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REFRAMING PABLO PICASSO AND DORA MAAR IN GRACE NICHOLS'S "WEEPING WOMAN"

GRACE NICHOLS'IN "WEEPING WOMAN" ADLI ŞİİRİNDE PABLO PICASSO VE DORA MAAR İLIŞKİSİNE YENİDEN BAKIŞ"

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ABSTRACT

The Guyanese poet Grace Nichols's ekphrastic poem "Weeping Woman" in her *Picasso, I Want My Face Back* challenges Pablo Picasso's iconic status in twentieth-century art. Written in the form of a dramatic monologue, the poem gives voice to Picasso's model, muse and lover, Dora Maar, who was a Surrealist photographer before she had an affair with Picasso. Unlike traditional ekphrastic poems which involve the description of a fixed, silenced and gazed beautiful image through a male persona who is also a gazer of that image in poetry, Nichols transforms Maar's objectified position in Picasso's painting into a subject by voicing her critique of the artist's cubist art, his use of colors as well as his geometric figures, and of his maltreatment of her. Through this ekphrastic stance, Maar reconstructs her identity as a photographer and rids herself from the artist's domination over her in his art and personal life. Hence, the aim of this article is to discuss in what ways Nichols's poem problematizes the privileged status of the male artist over his silenced female model and acknowledges the artistic talent of the woman through the use of ekphrasis.

Keywords: Grace Nichols; Dora Maar; Pablo Picasso; ekphrasis

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ÖZET

Guyana asıllı İngiliz şair Grace Nichols'ın 2009 yılında yayımlanan *Picasso, I Want My Face Back* (Picasso, Yüzümü Geri İstiyorum) adlı şiir kitabında yer alan ilk şiiri "Weeping Woman" (Ağlayan Kadın) çağdaş resimbetim (ekfrasis) örneklerindendir. Pablo Picasso'nun aynı adlı resmini betimleyen şiir, Picasso'nun yirminci-yüzyıl sanatındaki eşsiz rolünü bir dönem sevgilisi olmuş ve resimlerine modellik yapmış olan Dora Maar'ın ağzından sorgular. Maar aslında Picasso ile tanışmadan önce Sürrealist akıma dahil olmuş bir fotoğraf sanatçısıdır, ancak Picasso ile yaşadığı çalkantılı aşk süresince kendi sanatçı kimliğini bir kenara bırakır. Sessiz, durağan ve bakılan güzel sanat nesnesinin bir erkek konuşmacı tarafından betimlendiği geleneksel resimbetimsel şiirlerin aksine, Nichols şiirinde Dora Maar'ı Picasso'nun resmindeki nesne konumundan çıkartarak ona ressamın sanatını eleştirme hakkı verir. Maar Picasso'nun Kübist stilini, geometrik figürlerini ve kullandığı renkleri eleştirmekle kalmaz, ilişki boyunca ressamın üzerinde kurduğu hakimiyetten de yakınır. Maar ressamın sanatı ve kişisel ilişkisindeki baskın kişiliğinden kurtulduktan sonra kendi sanatçı kimliğini yeniden oluşturma sürecine girer. Bu makalenin amacı, Nichols'ın şiirinde erkek ressamın dişil imge üzerinde kurduğu hakimiyetin ne şekilde sorunsallaştırıldığını ve kadın sanatçının kendi kimliğini yeniden kurgulama çabalarını resimbetim çerçevesinde ele almaktır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Grace Nichols; Dora Maar; Pablo Picasso; resimbetim

"Weeping Woman," featured in the Guyanese poet Grace Nichols's *Picasso, I Want My Face Back,* takes the form of a dramatic monologue in the voice of Picasso's model, muse and lover, Dora Maar. The poem is an example of ekphrasis, which involves the representation of a visual artwork in literature, and in this case Picasso's eponymous painting is described by the persona. Unlike traditional ekphrastic poems, such as Robert Browning's dramatic monologue "My Last Duchess", where the Duke of Ferrara shows an agent his silenced dead wife's portrait and discloses his domineering and possessive personality, in Nichols's poem the female object/image in the painting is transformed into a subject and an onlooker, who criticises Picasso's art. Through this critical subversion, Maar reconstructs her identity as a photographer in order to escape what she perceives as the artist's domination over her in his art as well as his personal life. In this sense, considered within the framework of ekphrasis, this study aims to discuss how the interaction between the verbal and visual arts in Nichols' "Weeping Woman" is used for two purposes: first to challenge the privileged status of the male artist over his silenced female model and then to acknowledge the artistic talent of the woman.

At the beginning of her book *Paint Me a Poem,* which includes poems by Grace Nichols as well as children with whom she works on several paintings at the Tate Gallery, she claims: "I'd always been intrigued by painting and how poetry and painting have inspired each other. For me, there is a close relationship between the two art forms. In the compositional balance of a painting, one can almost speak of a certain colour 'rhyming' with a similar colour" (Nichols, 2004, p. 5). Nichols underlines the interaction between visual and verbal art forms by using the diction specific to each, namely color and rhyme, and shows how, for her, these art forms are closely interconnected and should cooperate

with one another. Therefore, before analyzing Nichols's "Weeping Woman", I would like to discuss briefly the characteristics of ekphrasis by referring to various prominent critics throughout the ages.

Discussion on the sister arts, namely visual and verbal arts, until the twentieth century, is highly paragonal. Since Leonardo da Vinci considers the eye as "the nobler sense" in relation to the ear as "the second, acquiring nobility through the recounting of things which the eye has seen," (2001, p. 20) painting, for him, is privileged over poetry. Moreover, unlike poetry, which is composed of words, in other words arbitrary signs, painting is a natural sign as it represents things in nature truthfully (da Vinci, 2001, p. 21). Taking da Vinci's distinction into consideration, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing dwells on the juxtaposition between the spatiality, silence and fixity of the image as opposed to the temporal dimension of literature with an emphasis on action and eloquence (1984, p. 78). Within the frame of the contemporary discussions on ekphrasis, W. J. T. Mitchell in his seminal book *Picture Theory* names the steps of polarity in ekphrasis as: "(1) the conversion of the visual representation into a verbal representation, either by description or ventriloquism; (2) the reconversion of the verbal representation back into the visual object in the reception of the reader" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 160). In other words, the literary work describes an art object or allows the image to speak and in this way, another visual image is formed in the reader's mind. He talks about how this dialectical relationship between the visual and verbal arts is unavoidably gendered: a male viewing subject in poetry describes an art object depicting a fixed and silent female image. In his *Iconology*, Mitchell claims, "Paintings, like women, are ideally silent, beautiful creatures designed for the gratification of the eye, in contrast to the sublime eloquence proper to the manly art of poetry" (Mitchell, 1986, p. 110). The gaze, as Mitchell underlines, is a crucial issue in discussions on ekphrasis, as the narrator or the character in literature, who describes the artwork, is also a beholder. Simon Goldhill, in his article on ekphrastic epigrams in the Hellenistic period, asserts that the act of looking is "a practice of interpreting, of reading – a way of seeing meaning," (2007, p. 2). And, as such, Goldhill contends, "ekphrasis is designed to *produce a viewing subject*" (2007, p. 2). In Nichols's poem, then, the viewed object in Picasso's painting becomes the viewing subject with a voice to critique his art.

Since in "Weeping Woman" Grace Nichols mainly focuses on Picasso's well-renowned eponymous painting, the poem asks for a transreferential act of reading: in other words, the poem and the painting supplement each other in the sense that appreciation of the poem necessitates the reader to view Picasso's painting, and afterwards, the female image in the painting cannot be viewed without Maar's story in mind. As the poet asserts in the Preface of the book, "The painting with its haggard fractured features and clash of colours (executed in Picasso's famous cubist style) made me want to give that face a voice" (Nichols, 2009, p. 8). The woman in the painting is Picasso's lover Dora Maar, who was a photographer and known to be a member of the Surrealist Movement in Paris. As Julie L'Enfant asserts, "some of Maar's photographs are considered central documents of Surrealism" (L'Enfant, 1996-1997, p. 15). While married to Marie-Thérèse Walter, Picasso saw Maar at the Café des Deux Magots in Paris in 1936, and

was immediately fascinated by her seductive and masochistic behaviour, playing with a knife between her fingers and staining her gloves with blood. During their affair between 1936 and 1945, Picasso continuously "humiliat[ed] this once proud and independent woman" (L'Enfant, 1996-1997, p. 18). For instance, one day Picasso gave her "a very distorted portrait of her, inscribed *For Dora Maar, Great Painter* (Lord, 1993, p. 238) to make fun of her artistic talent. After Picasso left her for a younger woman, Maar suffered a nervous breakdown followed by a long therapy period with the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. Nichols gives voice to Maar in the form of a dramatic monologue and defies the characteristics of traditional ekphrasis, where the female image stays silent and fixed within the frame.

The poem opens with Dora Maar's outcry of pain severely denouncing Picasso's Cubist style of using fractured figures. She says:

> They say that instead of a brush
> he used a knife on me –
> a savage geometry.
> But I say, look again,
> this is the closest
> anyone has got to the pain. (Nichols, 2009, p. 9)

In line with Goldhill's argument that ekphrasis creates a "viewing subject", Maar is transformed from a silent, gazed object of aesthetic beauty in Picasso's painting into a gazing subject who speaks in Nichols's monologue. She denounces not only Picasso's art as "a savage geometry" because of her deformed depiction in the painting, but also his maltreatment by using two symbols suggestive of male power, brush and knife. It is with the details of the image, her red hat "twisted mouth / and gnashing teeth, / my fingers fat and clumsy" (Nichols, 2009, p. 9) that Maar rejects such ugly depiction of herself, as she is known to be a very attractive woman with beautiful hands and long fingers. Moreover, she condemns the distasteful colours he used in this painting: for instance, green is "not the green of new shoots / but the ghastly green of gangrene" (Nichols, 2009, p. 9). Maar compares Picasso's abuse of her body to that of a conqueror invading a land: she calls him a "Conquistador / of the flesh" (Nichols, 2009, p. 12) exploiting her body "with the sperm / of [his] colours" (Nichols, 2009, p. 12). The sperm and colors refer to Picasso's maltreatment in both his actual life and his art respectively. Apart from his objectification of her, Maar also resists Piccaso's act of silencing her through his art, by giving voice to her cry which is depicted in the picture: "I hear / ... / my own stiffled scream" (Nichols, 2009, p. 9). This voicing of the cry, which is an aspect of ekphrasis mentioned before, in fact, shows the distance between Maar the image and Maar the beholder. Through this offensive image of a weeping woman in a group of paintings, Picasso displays on the one hand his abhorrence of war, and on the other hand his view of women as "suffering machines" (Nichols, 2009, p. 11). However, Nichols's critique of Picasso's painting through Maar's monologue displays the poet's aspiration to subvert the characteristics of traditional ekphrasis in which static, silent female figure is framed in art.

Maar's condemnation is intensified with her reproval of Picasso's reputation and fortune by comparing him to the mythological figure, Midas: "Everything he touches,"

she says "with his Midas hands / turns, of course, into a fortune. / One still-life can buy a house" (Nichols, 2009, p. 11). Ironically, while the persona of Maar underlines in this way the fact that fame brings fortune to the male artist, in person she could only hope that future generations would appreciate her surrealist art. In his *Picasso and Dora: A Personal Memoir*, James Lord touches upon this expectation, noting that "Several times she remarked that she was absolutely sure of herself so far as the future was concerned: it would recognize the enduring quality and unique accomplishment of her work" (Lord, 1993, p. 325-6). Grace Nichols seems to have recognized Maar's talent, and tries to give credit to the woman artist with her poem.

The ekphrastic critique of Picasso's art – the geometric depiction of figures, the use of colours, and the image of the woman in pain - is superseded by another form of ekphrasis in which Maar's focus is directed towards her own art. To underline her accomplishment in art, then, she needs to reconsider her personal relationship with the artist; that is to say, how his treatment and view of her shifted "from goddess to doormat" (Nichols, 2009, p. 11). Before becoming a devoted lover, striving to meet his needs, however, Maar had been a member of the Surrealist Movement, "wearing her camera / like a medallion against her heart" (Nichols, 2009, p. 11). After she hears "whispers of a new mistress" (Nichols, 2009, p. 13), and sees the pitying looks of the people, she articulates her perplexity: she is well aware that although depicted as very ugly and suffering, she has been immortalized through his art, and that the painting has become "an icon / of twentieth-century grief" (Nichols, 2009, p. 10). The painter once confessed that he tried several times to depict Maar cheerfully, but he could not do so, saying: "I just couldn't get a portrait of her while she was laughing ... for years I painted her with tortured shapes." (as cited in Caws, 2000, p. 5)

In order to reconstruct her identity, Maar has to break apart the iconic status of Picasso in her mind and distance herself from her past identity as the painter's beloved muse. She describes how she is relieved of her painful experience during the therapy period, and as a result demands Picasso to give her her "face back" (Nichols, 2009, p. 16). Despite the demands of the public that she should give credit to Picasso for her fame, she asserts her identity by bitterly disclaiming that she is not a parasite:

I am no moth flitting around his wick.
He might be a genius but he's also a prick –
Medusa, Cleopatra, help me find my inner bitch,
wasn't I christened Henriette Theodora Markovitch? (Nichols, 2009, p. 16)

In this passage, though she recognizes Picasso's talent ("a genius"), she also thinks that he is repulsive ("a prick") in his treatment of women. Maar takes as her own muses dazzling women from mythology and history who will give her courage to resist the damage Picasso has done on her personality, and by mentioning her full name, she asserts her own identity against what she sees as Picasso's erasure of it.

As a result of this recovery period, she starts working as a photographer again, taking pictures with her camera and "turn[ing] my negatives into positives. / my floating foetuses into life" (Nichols, 2009, p. 17). The process of photographic printing is also very suggestive of her transformation, from a psychological breakdown after Picasso's

betrayal of her, to a state where she can refabricate her identity. If the critical gaze of her silenced objectified self in Picasso's art is one part of Maar's issue in her monologue, then the other is how as a viewing subject she highlights her photography by using the trope of the eye: she calls her instrument to observe and reflect the world as "my one-eye" (Nichols, 2009, p. 17), and "my third-eye" (Nichols, 2009, p. 17), and resembles herself to Polyphemus, the man-eating cyclops to suggest how she tries to survive through her art of photography. Underlining her persona's artistic contributions in an ekphrastic fashion, Nichols names some surrealist works by Maar; the "floating foetus" alludes to her famous *Portrait of Pere Ubu;* other references include Maar's photograph of "A blind man sitting / with his white cane in the sun," (Nichols, 2009, p. 17) and her photographs of Picasso in his studio painting his *Guernica*. With the metaphor of a butterfly having "still imperfect wings," (Nichols, 2009, p. 17) Maar finally suggests that she has liberated herself from being "a battered muse" (Nichols, 2009, p. 16) in his consuming love. As part of the art of painting, colours, then, gain importance in her life: black suggests her strength and freedom from male oppression, white her innocence, green faith in the future, yellow her awakening, red her passion, and blue the support of her soul (Nichols, 2009, p. 18).

After she becomes independent of his influence and finds her true self, as underlined by Maar in the poem, she starts appreciating Picasso's art but she still refuses her effect on his art: "'Picasso's art is Picasso's art. / Not one is Dora Maar'" (Nichols, 2009, p. 19)*. She realizes that there are many women abused by men: "There will always be a weeping woman. / Although I've left, she remains, / weeping her Hiroshima of tears" (Nichols, 2009, p. 20). This is an attempt by Maar to sympathize with other women who suffer for similar reasons. What Gabrielle Griffin argues in terms of Nichols's poems on a fat African female figure is very pertinent in this context as well. Griffin suggests that the female persona in Nichols's poems "uses her body, her voice, her song to maintain her sense of selfhood, to support others and to subvert the structures that oppress her" (Griffin, 1993, p. 28). To reconstruct her identity and to refashion her career as an artist, Maar first needs to subvert Picasso's repression on her, free herself from the boundaries of the frame of art and gain her voice.

Nichols's "Weeping Woman" demonstrates how the act of writing or creating for women can become "a political act of breaking silence" (Wiskers, 1993, p. 3). By challenging the characteristics of traditional ekphrasis, discussed before, in which the female image remains a silenced object, the poet takes Dora Maar out of the frame of Picasso's painting, where she is depicted with a weeping visage, and gives voice, autonomy and freedom to the silenced and fixed female image. Such an alternative to traditional ekphrasis, suggests subverting the dichotomy that privileges the male artist over the female, and attributing equal value to the woman's accomplishments through an emphasis on her persona's painstaking efforts to reconstruct her identity as an independent artist. I would like to end with Nichols's short poem "Epilogue", which tells the poet's process of adapting into the colonizer's culture with specific emphasis on

* Nichols probably refers to James Lord's memoir in which he quotes Dora Maar's statement: "all his portraits of me are lies. They're all Picassos, not one is Dora Maar" (Lord, 1993, p. 123).

language. The poem summarizes Dora Maar's ambition in "Weeping Woman" as well if the language concern is replaced with that of identity. She says:

I have crossed an ocean
I have lost my tongue
from the root of the old
one
a new one has sprung. (Nichols, 1983, p. 87)

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