



LONELINESS, VIOLENCE AND REBIRTH IN XIALOU GUO'S VILLAGE OF STONE AND DACIA MARAINI'S THE SILENT DUCHESS

XIAOLU GUO'NUN "VILLAGE OF STONE" VE DACIA MARAINI'NIN "THE SILENT DUCHESS" ADLI ROMANLARINDA YALNIZLIK, ŞİDDET VE YENİDEN DOĞUŞ

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Abstract

The Village of Stone and The Silent Duchess are contemporary novels which depict clearly the oppression on women in the male-dominated society both in the 18th century and in our times. Both heroines have a similar experience in life and the endings of the novels are identical. The gloomy, depressive atmosphere of each novel turns into hope and optimism in relation to the future. This paper analyses the hardships both protagonists go through and despite the difficulties they face, it suggests that so long as women assert their own will, they are destined to reach victory.

Öz

The Village ve The Silent Duchess adlı romanlar günümüz ve 18. yüzyıl erkek egemen toplumunda kadına uygulanan baskıyı ele almaktadır. Her iki romanın kahramanı da benzer deneyimlerden geçmekte ve romanlar da benzer şekilde sona ermektedir. Karamsar ve kasvetli başlayan romanlar sonunda geleceğe ümit ve iyimserlikle bakmaktadırlar. Bu çerçevede, bu çalışma kahramanların karşılaştıkları zorlukları ele almakta ve kendi iradelerini ortaya koydukları sürece kadınların zafere ulaşacaklarının kaçınılmaz olduğunu göstermektedir.

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Violence against women has been an extremely serious issue in many countries during the past decades, to which no solution seems to be found. This is a widespread social problem. Unfortunately, every day newspapers report women being killed or raped especially by the people who are close to them. Apart from violence, women also suffer from loneliness, despair and lack of understanding from their family members, friends, partners and from the society in general. The technological developments and the increasing rhythm of life push all individuals towards loneliness. Many writers reflect on this universal problem in their novels. The award-winning Chinese filmmaker, screenwriter, magazine essayist and novelist, Xiaolu Guo and the Italian novelist and director Dacia Maraini reflect upon these heartbreaking issues in their novels. There are fourteen years of difference

between the publication of the two novels but the real difference lies in the settings. *The Silent Duchess* takes place in the early eighteenth century and the *Village of Stone* is placed in the year 2000 and onwards. Curiously, the events and the problems depicted in the two novels are almost identical. We are all aware of the women being oppressed by men in a male-dominant society. For centuries women have been left without education. They have been forced into arranged marriages. They have not been given their legal rights. They could not own anything legally. When they got married, their share of the family's fortune was passed directly to the husband and she also had to take a large sum of money as dowry. This issue will come up when we analyse *The Silent Duchess*. In the 20th Century, little has changed in favour of the women. There are many parts of the world where women still go on living precisely like in the 18th Century. Many women are still left without education and they are still forced into arranged marriages. Governments try to pass laws which require women to get married to their rapists. Child brides exist in many societies. Once women decide to separate from their husbands, usually they are murdered or wounded seriously. Many women are employed in the world of business and career but in some countries women are paid less than men for the same type of jobs. Many women are beaten by their husband or by their partners in so-called civilised countries even in the middle of the street. In some places, they put the blame on the woman who is raped claiming that this issue brings shame on the whole family. She is expected to commit suicide. Turkish novelist, composer and politician Zulfu Livaneli has written a novel on this subject: *Bliss* which has been published in 2006.

The novel *Village of Stone* (2004), has been shortlisted for The Independent "Best Foreign Fiction Prize" (2005) and has been nominated for the "Dublin International Literature Award" (IMPAC) in 2006.

If we have a look at Chinese women's literature since 1995, we observe that:

Many working people (men) have begun to acclaim the status and the significance of women's literature. However, that acclaim sometimes falls unwittingly into the old patterns of "them" looking at "us" (...) Chinese women writers do not like to emphasize the fact that they are women, and it may even be said that they are afraid to do so. The label "women" writers seems to arouse extreme irritation since it implies in their perception that they have already been excluded from the society of writers. (Kun et al 26).

Xiaolou Guo is a representative of the above-mentioned modern women writers in China.

In 2008, Xiaolu Guo released an interview to Zhang Zhen. She was promoting her novel *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, on the occasion of an international writers' festival in New York. It is stated that:

Guo started writing poetry as a teenager and voraciously read Western modern literature in translation while growing up in a fishing village on the coast of the China Sea. The power of literature gave her imagination the wings with which she could take leave of the impoverished material and intellectual life in rural China. She was determined to go far away, to study and live in Beijing, China's political and cultural center. (Zhen 46).

When we read her novel *Village of Stone*, we discover a lot of traces from the novelist's own life. The heroine of the novel is an unhappy, unfulfilled young woman, Coral, who lives in a small flat in Beijing with Red, who is almost incapable of communication as he dedicates himself entirely to Frisbee sport. Coral is aware of this lack of spiritual union between Red and herself: "*Two people together never add up to anything more than one person added to another. That we continue to add ourselves up in this way is the reason human beings will always be lonely*" (Guo, *Village of Stone* 7).

Coral feels uncertain about everything: "*Love is uncertain, jobs are uncertain, our future in this rented flat is uncertain. My future with Red is, if anything, even less certain*" (Guo, *Village of Stone* 7).

She goes through incredibly sad experiences during all her years at the village and eventually she feels she has to move somewhere else but the village leaves a deep mark on her:

But the Village of Stone- that tiny corner of the sea that, on a map of China, appears as nothing more than a deep blue stain, with no air or shipping routes to link it anywhere else- still exerts a strange sort of pull on me. Like a recurring dream that appears each and every midnight, or some profound and inescapable homesickness, I somehow find myself remaining loyal to its memory (Guo, *Village of Stone* 7).

(...) Coral, the lead character in her new novel, *Village of Stone*, is in such a situation. Does the novel detail aspects of her own life? Guo smiles. 'It is a work of fiction,' she says. As the writer Doris Lessing says on the book's sleeve: 'What could have been a story of misery has the mysterious charm of a fairy tale or a legend. Reading it is rather like finding yourself in a dream (...) 'Coral is my double in my real life,' says Guo. 'My grandfather married a child bride when she was 12. They never loved each other. They lived separate lives under the same roof. He would beat her, but she never once complained. They both suffered. My grandfather committed suicide because he was so poor. I really hated that fishing village.' (...) While Chinese film may be earning prizes, Chinese literature hardly breaks into the sales charts in the west (...) She sees it as her mission to bring Chinese fiction to the west, especially her adopted, temporary home. 'I think, in Britain, people know more about India, and want to read more about there,' she says. 'Whereas in France, they prefer tales about China. I don't know why, really.'" (Guo, *My Secret Life...*).

At the beginning of the novel Coral receives an anonymous gift from her former village which is a huge dried eel and this present takes her back mentally to the old days. In the novel, Coral tells us about her life alternating between the life in Beijing and her memories of the Village of Stone. The setting is our modern times. The narration concerning Beijing displays clearly the loneliness of the individuals in a society in which people with low income have been converted into robots: "*Red and I live together in the enormous, parched megalopolis that is Beijing. I'm twenty-eight and Red is twenty-nine, just a few days shy of his thirtieth birthday. Confucius said that thirty was the age at which a person should settle down, but Red and I have never had the sense of being truly settled, not in a city like this*" (Guo, *Village of Stone* 3).

She describes their flat in Beijing:

Red and I are like a pair of hermit crabs encased in a huge-rise building. There are twenty-five storeys in our building, but we live on the ground floor (Guo, *Village of Stone* 4).

We've never tried to keep a cat, much less a dog, although we once had several potted plants that we thought might be flowering plants. We never did find out, though, because the identical twenty-five-storey high-rise opposite ours blocked most of the sunlight from our flat (Guo, *Village of Stone* 5).

The memories relating to Coral's former life in the village are extremely sad. Right from the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to the seven-year-old Coral at the Village of Stone. We learn that her mother had given birth to her on a rowing boat. By the time the little boat reached shore, her mother had already died from loss of blood. Her father had escaped from the life of a fisherman by abandoning the village even before her birth. Coral was brought up by her paternal grandparents in a stone house on the seaside:

Actually, I wasn't at all like a piece of red coral. I was more like a tiny pebble that had been flung up from the seashore and fallen into one of the cracks between the cobblestones, to be trampled on by passing feet (...) The house I grew up in was along one of those cobblestone alleyways skirting the sea. I was nothing more than a tiny Stone – crusted in salt, silent, unnoticed and insignificant (Guo, *Village of Stone* 9-10).

The grandparents had nothing in common, nor were they in love with each other. They lived on separate floors with no verbal communication at all. Coral was the only bond between them. Her grandmother had been a child bride from another village so she was continuously despised and unwanted by the people in the Village of Stone. Coral's grandfather used to beat her grandmother. Coral grew up without understanding the meaning of love. Instead of her real name, she was given the nickname "Little Dog" hoping that the sea goddess would not carry her away some day thanks to her ugly name. When the sea was rough people used to disappear in the sea. Further on, we see that her grandfather commits suicide without leaving a note. Following his death Coral realises: "*My memory grows foggy. No matter how hard I try to recall my grandfather's face, I can't quite remember what he looked like. I begin to regret that I never touched his face with my own hands, not even once*" (Guo, *Village of Stone* 59).

At the age of seven, we find out that she has been first followed, touched and eventually raped by an elderly person who was known as "the mute." Coral was extremely afraid of him and the day she was raped and imprisoned by the mute in his cottage, she could not escape from him due to her panic. She was always scared and lacked self-confidence.

The mute forced me into his house and quickly kicked the door shut with his heel. Inside it was very dark. Too late, I realised that I was in great physical danger, I don't know if it was fear of physical hurt or fear of death, but at last, I regained my voice and began screaming at

the top of my lungs (...) but the mute quickly clamped a hand over my lips and silenced me by stuffing a rag into my mouth. Then he threw me onto the bed, which was as hard as a wooden board. After that, there was only excruciating pain, I was seven years old. I had no idea what was being done to my body. If it were possible to measure death against pain, then the pain I endured in that room must have been equal to a hundred deaths. I know I must have died a hundred times that day (Guo, *Village of Stone* 75).

Following this event, the mute keeps Coral as his prisoner for days and days. The mute's parents know about this, but they do not save Coral. On the contrary, they protect their son. Fearing that the people would find Coral, the mute starts digging a hole inside his bedroom. *"He untied me from the bed, bound my hands and feet and placed me in it. Then he moved the bed back over the hole. It was a darkness blacker than death"* (Guo, *Village of Stone* 78).

For days and days the mute keeps raping her, feeding her with bread and water only to keep her alive. One day when he is drunk, she manages to escape and some time later we find out that the mute, together with his parents remains under the tiles of their roof destroyed by the typhoon. The three of them die a horrible death. As Coral had been wishing for this end for the mute, she believes that retribution awaits everybody.

After this event, Coral goes back to her grandmother's house who after a short time dies of old age. Coral is left alone in life. She suffers from loneliness. She decides to attend school and there she starts a relationship with her chemistry teacher Mr. Mou. Mr. Mou finds Coral very enigmatic which he expresses to her: *"The eyes he had seen, he told me, were not the eyes of a fifteen-year-old girl. They were the eyes of a wild animal, something wary and constantly on its guard, a creature that could never be tamed. That was more or less what I had become at the age of fifteen: a wild animal with an inborn hatred of the world"* (Guo, *Village of Stone* 129-130).

After a short period of time, she finds out that she is pregnant and that she has to have an abortion in another place. Mr. Mou arranges everything but somehow this secret is discovered by the village people. Coral feels obliged to leave it for good and starts living in Beijing. Years later she receives a letter from Mr. Mou announcing her that he is happily married and he is in love. He still teaches at the same village, whereas Coral has had to leave the village for good out of shame. This

shows the traditional double- standard applied to women on similar occasions. Mr. Mou does not show even the slightest interest in Coral. He does not ask anything about Coral's life. He only wishes her good luck.

Further on we see that her father whom she had never met since her birth, comes to her flat to meet with her because he is sick and he is going to die soon. This event influences Coral deeply and she tries to be next to her father at the hospital without being able to talk to him at all because he has his vocal chords removed due to the cancer in his throat and soon after he dies in pain. Coral cannot tell him anything related to herself and her life. She does not find the occasion of telling him that she is pregnant.

While she is planning to go through another abortion, she receives a marriage proposal from Red. He wants her to have the baby and start a new life together with him in another house where there is more sunlight and fresh air. The novel ends with Coral and Red looking on to the future with hope and a great deal of optimism. This is like being reborn for Coral after all the unfortunate events she has gone through.

Here at this point we can establish a connection between Coral and Marianna, the heroine of the novel "*The Silent Duchess*" by Dacia Maraini. The novelist Dacia Maraini is the daughter of a Sicilian Princess and a famous ethnologist. *The Silent Duchess* has the setting in the aristocracy of Sicily with which Dacia Maraini is familiar. The original Italian title of the novel is *La Lunga Vita di Marianna Ucria*. Dacia Maraini wrote many novels and plays mainly focusing on women's issues as stated by Joann Cannon:

Whether set in contemporary Rome, as in *Voci*, or turn-of-the-century Verona, whether based on archival research or fictionalized, Maraini's companion texts bring the victims alive and move the reader to denounce the as-yet unsolved crime of violence against women (Cannon 58).

Many scholars who have studied Maraini have correctly focused on the author's exclusion from the canon. This exclusion, without question true for much of her career, has recently been addressed and considerably corrected by edited volumes, tributes, and literary prizes (the Premio Bagutta for *Bagheria* in 1990 and the Strega, Italy's most prestigious literary prize, for *Buio* in 1999). What is striking in this context is the way in which Maraini's work can profitably be read not only from a feminist perspective, nor simply in

the company of other women writers. It can and should also be read as part of a dialogue with some of contemporary Italy's most interesting and enduring male writers (Cannon 102).

The Silent Duchess is about Marianna who happens to be the granddaughter of the Duke Signoretto Ucria of Fontanasalsa in Sicily. Just like Coral, Marianna is a little girl of who has been raped by her mother's elder brother when she was five years old. This shock causes her to become deaf and mute. *"Her silence is the outward sign of the carnal violence to which she was subject as a child and the consequent obligation to internalize and forget the whole event"* (Ryan-Scheutz 57).

Her mother forces her to accept the arranged marriage with the uncle who has raped her. As she has reached the age of thirteen, which in the eighteenth century is the right age for getting married, her mother thinks that no one would like to get married to a deaf and mute girl. If she entered the monastery, she would have to take a large sum of money whereas the rich uncle was willing to marry her because when he raped her, his pretext was that he had committed this act out of excessive love. Marianna refuses but the whole family pushes her towards this unwanted "uncle husband" who is much much older than Marianna. *"We don't want you wedded outside the family so we are giving you to your unkle Pietro Ucria di Campo Spagnolo, Lord of Scannatura, of Bosco Grande and of Fiume Mendola, Count of Sala di Paruta Marquis of Sollazzi and of Taya. On top of all that he is my brother and your father's cousin"* (Maraini 27-28).

Marianna refuses but she cannot resist, she is obliged to get married:

She had never seen him smile except once when she had taken off a shoe to dip her foot into the water of the fountain. Never again. Since the first night of their marriage this cold, shy man had slept on the edge of the bed, his back turned towards her. Then one morning when she was buried in sleep, he had leapt on top of her and violated her. The body of the thirteen-year-old wife had reacted with kicks and scratches, and very early the next day Marianna fled to her parents in Palermo. Her mother the Duchess wrote that she had acted "like an inky squid" in leaving her place as a wife, and had made an exhibition of herself and brought discredit on all the family. (Maraini 39).

Marianna's mother is almost inexistent. She is weak, unhappy, indifferent, distant. She is living on drugs. *"It is not until after the Duchess's death that Marianna comes to terms with their failed relationship; looking back, she*

understands her mother's need to escape reality and regrets not having loved her more" (Amatangelo 242).

At the beginning of the novel we see that her father the duke, following the advice of a doctor, takes Marianna to witness the execution of a hanged young boy hoping that the shock could make Marianna speak like her brothers and sisters but it does not work. On the contrary, this experience causes her to withdraw more into her little world. She vaguely remembers sounds and songs but her father tries to convince her that she was born deaf and mute. Her eyes and her nose are the only means with which she can communicate with the world around her: *"Smell, touch, taste, and an internal concept of sound contribute to her rich inner life and endow her with an extraordinary ability to read people's minds" (Ryan-Scheutz 57).*

The fact that she has been raped by her uncle has been hidden from all the female members of the family. Marianna's elder brother Carlo knows the truth and when Marianna keeps asking him whether she was disabled since she was born, he makes an effort not to tell her anything but Marianna reads his mind:

One evening they heard screams to make the flesh creep and Marianna with her legs all bloodstained being dragged away between their father and Raffaele Cuffa. Strange the absence of the women (...) the fact is that, yes, now he remembers, Uncle Pietro, that damned old billy-goat, had assaulted her and left her half-dead (...) yes, Uncle Pietro, now it comes back to him, how could he have forgotten? "Out of love," Uncle Pietro had said, "out of a most sacred love." He just adored that little girl and "if only he hadn't gone crazy. (...) How could he have lost the memory of that tragedy? And then, afterwards, yes afterwards, when Marianna was healed it was realised that she could no longer speak as if zap, he had cut out her tongue (Maraini 194-195).

Marianna gives birth to her third daughter but the uncle husband is expecting a son who is born two years later: *"This time, uncle husband has smiled openly. He has brought his wife a present of a necklace of pink pearls as large as chickpeas. He has also made her a gift of a thousand escudos because "kings do this when queens give birth to a boy" (Maraini 39).*

All the relatives rush to see the baby boy. Marianna's father comes to visit Marianna. *"Frustrated by his daughter's inability to speak, the Duke encourages her to communicate by giving her a set of writing instruments (pens, ink, ashes for drying*

the ink, a small writing table, and paper) that she can wear around her waist like a belt” (Amatangelo 241-242).

This present changes Marianna’s life radically. From then on she starts communicating with everybody easily. *“The silent Marianna also fosters her self-knowledge and self-expression by reading numerous books. She spends countless hours in the family library and is most influenced by the thoughts of David Hume”* (Ryan-Scheutz 61).

Marianna is exceptionally tied to her father. Towards her husband and her only living son she is distant. Out of her three daughters she is in harmony with only one of them, Giuseppa, who resembles her totally. Marianna loses her mother, her father, her four-year-old son and eventually her uncle husband. She is emotionally attached to her servants and she has a suitor: Don Camaleo who proposes marriage to Marianna.

As a widow, Marianna takes complete control of the family and of the estate but at the end of the novel she decides to leave Sicily and travel alone to the Continent. Her son, Mariano is the only heir. He feels upset because of her mother’s close friendship with Don Camaleo thinking that he could claim a part of the estate if Marianna would marry him.

Marianna, at last, is a free woman. She can make her own decisions. She is looking at her future with optimism. Her son has sent Marianna’s brother to warn her about this “unsuitable” relationship:

“You are a widow and I hope you are not planning to make yourself look ridiculous by getting married at the age of forty-five to a libertine bachelor of fifty-five.”

“Don't worry, I have no intention of getting married.”

“Then you should not allow the senator Camaleo to come and visit you. It is not right to make people talk.”

“There is no physical relationship between us. It is purely a friendship.”

“(…) You have four children to think of. Mariano, who will inherit from you, is worried that you could convey your property elsewhere by a rash act that would be truly regrettable.”

“Even if I did remarry, I would not take away a crumb” (Maraini 214).

The novel's ending is an open one. Dacia Maraini leaves it to the imagination of the reader. Marianna is free, as if she were reborn just like Coral in the *Village of Stone*. Both women have suffered a lot, they resisted with patience and like Coral says: "Retribution awaits us all" (Guo, *Village of Stone* 89).

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