

Mira Mattar's *Yes, I Am A Destroyer* (2020)

Review

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“It has been possible to fulfil the requirements by performing, with a minimum of effort, a series of repetitive tasks.”

So opens *Yes, I Am A Destroyer*, Mira Mattar's dazzling hybrid of experimental prose, autofiction, and poetry that resists the stricturing confines of embodiment, selfhood and identity at every turn. Described by its publisher, Ma Bibliothèque, as an “anti-Bildungsroman in the collapsing first person”, *Destroyer* interrogates the dissonance between the seemingly infinite capaciousness of the first person pronoun and the constant labour required to force this boundless ‘I’ to cohere into an orderly, socially acceptable semblance of personhood.

For *Destroyer*'s unnamed narrator, this labour is central to how she operates in the world. Her personality is tailored to fit in with presumed social norms so she can “navigate more successfully the tepid, necessary spheres and join more evenly with the seductive delusions of others” (9). The few opinions and preferences she has are invented “just to have something to say in company when I am among it ... To give an impression that there is something there” (11). The narrator is only truly intimate with her fear of the “bludgeoning continuity” (11) that defines her existence, the endless stretching out of time before her, the absence

of limits discretely bounding her selfhood. It is only by allowing this fear to guide her that she can stay within the sanctioned confines of the status quo.

The narrator professes that she is “not interested in the theories” of “psychologists and philosophers” (12). The same cannot be said for Mattar, who provides an extensive bibliography of creative and academic texts that informed the writing of *Destroyer*. Viewed through this lens, *Destroyer* can be conceived of as an exploration of the subjectless position evinced by poststructuralist critique – and by feminist and queer theory in particular. “They told me I was a girl and I believed them. It taught me who I may and may not love, how to arrive at femininity and what I may and may not invoice for,” the narrator relays (18). For her, gender, like everything else, is external, something imposed upon her without her consent but relentless in its demands for constant upkeep. The narrator diligently performs the expectations of this assigned gender, carefully monitoring her diet and exercising to control her weight, slavishly adhering to complex and intricate beauty regimens, dressing in an appropriately feminine manner, willing her physical form to align with the socially acceptable contours of the word ‘woman’, all while working equally hard to “conceal its maintenance” (23).

In exposing the gap between the self and its embodiment as constructed by both sex and gender, the resonances between *Destroyer* and Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity are pronounced (interestingly, Butler does not feature in Mattar’s bibliography). Yet if Butler drew attention to the performed nature of gender to destabilise the tyranny of rigid identity categories, for the narrator of *Destroyer* the illusion of a coherent personhood generated by this performance of fixity affords a certain freedom. It stabilises her. It helps her to “avoid becoming known” (25). Escape from gendered expectations, from a predefined subjecthood, can be liberatory, but it can also provoke a confrontation with the limitlessness – the terrifying unknowability – of a self untethered from the obligation to play by the rules or to accept the hand that you’ve been dealt. The stability offered by the mandate to ceaselessly signify that which you are *meant* to signify is a source of respite for the narrator. Mattar thereby adroitly complicates Butlerian constructions of gender by acknowledging its artifice and constraints while simultaneously questioning the implications for a (subjectless) self that exists beyond it.

Capitalism is equally integral to the narrator of *Destroyer*’s performance of a self. She works as a governess for a wealthy family, whose luxurious, elegantly decorated home starkly contrasts with the dingy, asceticism of her own room. She views her employers with contempt:

My job is to help them maintain the vast soft cushion between themselves and anything hard so they would always land not only on their feet, but on the feet and hands of others, on their heads and on their hearts on and on thus creating beneath them a solidified mass (12).

I teach what suits the ruling class, I am a servant of the nobility (74).

Although Mattar is excoriating in her depictions of the class differentials between the narrator and her employers, she introduces an element of ambiguity that complicates this reading. The narrator's job contributes to the illusion of a knowable self that she projects – “Look at her, regular, waged” (29) – as once again the repetition of unwanted but necessary labour creates a simulacrum of a person that can function subjectlessly. However, it is when Mattar conflates the narrator's two performances – as a woman and a diligent employee – that perhaps her true intentions can be glimpsed. The narrator simultaneously covets and despises the mother of the child she is paid to look after, a wealthy white woman. Like the narrator herself, her employer too performs gender and class, donning tastefully understated designer outfits, wearing her expensively cut hair in an unfussy ponytail because she's too busy doing charitable work and raising a family to be bothered with more ostentatious styles (although of course, any actual time/money saved as a result of presenting yourself in such a 'simple' manner is often far less important than the *appearance* of such savings). At times, the boundaries between the narrator and her employer dissolve, as she charms her boss, exploiting her cultural capital to make 'cool', stylish suggestions (gleaned from the narrator's obsession with appearing like a person who know things that a young person such as her might be expected to know). She fantasises about being loved by her boss, about becoming her, embodying her.

Mattar presents two women, both sculpting an image to present to the world distinct from whatever can be understood as the 'I' behind the 'I'. But she resolutely rejects the speciousness of any notion of common ground. “Her favourite bit is to pretend that because we share an accident of birth we have something in common. That because we have something in common, we have something in common,” writes the narrator (77). Everything may be a performance, but the stakes are not equally shouldered by all actors. The choice to refuse to play your part cannot be separated so easily from the role that you have been cast in. Through this juxtaposition, Mattar argues that the ability to occupy a subjectless positionality always remains contingent upon one's circumstances. In this light,

the narrator's seeming embrace of the labour necessitated by her gender and class circumstances is less a veneration of the conditions of womanhood and capitalism than a grudging acceptance of the absence of a viable alternative.

That's not to say that no such possibilities for subjecthood are presented in *Destroyer*. In one particularly effective passage towards the book's climax, the narrator experiences a profound link to the world around her:

I am part of their world, this world, hairballs and the cats that retch them, this smell, autumn's fetid mulch, the floating waste of sewers, the pavement's hocked mucus, all that is spat out by disgusted creatures, that which will become fuel and be burnt, that which burns, the carcasses of dead pets, spring-pink cherry blossoms swirling, each pigeon's shit adorning each mansion's windows, the arm of the woman stretching around the grand window's edge to scrub thoroughly away at it, her other hand resting on the interior window's sill for balance, I am the shit itself being slowly but evenly scrubbed away and falling in specks and flakes to the sill or the ground, parts of it sticking to the rag which is not a rag but a pale-blue microfibre ultra-absorbent ultra-strong cotton cloth that came in a pack of three for £10.99 from an online delivery from a luxury supermarket from a warehouse in Hatfield from a factory in India from the cotton of the cotton fields of Maharashtra picked and decontaminated manually before being spun by the blistered hands of masked suicidal pickers and which, upon washing after use, will shed itself in microfibrinous granules and eventually be deposited into the great plasticisation of oceans. *Now* I am connected to everything (81–2).

Here Mattar severs the link between selfhood (however it is conceived) and discrete, specifically human embodiment. The distinctions between the narrator and other women, the narrator and animals, the narrator and animal waste, the narrator and inorganic matter, are flattened, suggesting that a disavowal of embodied subjectivity can open up expansive ways of understanding existence. This narrative shift recalls recent works by Rebecca Tamás and Daisy Hildyard (*Strangers: Essays on the Human & Nonhuman* and *The Second Body*, respectively), which seek to reconsider the centrality of humanity in conceptions of the world. Mattar fuses those critiques with the incessant workings of globalised racial capitalism, underscoring that any expanded notion of selfhood will only be truly meaningful when equally available to all.

At the conclusion of *Destroyer*, the dissolution of the borders between the narrator and the world around her are mirrored by the breakdown of language. Whereas the bulk of the book is conveyed in short vignettes, this final section is a fragmentary collage of images and sensations. But once again, this collapse can be thought of not as a failure of language, but as a broadening of its horizons. Language, of course, is another means of performing a self, but it is also a way to construct new shared realities: “making a new language for a new world / or a new world / from a new language” (102). For Mattar, language can never hope to fully capture the vastness of consciousness. But it’s as close as we can get to “each pulsing universe glimpsed at the feeling limit of skin, of all that is shared which is all there is” (105).

WORK CITED

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