

Gillian M. E. Alban. *The Medusa Gaze in Contemporary Women's Fiction: Petrifying, Maternal and Redemptive*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017. Pp. xviii, 282. £61.99. ISBN: 9781443891486.

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Fearful and intriguing, Medusa is also an oppressed and scorned mythological female figure of the ancient Greeks. Medusa's iconic image has continued to influence artists and writers, while also directing the theoretical framework of scholars. In her recent study, Gillian M. E. Alban revisits this inspiring female archetype from the perspective of Medusa's gaze. This study takes its cue from this gaze, as an impetus that petrifies the objectifying or diminishing force of the Other, leading to madness and death, while elsewhere fortifying and invigorating the psyche.

In addition to Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical perspectives, Alban employs the framework of leading names in the field of feminist theory (including but not limited to Laura Mulvey, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray). The book's major concern is to explore women characters through the literary works of nine contemporary writers, analysing how these female figures regain their voice despite their oppressively debilitating societies.

In the first chapter, Angela Carter's "Wolf-Alice" (1979) and *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) are discussed in the light of Lacanian mirror stage as well as Mulvey's gaze theory. Various women's struggle against the debilitating gazes of both men and women in these works are investigated, while their voyeuristic elements are extensively explored. Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) are amongst novels the second chapter delves into. Alban's analysis concentrates on the hazardous entrapment of the gaze that is reflected through the mirror image within the lives of female characters in many texts.

The book also reflects on maternal concerns related to the Medusa gaze. Chapter three is dedicated to mother and daughter figures in contemporary writings like Tony Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Alban interlinks various works through the theme of motherhood, offering the reader a comparative



analysis of colourful female characters. She invokes feminist criticism while supporting her thesis, underscoring the heavy duties of mothering. Alban ponders whether those duties may have transformed the castigated Medusa archetype into a wicked or devouring figure (115). The perspectives of daughters are also considered while evaluating the demands of maternal commitments.

Chapter four takes the reader to Gaia, mother earth. Compromising, self-sacrificing mother figures are explored through the theoretical perspectives of Melanie Klein, Nancy Chodorow and Julia Kristeva. Alban discusses the maternal experience with its nurturing and challenging aspects in works such as A. S. Byatt's *Still Life* (1985), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), Angela Carter's *Sadeian Woman* (1978), Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973). She demonstrates how a Freudian psychoanalytical perspective might be misleading as it encapsulates mothers within certain negative patterns.

The fifth chapter illustrates how Medusa's potential serves as a lucky charm or evil eye in paralyzing her opponents with her cataclysmic gaze. The dichotomy between female power and goddess mightiness is discussed through literary works like A. S. Byatt's *The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* (1994), Michèle Robert's *The Wild Girl* (1984) and *Daughters of the House* (1992). Alban traces the symbolism behind talismanic elements within these works. She underlines that these elements epitomize the concept of the female divine, providing a creative source for the women writers of these literary texts.

The binary between good fortune and the demolishing force of Medusa power is reflected in the last chapter. Alban underlines the multi-layered aspects of the Medusa gaze, a destructive force that may entrap women within a vicious loop of fury, resentment and atrocity. Here, she examines Atwood's *The Robber Bride* (1993) and Iris Murdoch's *A Severed Head* (1961), amongst other literary texts.

All in all, this study presents a wide spectrum of literary analysis which is not restricted to a particular milieu of contemporary women's writing. Thus, this fascinating research offers an insightful guide and powerful reference to literary scholars, presenting strikingly appealing Medusas within its discussion of characters. Alban constantly supports the reader regarding ongoing arguments and offered conclusions within each chapter section. However, with its effort to analyse the varying aspects of the Medusa gaze in extensive detail, and probably concerned not to omit any significant literary work by the evaluated women writers from the sixties to

the present, there are slight overlaps within the discussion. Nevertheless, literary scholars, particularly those engaged with contemporary women's writing, will appreciate the rich resources of Alban's analysis in this thorough and insightful study.

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