed her vulnerability to her brother telling the

mental exhaustion she suffered all due to extensive labour she was subjected to. Her letter implies that the only reason there was an increase in the labor even for young individuals was the ongoing war. Similarly, the phrases like "war widows and every day there are more" (Doerr, 2014; 264) appear to be sympathetic but in actually contributes to the idea that individual suffering is being equaled worth the numbered loss, and also presenting female as a subject of men's war loss. This instance exemplifies what Lanser (1992) calls as "suppression of female narrative agency" in her feminist narratology theory. Lanser puts emphasis on the suppression in the context that women are not granted the space to articulate their own traumas rather they are narrated through external focalization. The character of Jutta in the novel also exemplifies similar notions. Her letter to her brother further solidifies this paper's objectives. In her letter to Werner, she is not just focusing on her tensions, but also reassuring her brother, consoling him, and maintains the emotional stability in the situation of chaos. Jutta's role of caregiver/consoler, hints at gendered expectations inscribed by a patriarchal society. Collectively, these outcomes of horrific war situations that disrupted not only the individuals but also undermines societal structures. As a result women are awfully affected and portrayed as victims.

5. Conclusion

Hence, the findings illustrate that in the novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, Doerr uses highly gendered language which contributes to framing women as victims of society and conflicted situations, through emotional states and physical disability of the protagonist. By employing Lens of female narratology, the focus is grounded on language's role in framing of women as victim of conflicted situations. While the novel revolves around a female protagonist but her voice is silenced at many instances, or mediated through some external narrations. Her internal state of mind is often under looked, reducing her to a mere symbolic figure rather than one having certain autonomy. Moreover the narration as well as linguistic structures exemplifies the notions off female narratology theory that echoes the subjugation of women and their voices. These findings suggest that even in the present world, the contemporary literature that appears to be female centered and giving limelight to female characters, occlude the gendered voices and narrations, Lanser's theory enables a critical interrogation of the ways in which language and narratives contribute to the framing of women as victims of conflicted situations.

To conclude, it is evident that in literature, narratives are constructed via language that outline the victimization of females in war regions, as examined in the novel by Doerr. Through the diction used by Doerr, females in the novel are represented as oppressed, submissive, and bullied mainly because of one sole reason; the World War. This subjugation faced by females creates a grounding imagery that dictates them as victims of their surroundings. On the other hand, the use of gender binaries in the novel where males, who are frontiers of war are shown tough, and strong, capable of overpowering women whereas women objectified as vulnerable due the horrific consequences of war further solidify their role as victims. This research examined this victimization of females via two of the leading female figures in the novel, Marie-Laure and Jutta. The language of novel portrayed them as someone who lacked individuality and had personalities that foreshadowed their dependency on male characters who, in fact, ended up losing their lives to the war thus leaving their female dependents alone to deal with the consequences. This, as a result depicted them as victims of the conflicted situations. The linguistic items and

narration used in this novel hints at female subjugation. Literature is considered as a powerful tool which not only reflects the dominant ideologies but also creates and shift narratives. The narratives framing women as victims are also reflected and shaped by language and literature. The primary text of this study "All the Light We Cannot See" exemplifies this notion. Through different metaphors, symbols and narration, women are presented as victims of warlike situations and eventually it delves into the broader themes of women marginalization. While this study explores framing of women victimization through female narratology theory, the future researchers can expand on exploring other war narratives to interrogate whether similar structures persist. Similarly this study offers a strong foundation to future comparative studies on historic and contemporary literature providing insights to the evolving narrative dimensions when it comes to female victimization.

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