

Imprisonment and Escape in Mrs. Mary Velnet's Captivity Account: An Early 19th Century Woman Writing Tradition

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Women captivity narratives are stories that are written by captive women in places far from their native countries. Some of these women were captured by pirates in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean areas; others were captured by Indians in America. Those who were captured by pirates were sold in public slave markets in North Africa to rich people or to the royal palaces to become house keepers, concubines or sometimes some of them were married with their masters. Some of these women captives kipped silence others decided to write accounts about their captivity experiences. In this essay I will bring in one of those captivity accounts by Mrs. Mary Velnet who was captured in North Africa and which I believe that it can be read from feminist approach. Though the Velnet's story was first published in 1800 before the emergence of feminism, it exhibits some features of feminist ideas. The ones that Mrs. Mary Velnet was not aware of at the time of writing her captivity account. In fact, reading Mrs. Mary Velnet's story, I come up with the idea that it is not a simple narrative which tell a story of a woman's enslavement but rather it is a narrative of a woman who struggles via her account to obtain her liberty and escape from the imprisonment of patriarchal doctrines.

Mrs. Mary Velnet, an Italian lady, was married to Mr. Morn Henri Velnet. Her husband was a wealthy man. He was engaged in the East- India trade. He asked her to join him at Canton where he was at that time. Accordingly, she set sail on 20th June, 1797. Two months later, the Vessel was attacked by the Tripolitans in North Africa. As a result, she and other passengers were captured and taken to the Tripolitan shore so as to be sold in public slave market. Consequently, she was bought by the Tripolitan Bashaw and she became one of his slaves for seven years. Her slavery experience pushed her to write a captivity account in which she described her captivity daily life in Tripoli. Her story is entitled: *An Affecting History of the Captivity and Suffering of Mrs. Mary Velnet an Italian Lady, Who Was Seven Years: A slave in Tripoli, Three of which she was Confined in a Dungeon, Loaded with Irons; and Four Times Put to the most Cruel Tortures ever Invented by Man.* Written by Herself. It was first published in 1800; which was reprinted six times.

After being driven to the Bashaw's house, she was directed to her dungeon in which she started her first task. She was forced to take care of another woman captive who was seriously ill. After the death of this woman, Mrs. Mary Velnet was directed to help other women slaves in cooking for men slave workers. She continued her life as such until the arrival of a man who was called Mr. Cini. The latter purchased her a week of freedom during which she was allowed to visit the Tripolitan city. At that time Mr. Cini suggested to Mrs. Mary Velnet a plan for her escape and her turning back to her country. Unfortunately, this plan failed. Consequently, Mr. Cini has disappeared and she was doomed to torture during which she became seriously mad. Only her strong belief in nature and her body's abilities which helped her to survive until she was ransomed and came back to her country where she encountered her daughter and her husband who hardly knew her after being absent for a long time.

At the very beginning of her story, Mrs. Mary Velnet draws the reader's attention to the fact that her husband is absent and her journey is an act of obedience to his wish. Accordingly, she points out:

On his arrival in Canton, he was so pleased with the situation of the country, as to from the determination of spending several months there. Of this he informed me by letter, at the same time desiring me in the most urgent manner to take passage myself, together with a little daughter (our only child) for the place. Accordingly in June following, I took passage on board the ship Susi¹.

And so, Mrs. Mary Velnet set sail to join her husband at Canton. Hence, her journey is a fulfilment of her husband's urgent desire. Obeying to his wish, she focuses on the fact that she belongs to a patriarchal society which implies the idea of men's superiority over women that is the basic of many stereotypical images that categorize human beings. It also involves the idea that one dominates the other who should submit to this domination. In this context, Kate Millett defines patriarchy according to various influencing facts which result in the existence of patriarchy. These include the ideological, biological, sociological, class, mythical, psychological and education. These components strengthen patriarchy as radical institution that governs each family and so classifies both man and woman in different societies all over the world². In fact, in her captivity account Mrs. Mary Velnet reinforces the fact that of submitting to patriarchal doctrines before and during her captivity however it is clear that only during her imprisonment in Tripoli that she becomes aware of the patriarchal domination of woman.

During her captivity, Mrs. Mary Velnet receives orders from different men to fulfil various tasks. Some times these orders come from the Bashaw and in others from his guards or his Mamluks. Accordingly, she says:

I was ordered to proceed immediately to business, and orders given me, on pain of death, not utter a syllable to any one of my fellow prisoners, this you may rest assured was extreme unpleasant to one who had been flattering herself with the fond hope...It was however the commands of Bashaw, himself, whose orders it was nothing short of death to disobey³.

Here, in this passage Mrs. Mary Velnet focuses on the fact that all her actions are the result of orders that she receives from her master or his attendants. She has been ordered to prepare meals for other men slave workers and to keep silence. However, what seems to me very ironical on Mrs. Mary Velnet's part is that she is obliged to be at the service of different categories of men. First, she is forced to obey the Bashaw's orders. Second, she is obliged to serve slave men who are in the same situation as hers silently simply because she is a woman. To be at the service of man silently means to accept her situation without any objection. Here Mrs. Mary Velnet reinforces the idea of the fact that of being a woman keeps her at the service of man in whatever situation and social position. In other words, she tries to convey that patriarchy urges woman to serve man in whatever situation and the latter is still superior to her even in similar circumstances. Unconscious of patriarchal ideology, she submits to its doctrines without any resistance because at this level Mrs. Mary Velnet is still believe in such thoughts that have been taught to here in her home culture. Doing domestic works and keeping silence on the part of women are some of the basic doctrines of patriarchal ideology even in different cultural context. Here, I shall refer to Millet's definition of patriarchy as an ideology which will clarify my point. She says that:

As status, a pervasive assent to the prejudice of male superiority guarantees superior status in the male, inferior in the female...This complemented by a second factor, sex role, which decrees a consonant and highly elaborate code of conduct, gesture and attitude for each sex. In terms of activity, sex role assigns domestic service and attendance upon infants to the female, the rest of human achievement, interest, and ambition to the male⁴.

Hence, patriarchal institution limits women's roles to house works and children's care. Here Mrs. Mary Velnet's tasks are limited to domestic work silently. Not along until she exhibits a clear criticism to patriarchal doctrines and towards men's superiority over women the fact that which lets me say that Mrs. Mary Velnet reflects through her captivity account an unconscious feminist voice.

Elaine Showalter defines three phases of feminism which reflects the development of women writing. First the feminine period in which women writers writes without being aware of their rights. During this phase they imitate men's writing tradition in the representation of women. In contrast, the second phase, the feminist one, women become aware of their rights hence their writings reflect a revolting voice against patriarchy creating a literary tradition of their own. Finally, the female phase, women start writing from a gender perspective. Their writings echo their experiences as women⁵. Be a part of women writings, Mrs. Mary Velnet's captivity account can be classified in the early phase of feminism only because she was not aware of her rights. However, I believe that Mrs. Mary Velnet's narrative about imprisonment in Tripoli is just a reflection of her imprisonment via the acceptance of the feminine doctrines that are dictated by the patriarchal institution. In her account, she tries to express her hopes to change her situation via deep thoughts of escape and reaching her freedom. Both extremities of imprisonment and escape in Mrs. Mary Velnet's captivity account mirror what Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gilbert define as women writings nineteenth century tradition. In this context, they mention that:

Dramatization of imprisonment and escape are so all –pervasive in nineteenth-century literature by women that we believe they represent a unique female tradition in this period. Interestingly, though works in this tradition generally begin by using houses as primary symbols of female imprisonment, they also use much of other paraphernalia of "woman's space" to enact their central symbolic drama of enclosure and escape⁶.

Earlier in her captivity account, Mrs Mary Velnet provides many descriptions of the slave house⁷ and her dungeon as gloomy spaces which increase her sorrows and sufferings. After her captivity she has been driven to an underground dungeon in which she has been asked to care for another women captive who had been there before her arrival. In this context, she points out that:

Confined in a dark and dismal dungeon, thirty feet under ground, the very air of which was poison, hid from the cheering ways of the sun, and attended by a dim burning lamp, and without any other company than that of a person whose pale visage and mangled form could not fail to make more distressing my situation; it was at this moment, that I should, were it my choice rather have chosen death than life⁸.

Her description of the dungeon reinforces the idea of woman's imprisonment that create a dark space in woman's life and which pushes her to desire death rather than to be alive. Furthermore, in her further portrayal of her captive companion she stresses the idea that this woman has been exposed to torture which has caused her illness and finally her death. Through this depiction, Mrs. Mary Velnet conveys the idea of the result of woman's submission to man's power which directly leads to her death. Besides, this account of this woman

captive draws a picture before hand of what may happen to Mrs. Mary Velnet during her captivity. Therefore, be aware of the consequences of the submission to her imprisonment situation pushes her to believe in the necessity of liberating herself via escape and reach her freedom.

Yet, Mrs. Mary Velnet is not the only woman who suffers from enslavement. After the death of captive woman she has been directed to the cookery where she meets many other captive women. At the first sight, the presence of these women provides her with a strong belief of hope to speak and break her silence. In this context, she says that:

I was not a little pleased to discover a considerable number of my own sex employed, and who I judge by their dress was held like myself in captivity. I was pleased because it is well known that "misery loves company," and I could hope that I should find some one among those women who, if not my own country, might know enough of the Italian language to converse with me⁹.

Here Mrs. Mary Velnet exhibits a strong will to talk about her miseries which in fact concern many other women who are in the same situation as hers. However, it was not long until that her hope vanished as she discovers that she and other women are not allowed to speak. Accordingly, she conveys that she is not the only one who suffers from patriarchy. She and other slave women are condemned to be at the service of men without protestation. Being convinced that she cannot speak, she starts thinking and imagining her escape from her miseries so as to reach her freedom.

In her account, Mrs. Mary Velnet refers to another story of another woman captive towards whom she expresses her admiration. This woman is a French captive whose name is Mira Civer. Her story has been known by the all the habitants of the Tripolitan city. She has displayed a courageous character via her attempt to flee from the guards to reach a savage cave where a savage lioness lives. Forced to quit the cave she has been caught by the Tripolitans and she has been exposed to torture that the Bashaw orders to his guards. Accordingly, she has been tied to a tree in the middle of a forest. What seems amazing is that Mrs. Mary Velnet tells her readers that this woman is still alive because of her courage and the protection of the lioness with which she has been living in the cave. The lioness protects her from tigers and the guards as well. Astonished by this scene, the soldiers deliver the woman captive. Here Mrs. Mary Velnet provides a metaphorical image from nature which implies that the tigers stand for men's danger that threatens women's existence. In fact, the lioness is a female as Mira Civer which entails the idea of solidarity among the same sex. Furthermore, the lioness's protection implies also the nature's shelter. Fascinated, with the way this woman has escaped and has reached her liberty, Mrs. Mary Velnet becomes obsessed by the idea of escape.

As I have mentioned earlier in the essay, during her captivity Mrs. Mary Velnet has been visited by a man, Mr. Cini who has purchased a week of freedom for her. Nearly when the week comes to its end, Mr. Cini suggests a plan for her escape about which she has agreed. Unfortunately, this plan is doomed to failure and has resulted in her imprisonment and exposure to various types of torture rather than offer her with liberty. Consequently, her torture caused her madness which she describes as follows:

The little sleep I could have in such a situation that easily be supposed and at length body and mind sunk under this accumulation of miserable suffering and I fell ill of burning fever. Reason, fortitude, horizon, all the noble qualities of the mind, decay when the corporal faculties are diseased, and the remembrance of my sufferings, at this dreadful moment, still inflames my body, so as almost to prevent an attempt to describe what they were. Yet hope had not totally forsaken me- deliverance seemed possible, especially should peace ensue¹⁰.

Her disappointment to reach liberation via escape leads to her madness be here another way to get away from her physical and psychological miserable afflictions. Her madness transfers her into another state of mind in which she desire death so as to put an end to her depression.

According to Gilbert and Gilbert the idea of escape is one of the traditions of women's writings during the nineteenth century. They point out that:

As we explore nineteenth-century literature, we will find that this madwoman emerges over and over again from the mirrors woman writers hold up both to their own natures and to their own visions of nature¹¹

So, Mrs. Mary Velnet's captivity account reflects this tradition. Madness has been mentioned many times in her story. The mad woman who represents her double in her narrative is mirrored in three women characters including hers. First woman's madness case is reflected through the experience of the first captive woman whom she has been ordered to take care of; the second case is depicted via the French woman's story and finally, madness is echoed through her own case. These three cases refer to the fact that there were many women at that time who suffered from imprisonment and submission to patriarchal dogma therefore madness was the only way to break out their oppression. More to the point, Mrs. Mary Velnet believes that her recovery is related to nature's assistance. In this context, she elucidates that:

I continued ill about two months, and was so reduced at least that I had scarcely strength to lift the water jug to my mouth. What must the sufferings of a female be, who is confined in a dungeon so damp, so dark, so horrible, without bed or straw, her limbs loaded as mine were with no refreshment but dry mouldy

bread, without so much as a drop of broth, without a consoling friend, and who under all these afflictions, trusts for her recovery to the efforts of nature alone!¹².

It is clear that Mrs. Mary Velnet's trust in nature provides her with power to endure her captivity torments. Many times in her account she refers to the fact that she has been powerful enough to bear physical and psychological tortures. Her strong will to still alive which chiefly conveys the idea of her strong will to challenge patriarchy. Indeed, she has been exposed to torture for two months and has been conducted to an underground dungeon for three years after which she becomes free after she has been ransomed by the Italian government.

After she has been a captive in Tripoli for seven years, Mrs. Mary Velnet reaches her native country. Arriving there she has sent a messenger to inform her husband about her arrival so as to meet him if he is alive. Accordingly he has come with their daughter. She describes their encounter as follows:

We anchored in the harbour of Milan from which I immediately dispatched a messenger to Modena, to inform my husband (if alive) of my arrival. Three days after, the messenger returned, accompanied by my husband and daughter. But, alas! We were strangers to each other; many hours passed before they could be prevailed on to believe that I was the person to whom they were so nearly connected, and whose absence had caused them so many unhappy moments¹³

After her long absence she feels that her husband and she were strangers to each other. It is worth noting that Mrs. Mary Velnet has not given much attention to the presence of man in her account. This denial refers to the absence of men in her life. As I have mentioned earlier in this essay, Mrs. Mary Velnet's journey comes as a fulfilment of her absent husband desire. So her husband was absent before her captivity and in her narrative she does not mention that he has attempted to look for her or has tried to ransom her. So, in her account she reflects his absence and by doing so she criticises all feminine thoughts that she used to believe in. It is worth noting that during her captivity, Mrs. Mary Velnet finds herself without any protection of her husband however she is exposed to danger by him. In fact, throughout her captivity experience, she has been obliged to accept different living conditions from those of her "womanhood" culture which urges women to be clean both bodily and spiritually. Accordingly, and as Christopher Castiglia explains that:

Since the captive could not maintain these standards, as defined by her culture, during her captivity, her sense of "womanhood" necessarily become more issue in the nineteenth century than in earlier periods. The captives' anxious self-distancing from other white women suggests both the fixity of their cultural constructions of "womanhood" and how far their narratives took them beyond those definitions. Female captives seldom credit other white women possessing bravery or physical strength, imagining themselves as unique exception to the "norm" of femininity¹⁴. (pp. 61-62).

In view of the fact that Mrs. Mary Velnet could not preserve those cultural standards; in her narrative, she indeed creates a different image of herself as if not bodily clean however as body strong. In many times she depicts herself as strong enough to bear various types of torment the fact that result in her difference from other women in her native country. In relation to this point she says that:

The irons every where round my body, and their weight was insupportable, nor could I imagine it was possible I should habituate myself to them or endure them long enough to expect deliverance. A thou, and reasons convinced me it was necessary to end my sufferings. I shall not enter into theological disputes: let those who blame me imagine themselves in my situation; or rather let them first actually endure my miseries, and then let them reason¹⁵. (pp. 63-64).

So, it is clear that through her captivity account she tries to convince other women in her country that she was exposed to different conditions of life which pushes her to act differently. And so she is proud of the fact that she was able to proof that she is a different woman and overthrows those "womanhood" standards of femininity of women. She is thus an exception to these norms. Indeed by doing so, she contributes in the early feminine writing tradition.

As has been shown, Mrs. Mary Velnet is still one of rare captivity accounts which exhibit women's enslavement in North Africa. Her journey and her imprisonment in underground dungeon and cells symbolize her journey towards the self to come out with different beliefs from those of her feminine culture. As I have analysed in this essay, Mrs. Mary Velnet's captivity among the Tripolitan community embodies her imprisonment as well as other women's via the submission to patriarchy and their tendencies to escape its doctrines. Furthermore, the ideas of imprisonment and escape in the narrative echo some of the nineteenth century feminine writing traditions. For instance, the escape via madness through which Mrs. Mary Velnet tries to break away from her sufferings that are chiefly caused by patriarchal authority. This authority that is manifested through different men characters in the narrative. Furthermore, Mrs. Mary Velnet's captivity account as well as many other women captivity narratives creates a source of inspiration to many women novelists to develop the feminine writing tradition of the early nineteenth century into well expressed and developed feminist thoughts in their fiction production.

Endnotes

- [1]. Mary Velnet, *An Affecting History Of The Captivity And Sufferings Of Mrs. Mary VelnetAn Italian Lady .Why? Who? Was Seven Years. A Slave In Tripoli, Three Of Which She Was Confined In A Dungeon, Loaded With Irons; And Four Times Put To The Most Cruel Tortures Ever Invented By Man. Written By Herself, Second American Edition* (Sag Harbor And New York: Aldkn Spooner, 1806), 55-56.
- [2]. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago Press, 1977), 26-58.
- [3]. Mary Velnet, *An Affecting History Of The Captivity And Sufferings Of Mrs. Mary VelnetAn Italian Lady .Why? Who? Was Seven Years. A Slave In Tripoli, Three Of Which She Was Confined In A Dungeon, Loaded With Irons; And Four Times Put To The Most Cruel Tortures Ever Invented By Man. Written By Herself, Second American Edition* (Sag Harbor And New York: Aldkn Spooner, 1806), 24.
- [4]. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago Press, 1977), 26.
- [5]. Elaine Showalter, "Towards Feminist Poetics" In *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays On Women Literature, And Theory*, Ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago Press, 1986), 137-139.
- [6]. Sandra M Gilbert, Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman In The Attic: The Woman Writer And The Nineteenth- Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven And London: Yale University Press, 1979), 85.
- [7]. Mary Velnet, *An Affecting History Of The Captivity And Sufferings Of Mrs. Mary VelnetAn Italian Lady .Why? Who? Was Seven Years. A Slave In Tripoli, Three Of Which She Was Confined In A Dungeon, Loaded With Irons; And Four Times Put To The Most Cruel Tortures Ever Invented By Man. Written By Herself, Second American Edition* (Sag Harbor And New York: Aldkn Spooner, 1806), 11.
- [8]. *Ibid.*, 16.
- [9]. *Ibid.*, 23.
- [10]. *Ibid.*, 61-62.
- [11]. Sandra M Gilbert, Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman In The Attic: The Woman Writer And The Nineteenth- Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven And London: Yale University Press, 1979), 77.
- [11]. Mary Velnet, *An Affecting History Of The Captivity And Sufferings Of Mrs. Mary VelnetAn Italian Lady .Why? Who? Was Seven Years. A Slave In Tripoli, Three Of Which She Was Confined In A Dungeon, Loaded With Irons; And Four Times Put To The Most Cruel Tortures Ever Invented By Man. Written By Herself, Second American Edition* (Sag Harbor And New York: Aldkn Spooner, 1806), 62.
- [12]. *Ibid.*, 68.
- [13]. CristopherCasteglia, *Bound And Determined: Captivity, Culture-Crossing, And White Womanhood From Mary Rowlandson To Patty Hearst* (Chicago And London: The University Of Chicago Press, 1996), 61-62.
- [14]. Mary Velnet, *An Affecting History Of The Captivity And Sufferings Of Mrs. Mary VelnetAn Italian Lady .Why? Who? Was Seven Years. A Slave In Tripoli, Three Of Which She Was Confined In A Dungeon, Loaded With Irons; And Four Times Put To The Most Cruel Tortures Ever Invented By Man. Written By Herself, Second American Edition* (Sag Harbor And New York: Aldkn Spooner, 1806), 63-64.