Discursive Vulnerability and Identity Development: A Triangular Model of Bio-forces in Cultural Ecological Analysis of American Romance Fiction

Maryam Mazloomian
Department of English Literature, Alzahra University
Postal Code: 1993891176, Tehran, Iran.
Email; m.mazloumian@alzahra.ac.ir
Nahid Mohammadi
Department of English Literature, Alzahra University
Postal Code: 1993891176, Tehran, Iran.
Email: na.mohammadi@alzahra.ac.ir

Abstract   This multidisciplinary study examines the discursive representation of vulnerability in Debbie Macomber's bestseller, *A Girl's Guide to Moving On (2016)*. It is conducted in the light of the psychosocial theories focusing on self-others interaction and identity development of the selected heroines. Also, by applying Brené Brown's theoretical understanding of vulnerability as a social work construct, Hubert Zapf's cultural ecology theorization, and Foucauldian notion of power, the present paper elucidates the ways in which vulnerability concept can be used as a lens to look at its impact on identity development of the selected heroines. Given its negative and dark stance usually associated with notions of weakness, frailty, grief, despair etc., vulnerability is discussed as a result of a metadiscourse in socio-cultural system which is created out of human intimate relationships and emotions such as trust and love. However, if being recognized and embraced, vulnerability can be seen as an imaginary counter-discourse which gains its potential only by self, interacting with the society. The analysis shows that the re-integrative inter-discourse as embodied in re-connection, results in love and belonging within the cultural reality-system. It concludes that how the proposed triad conceptualization of vulnerability traces the interpersonal relationships to reconstructing a new self.
Key words   vulnerability; cultural ecology; Debbie Macomber; contemporary American romance fiction; self-others interaction; psychosocial theories of

development

Author   Maryam Mazloomian is a PhD graduate in Postcolonial Studies in English Language at Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM, Malaysia. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher in Department of English Literature, Alzahra University. Her area of research includes: interdisciplinary studies, Cultural Ecology, Identity development theories, Diaspora and cultural studies, psychosocial and developmental psychology, American literature; **Nahid Mohammadi** is a PhD graduate in American Literature from Augsburg University of Germany. She is currently an assistant professor in department of English Literature at Alzahra University. Her fields of interest and research include interdisciplinary studies, ecocriticism, American Literature, literary theories, philosophy of literature.

Vulnerability: The Paradoxical Key to Connection and Development of the Self

Given its centrality in all human emotions (Brown, "Daring Greatly" 5), vulnerability plays an important role in love and romantic relationships as thematised in contemporary romance fiction. The concept, in general has negative connotations, mostly attributed by dark emotions such as weakness, sadness, fragility and helplessness. In Merriam-Webster, according to Brown, vulnerability denotes "open to attack or damage" or "capable of being wounded" which interestingly converges with the definition of "weakness" as "the inability to withstand attack or wounding" (20). However, a more thorough outlook towards the term, makes vulnerability as key to human communications and interactions, due to its productive potential in assisting the psychosocial identity development (Erikson, "The Life Cycle Completed" 28). So, the term is an essential component of human connection and growth if only being recognized and embraced.

Vulnerability could be considered as a paradoxical concept in the way it associates with negative emotions, while simultaneously is essential to human interactions and development. The contradictory essence of vulnerability beside its functional role in human culture, makes the concept compatible with cultural ecology's theorization of literature developed by Hubert Zapf. Based on Zapf's theory, literature's unique potential of creative and cognitive power is driven from a triadic dynamic including a cultural-critical meta-discourse, an imaginative counter-discourse and a re-integrative inter-discourse ("Literature as Cultural Ecology" 138-141). It is hypothesized that the fear experienced by the characters of the novel is the outcome of a normative social negative attitude towards life emotional crisis. This is the socially-established way of thinking that should be criticized since it only considers the negative aspects of vulnerability which ascribes to characters'

fear, shame, frustration, failure and despair; However, according to psychological theories, even though crisis is traumatic and threatening to human's life, it could be regarded as an opportunity to either growth or decline (Updegraff and Taylor 20). Accordingly, embracing vulnerability by the characters of the novel could be considered as a counterforce to the discussed meta-discourse which they use to break up the social repressive cliché and attitude towards crisis. In this regard, the meaning of being vulnerable and helpless due to a threatening situation could be changed into a productive opportunity to challenge the meta-discourse. This positive challenging mindset in turn, provides a constructive opportunity in which the characters take action and struggle to start over and to move on by the help of their experience and change they had been going through after a crisis. Therefore, self-other re-connection or the re-integration of meta- and counter-discourse emerges when the characters are able to move on that crisis and recognize, embrace and overcome their fears and take their vulnerability for granted to develop a new sense of self.

It is also assumed that the unravelling and resilience proceeded by the heroines' embracing vulnerability symbolically implies the empowerment of the main characters who challenge the social norm naturalized by being integrated to everyday life. This power defines what they are (Sindic et al. 2). According to Foucault power is discursive and relational that is exercised unevenly in the society throughout the social bodies (McLaren 37, 64). In this vein, the current examination of identity developmental process which is conducted in the light of the psychosocial theories and defines self as the social being, heavily influenced by the social interactions, is compatible with the ways in which power is exercised. One of the main significant social concepts between self and others is communication and the effective factors that help breaking the social constraints and achieve a balanced self-other interaction throughout the developmental process via overcoming the fear and shame of being vulnerable to those socio-culturally accepted stereotypes.

Furthermore, communication as one of the human's natural needs plays an influential role in shaping human culture and giving meaning into our life in today's era (Castells 4; ch. 1). Therefore, being a key to connection, vulnerability is of great importance which should be accepted and embraced as a "gift of imperfection" (Brown, "The Gifts of Imperfection" 13) by the individuals. This embracement will function as a counteraction and a medium which can facilitate self-reconstruction process. The current paper will explore the ways in which vulnerability is represented within the selected novel when being experienced and embraced by the main characters in response to the cultural-critical metadiscourse that ultimately

leads to reconnection and development of the self.

For the current analysis, a romance fiction bestseller, *A Girl's Guide to Moving On* (2016) written by the American author Debbie Macomber is selected. The novel portrays the two female protagonists – Leanne (the mother-in-law) and Nicole (her daughter-in-law) – who are struggling to move on their husbands' infidelity and the emotional crisis proceeds through the ways they deal with their vulnerable status. The objectives of the present study are first, to examine the ways in which being vulnerable, fearful and shameful of a life crisis such as divorce influence the selected heroines' development. Second, the current paper analyses the ways in which the selected protagonists counteract with the normative social negative attitude towards divorce by resorting to their own attributes, hope for a better future, and courage. Finally, to synthesize the ways in which embracing vulnerability by the heroines could lead to an inter-discourse through sense of love, belonging and developing a new self.

Vulnerability and the Romance Fictions

The ubiquity of the notion of vulnerability has placed the term at the centre of so many studies in humanities and social science during recent decades (Ganteau 2, 7, 12). It covers a broad range of topics in diverse multidisciplinary fields such as psychology, sociology, geography and environmental studies and so on. Within the literary canon and specifically contemporary fictional narratives, vulnerability has been examined in terms of its relationships to many fields of research including poetics, politics, ethics and trauma studies with a focus on the female protagonists of the novel (Ganteau and Onega 1-16). The previous research studied vulnerability as the notion related to diverse disciplines and approaches such as trauma studies and the theories of ethics, care, feminism psychology, ecological and sociological perspectives (Goodin 1-208; Gilligan 1-185; McKenzie et al. 1-317; Hirsch 1-2; Vital 297-313) However, these studies consider a negative value for the concept of vulnerability and attempt to reduce the negative effects it brings up. Yet, the viewpoint that the present study holds is opposite to the normative negative one which also considers the positive dimension of the term in human's life and the essential role it plays in the process of identity development via its effect in the interpersonal relationships. Given the fictional context of literature, the vulnerability as represented in contemporary romance narratives denotes the very basic feature of the heroine which although it creates traumatic experience, it leads to growth and development of the character.

The general definition of the term vulnerability has roots in its Latin origin,

"Vulnerare" which means "to wound" (Patterson 1). Accordingly, being vulnerable in different contexts is usually described as being exposed to harm and wound associated with concepts of weakness, vanquish and frailty. However, within the context of human relationships and social interactions in general and the intimate love relationships in particular, vulnerability becomes a condition that forms and opens up the gates to love, intimacy and closeness (Brown, "The Gifts of Imperfection" 5-17; *Daring Greatly* 105) while simultaneously it makes lovers unarmed and exposed to be wounded. In the present paper, we attempt to examine the ways in which vulnerability, as a discursive term, is represented in selected contemporary romance fiction. Even though past studies mainly are concerned with the negative connotation of the term, little attention has been paid to discussion of vulnerability as a power tool which could be utilized in human developmental process. Hence, the current work tries to fill the gap by proposing a conceptual model consisting of the ways through which vulnerability could be looked at as a counter force to the meta-discourse of the present negative normative attitude towards life crisis in general, and divorce particularly, within the American society as the same system in which the term is originated.

Although vulnerability has been considered as weakness, frailty and the wounding capacity (Campana 12), it has been known as "the heart of romance" in which lovers are set (Ganteau 39; Pearce ch. 2). In his study, Ganteau regards wounding, sore hearts and being prone to a broken heart at the core of romantic affiliation as the origin where "contact and connection" (41) arise. However, the trauma followed by vulnerability as depicted in romantic narratives is repetitive which leads one to return, a view that causes the romance be seen as an open or incomplete mode (Parker 14, 35, 45, 60, 76, 87, 173). In this sense, vulnerability is the main cause of forming a vicious circle in which the protagonist risks by being prone to be hurt and giving one's individuation in a desire for love and connection (Winterson 222). This metaphorical two-sided double blade, signifies the paradoxical and discursive nature of vulnerability; while being vulnerable increases the possibility of hurt feelings and wound, it functions as an important and fundamental element in forming love relationships among individuals. This feature in turn, challenges the purely negative connotation of the term and opens up a new venue to approach vulnerability not as a human weakness but as a substantial psychosocial factor in identity formation. Hence, a sense of risk-taking lies in the romance since departing "relentlessly" from one's self or being vulnerable and exposed are preludes to "the quest for love" and intimate "connection" (Ganteau 41). However, if recognized and embraced, this exposure could be transformed to

an influential factor in interpersonal contexts on which identity development of the heroines is depended. Also, the aesthetics and ethical study of the term hold on the idea as vulnerability being imperative in human communications (41). "Individual and society are intricately woven, dynamically related in continual change" (Erikson, "Identity and the Life Cycle" 114). Given the social essence of human being by nature the current study takes on the idea of inevitable and pivotal presence of vulnerability in attachment and inter-connection.

Moreover, the representation of vulnerability in the romance as an empowerment tool for the oppressed has been previously studied (Fuchs 29). This type of vulnerability evocation in romance affirms the feminist perspective which marks the genre's potential to dislocate politics (Radford 14-16; Pearce and Wisker 15) by distributing power in the society and giving voice to the powerless and the oppressed mostly women and slaves (Elam 23). Although the feminist point of view is beyond the scope of the present study, the empowering mechanism of vulnerability as an integral element in interpersonal human relationships constitutes one of the main concerns of the current analysis.

Vulnerability and the Triadic Dynamic of Romance Fictions

The interaction between the individual and society has been the central idea of the psychosocial theories (Erikson, "Identity and the Life Cycle" 1-171; *Identity: Youth and Crisis* 1-336 ; *The Life Cycle Completed* 15-131). In the light of the psychosocial and developmental approaches and from this theoretical context, the importance of "love and romantic relationships" raises which is known as "the most intimate human communications which has connection with self-identity development" (Mazloomian et al. 167).

The interrelationship between psychological (self) and social (others) as the core idea of the psychosocial theories is also fundamental in cultural ecological theories such as Hubert Zapf's. According to Zapf ("Ecocriticism" 137-139), cultural ecosystems play important role within human cultural system as a whole and literature significantly functions as one of the mentioned subsystems; it uses its internal potential of self-renewal and raises consciousness in an individual while at the same time it concerns with the self's environment.

Furthermore, literature as a powerful symbolic form of cultural ecology celebrates the diversities, complexity and differences of the mind through the representation of cultural imagination, creation and social interactions that form the modern man's cultural ecosystems. However, the individuals are vulnerable to standardized norms and overgeneralizations that are imposed by the surrounding

society. The power of literary innovation and cultural self-renewal lies in the interconnection of human and nature or the individual's mentality and the environmental/social forces (either human or non-human).

The unique potential of literary creative and cognitive power is driven from a triadic dynamic in its relationship to a more inclusive cultural system that are: "a cultural-critical metadiscourse, an imaginative counter-discourse, and a re-integrative inter-discourse" (Zapf, "Ecocriticism" 138). Through its textual form, does literature rebel against the rigid social ideologies, norms and structures, give voice to the marginalized and bridge the culturally-separated gap in between. In this regard, literature reciprocates the established interpretation of man's life by empowering the excluded or repressed halves of the self and the world. Therefore, based on this perspective, a balanced interconnection between the internal as well as external landscapes of humans -as both instinctual and cultural beings- is considered by means of literary products. The following paragraphs will discuss the current framework's approach to power and the significance of vulnerability in conceptualizing the ways in which imaginative counter-discourse is represented against the metadiscourse as explicated in the social norms and stereotypes within the selected corpus.

Further, the idea of power as to be "discursive rather than purely coercive" has been first coined by Foucault, based on which power "constitutes agents rather than being deployed by them" (Gaventa 1). Promoting norms, standards and stereotypes are what define the mechanism of this form of disciplinary power (Foucault, "Discipline and Punish" 170-230; Pylypa 21-35). In other words, Foucauldian understanding of power concerns with the ways in which norms impact individuals and their lives beyond their perception, by making them discipline themselves without any external forces. One of the ways of exercising power is discipline. Also, according to Foucault, power is exchanged and exercised on a relational basis in all human relationships, yet in different forms (Foucault, "Power/Knowledge" 98). This view mainly emphasizes the juxtaposition of the power as a relational entity causing a discursive practice to be emerged. This body of knowledge, in turn, determines the norms and controls what is defined as common, or socially accepted. One of the influential roles in exercising this form of discursive power is played by "communication networks" which causes the circulation and "production of knowledge" (Castells 5).

It is assumed that the metadiscourse as embodied in the negative attitude towards life crisis as focused in the current paper, stems from this type of normative social demands that oppress the individuals. Accordingly, it is attempted to offer a

way to resist against this constraint by following a conceptualized model that takes the discussed negativity at its centre. In other words, embracing vulnerability as represented in the selected novel highlights the ways to distribution of power in the society.

Respectively, social relationships and communications are regarded as the means to acknowledge about other value systems and beliefs rather than own in the developmental process. Although there is no coercion in accepting and conforming to the social norms, they are still considered as power being exercised which constraints the individual. Meanwhile, feeling vulnerable to the social constraints and against the socially defined ideology - once it is entrenched as everyday life's practice - is one of the influential factors in social communications of the self and environmental sources. So, the vulnerability experienced by the selected heroines of the novel within the psychological as well as social contexts is the main focus of this paper.

For the purpose of the current paper, the analysis is conducted within the three discourses as conceptualized by Zapf (138) with a focus on the self-others interaction and the concept of vulnerability. Within the first cultural-critical metadiscourse, the social normative view towards life crisis will be discussed. At this level, the discussion attempts to show how the novel as a metadiscourse culturally criticizes the socially-constituted system of interpretation that is normalized. The argument is based on the hypothesis of how the normative negative social attitude towards life crisis –divorce and emotional separation in the selected corpus- becomes a risk and threat for the heroines. Emotions of fear, shame, frustration and despair are the constructs and emotions resulted by this attitudinal restriction. Although the heroines need to be exposed in order to move on and to socially interact, they find it difficult and fearful and they choose "silence" to stay disconnected rather than facing with their fear of being vulnerable. Hence, the vulnerability at this level equals to a threatening factor in heroines' psychosocial lives.

The second analysis section is dedicated to the discussion on how the novel functions as "an imaginative counter-discourse articulating and valorising that which is excluded by the socially dominant systems of reality" (Bergthaller 1; Zapf, "Literature as Cultural Ecology" 95). In this case, the heroines begin to challenge the negative normative orientation toward divorce. It will be elaborated that how the main female characters' resistance and constructive mindset help them to change the risking opportunity into protection which in turn, conducts them to recognize their vulnerability and fear. So, at this level, they struggle to get themselves prepared

for a new life by embracing their fears as a counter-response to the oppressive metadiscourse. Therefore, courage, daring and hope are the key-concepts to be discussed.

Lastly, when the heroines put themselves at the line by embracing their vulnerability practically, they try to re-integrate the metadiscourse and counter-discourse to achieve a compromise. Consequently, at this level the heroines put their trust and vulnerability into practice to interact with the society. They struggle to negotiate a new relationship and a renewed life by the changes they make based on the experiences they gained. At this level, vulnerability is considered as a re-productive concept which re-connects self and others and results in a new love and sense of belonging which ultimately leads to develop the heroines' new sense of selves. In what follows a discussion is made in three subsections by employing the conceptualized framework described to examine the representation of the term vulnerability by the selected author.

Be Vulnerable, Stay Connected and Be Loved

As being discussed earlier, communication involves being vulnerable and open to be wounded. That is why the concept has been viewed as a risk and negative factor which seemingly hinder human's psychosocial development. Because being vulnerable might cause hurt and pain and finally leads to a life crisis, there exists a negative normative attitude towards being vulnerable. So, the metadiscourse is this negative socially-normalized way of thinking towards the life crisis and vulnerability it causes. However, if being recognized, challenged and embraced, the discussed situation could be changed from risk to a protective tool leading one to a sense of love and re-connection as essential in developing a new self.

Metadiscourse: Vulnerability as a Negative Stand

Being a form of emotional crisis, divorce could be considered as a platform from which one can either grow or decline. It is considered as "not a threat of catastrophe, but a turning point, a crucial period of increased vulnerability and heightened potential" (Erikson, "Identity: Youth and Crisis" 96). However, it is difficult to think of the consequences of the mentioned crisis within the modern society that still considers divorce as a "taboo" due to the destructive changes it makes by "breaking the home" (Glaeser 1) and the social threatening effect it causes (Gilson 26, 76). As a result, people find it quite precarious and insecure to put in their trust and to invest on another love relationship with the risk of being hurt again. In this regard, the cultural-critical metadiscourse as embodied in the negative

orientation dominating the society and represented in the selected novel affects the individuals' way of coping with the distressing event. As a result, the individuals find themselves fearful, desperate, shameful and helpless when facing with the crisis.

Macomber clearly represents the American society's negative ideology towards divorce in her novel through the fear the heroines feel for the following psychological and social influences on their lives. For example, we read how Nicole's "social life dried up" once she "filed for divorce". Even though Nicole seems not to care about becoming a "third wheel" in their married-life friendships, she was annoyed by the way the "so-called friends … gossip" about her married life as well as her husband's "indiscretions" (Girl's Guide 6). Beside social exclusion experienced by the heroine, Nicole was fearful of other consequences of divorce. For instance, she is scared of "being alone", "finances" and lack of "support" which all make the distressing event a "complete upheaval" in her life (4). However, she is not sure of being able to "ever trust him again" rather than to continue to live with her husband (89); Nicole's confusion and doubt on whether to finalize her divorce or to forgive her husband and return to live with him again implicitly conveys her psychosocial conflict; on the one hand, she feels so terrible and devastating as if her "heart pounded like the judge's gavel, securing the nails in the coffin of my marriage" when she looks at the final signed and recorded divorce papers (144), while on the other hand, she feels to be surrendered by "a deep sense of loss and unreality" (19). Therefore, it is difficult for the heroine to strike a balance between how miserable she feels about putting an end to her married life and equally how undaunted and insistent she is on her decision to get divorced. Although it could be said that the discussed conflict has psychological basis as it deals with the character's emotions and feelings, it could also be viewed as her serious and intense concern about the social consequences of her divorce. Evidently, the death imagery as the writer uses emphasizes the notion of the divorce as being extremely mortal and dismal against life.

Also, the unwelcoming and despising feature of divorce and separation is apparently reflected in the case of the second heroine of the novel. Leanne is a middle-aged woman who has chosen "denial" for thirty-five years to her husband's cheating (195). Even though the question to her voluntarily silence remains unanswered, it could be implied as her uncertainty and ambivalence as she looks at herself as "a woman unloved and discarded by her husband years before she had the courage and the strength to walk away" (226). However, after divorce, Leanne's response to her silence is anger as "directed at" no one but "herself" which makes

her wonder and regret why she "waited so long to take care of herself emotionally and spiritually" by putting an end to her marriage (110). The denial, silence and the way she and her husband "separated" their lives "for over last ten years" as "love … between them had died long ago", suggest her inability in accepting the divorce emotionally; but, the way that she tries to live "a pretended life" (215) signifies how she cares about the social aftereffects in the society where she lives:

> I thought of awkward situations that I'd faced in the past. Once I'd sat at the dinner table with a woman and her husband when I knew Sean was currently having an affair with her. I'd been forced to be polite and friendly when I really wanted to do was rage at them both. (195)

The excerpt above exhibits Leanne's fear of how she will be looked at as a divorcee that has its root in the social negative view towards divorce. However, the use of the time adverb "past" shows that the statement is made by Leanne after her divorce which celebrates a counteraction against the discussed metadiscourse as will be elaborated in the next section.

Besides, the novel represents a metadiscourse which not only sees divorce unfavourable, but also disapproves being vulnerable due to the fears and apprehensions ensued. The heroines' anxiety and fear of being emotionally hurt as a result of being exposed and getting involved in another relationship is the result of the mentioned normative ideology. When Nicole finds herself falling for Rocco, she wonders if her feelings for him is "real" or is the result of her starvation for "affection and love" (Girl's Guide 156) she has been deprived of after her divorce. This level of hesitation in giving in and becoming vulnerable enough to restart a new love relationship shows two contrary points. At one point, the heroine finds herself doubtful of putting her vulnerability at the line since she is scared of being hurt again, while at the other, her interest in making a new relationship points out to her ambition and defiance against the frailty and despair she feels after her emotional confrontation.

Similarly, Leanne's fear of risking her openness to receive love and re-connection is pictured obviously in the novel. When she gets conflicted due to a misunderstanding in her almost newly-formed relationship with Nikolai- one of her students at ESL class for the immigrants where she teaches voluntarily after divorce- she says: "I don't like being vulnerable. I prefer to think I'm strong and independent … I'm going to tell him I don't want to see him again … I need to do this to protect me, to protect my heart" (216). Explicitly, the protagonist shows her unwillingness

in starting up a new relationship since she considers being "vulnerable" as being hurt and agonized again and as a result, she decides to follow the fear she feels and to stay in her loneliness as a way of protecting her emotions and feelings from getting injured.

Hence, the negative and threatening outlook on life critical situations such as divorce creates a metadiscourse as represented within the novel. The discussed attitude condemns vulnerability as the main origin of the crisis which influences the main characters of the novel in dealing with pessimistic and despondent emotions such as fear, despair, frustration, frailty and social exclusion. The next section is an elaboration on how the heroines counteract with the metadiscourse as discussed earlier.

Counter-discourse: Embracing Vulnerability

Although divorce is one of the life-changing events in human's life, it could be considered not as an absolute breakdown but as a great "unravelling" (Brown, "The Gifts of Imperfection" 10-11, 31). This positive approach sees divorce as a critical situation in which self-exploration could be practiced. So, affirming to this view, one can counteract with the negative orientation towards the crisis as the metadiscourse which finds the event devastating and so dreadful. When the female protagonists of the novel find their attitudes and feelings in clash with that of the metadiscourse, they get conflicted. Consequently, their mental attitudes incline to resist against the metadiscourse that is constraining. The challenging mindset towards divorce and vulnerability is formed as a counterforce and here is the level at which the characters make up their mind and find enough courage and hope for a better future despite the negative consequences of their decision that they are already aware of.

Macomber brings the imaginative counter-discourse into the light through the title of the novel, A *Guide* that the heroines write for themselves to move on the crisis and to start their life over again. In other words, they gain the courage to endanger their vulnerability and start to face with their doubts and to be authentic by accepting themselves the way they are:

> When Leanne and I (Nicole) created our list for moving on, I never dreamed where it would lead me. The list had helped pave the way, leading us to healing and love. To Rocco and Nikolai. (Girl's Guide 480)

The final excerpt from the novel indicates how the novel is specifically a representation of embracing vulnerability and starting over in order to receive love

and belonging.

Moreover, being vulnerable firstly requires being authentic and real to oneself that in-turn requires self-trust, self-love and self-acceptance as reflected in the novel. Even though Nicole has double-bind feelings and confusion about her divorce, she finally learns to "listen to her guts" (90) that indicates to believe in herself and her very inner feelings to make a final right decision which she understands that "the marriage was over" (99).

In addition, following her instinct and heart in making up her mind, Nicole welcomes another relationship with Rocco that is considered as another critical step to challenge the metadiscourse. In spite of the fact that she is "afraid of what she feels toward Rocco" (194) she finally decides to cherish her vulnerability and give a chance to herself to love and to be loved again. Also, Nicole has been "advised" to follow her guts that highlights the necessity of accepting one-self and having a strong belief and trust in one-self as pre-requisites to harbour vulnerability and dealing with fears and uncertainties that follow.

Likewise, Leanne believes that she is "blessed" by having found "the courage to move on" (476). The word "blessed" metaphorically implies how difficult and farfetched she thinks of moving on process. Leanne understands that the first step to embrace vulnerability is not to "allow yourself to wallow in your pain" which both her and Nicole find "easier than done" (5). This level of awareness and recognition shows the heroines' challenging mindset as a counter-discourse that allows them to be exposed and give their trust and "let go" of their "desperate loneliness" "in order to receive" love and re-connection (15). However, in the beginning of this process, Leanne does not think that having relationships helps with her being happy with her life: "I don't need a man … I'm just learning who I am and what brings me joy" (108). Yet, later on, she finds out that she "is ready to date again" when she thinks of Nikolai who "had shown me exactly how ready I was" (143). Therefore, the character's desire to be loved and her hope for a promising future proceeds when she learns to realize and overcome her fears. This challenging mindset as conceptualized as a counter-discourse is put into action by the selected heroines throughout the novel which will be discussed in the following section.

Inter-discourse: Vulnerability and Self-Others Interactions

The novel could be regarded as an inter-discourse when the heroines put their guide into practice that is well captured by the writer through a few themes of re-growth and re-building life all of which centre their social interaction and inclusion that leads to develop a new self. Within the inter-discourse, the main characters,

attempt to re-connect the society and resolve their conflicts by negotiation that directs them a compromise and reconciliation. They do this by applying the guide they planned to their lives.

The first and the most important step forward to this re-integration is represented throughout the voluntarily jobs both heroines start to take, in order to get themselves "out of the house and force us to stop dwelling in our own loss" (Girl's Guide 6). Leanne chooses to teach as she believes that teaching gives her "a sense of pride and accomplishment". The fact that she teaches voluntarily could be considered as a way to compensate her "shredded self-esteem" and to reclaim her "pride [which] was eaten up with the acid of my husband's infidelity" (35). Also, teaching is a metaphor to the give and receive theme as Leanne finds as satisfying as a way "to ease the pain with a distraction, by giving to others" (39). Besides, the students whom Leanne teaches ESL are immigrants who come "from all around the world" (40) that also directs the reader to the heroine's urge and tendency to re-construct and re-settle home in a better life condition like what her students aspire to.

In a similar vein, Nicole finds a voluntarily dressing job in an agency that "helped dressing women going into the workforce for the first time" (Girl's Guide 40) as delightful and enjoyable. The point that "dressing others was something I[Nicole] loved" (261) could be indicative of her longing for a new start; she enjoys helping women by dressing them and preparing them in hope for a better future through the job they are trying to get. This effective tendency towards growth and building in life is also represented in her fond towards "gardening":

> I missed my garden and the flower beds. Gardening had become a passion of mine. When Owen [Nicole's son] and I could manage it, I'd buy a house and plant another garden. (Girl's Guide 25)

The theme of planting "another" garden as stated in the extract symbolically points to the heroine's hope and prospect to re-build a new life which she sees no barrier to achieve since she has once planted a garden (metaphor for love and life) in her house she shared with his husband during their married life.

Hence, the novel functions as an inter-discourse with a focus on the heroines' struggle to get involved into the society and to strike a balance between themselves and the others. By embracing vulnerability and the courage, daring and openness they put in order to reconcile with the society from which the metadiscourse originates, they achieve satisfaction, love and social inclusion.

The theme of giving and receiving and life re-building is also symbolized in "bread" and "bakery" throughout the novel. Bread baked and given to Leanne by Nikolai is clearly indicative of giving "life" and "love" (174). The love and life granted to Leanne through bread is something that has been lacked in her life which metaphorically changes Leanne. An evidence to this argument is the time when Sean (Leanne's husband) asks her to have lunch at her place while he seems to be attracted by the new version of his ex-wife; after tasting the bread Nikolai had baked and Leanne fed him with he tells Leanne: "This is a new you, Leanne, and I have to say that I like it … So, that's what was different with lunch, … it was the bread. I don't know when I've ever tasted better" (199-200). The change in Leanne as symbolized in the different taste of the bread shows the way in which her life begins to differ, flourishing with a taste of love and life as offered by Nikolai. "I bake you bread every class. You will eat and enjoy my bread and I will remember your smile. Your smile make me smile here [pointing to his heart]" (45).

Nikolai expresses his love, care and attention through baking and giving bread to Leanne in order to make her happy and receives her love back. However, Nikolai gets hurt and angry when he finds out that Leanne feeds Sean with the bread he makes with his "own hands" for her: "you give him bread I bake for you? … bread from my heart… I make with my own hands … and you give to other man … his heart is black like charcoal" (200-201). Although at first glance, the reason behind Nikolai's anger could be jealousy, a deeper view connotes the giving-receiving theme. In this regard, it is important to take care of the fact that to whom you give your love. Although you need to be exposed and welcome your vulnerability in a relationship, you have to choose the right person who deserves your love and openness. In this case, Leanne needs to "protect" herself both "emotionally and spiritually", yet she seems to neglect by offering bread of love and life to his ex-husband who used to abuse her love and trust.

Additionally, the theme of creating and building is obviously present in the process of baking bread and particularly in the kneading process. Nikolai insists on the necessity of kneading with hands not with "a bread machine … [that] mixes and bakes all in one" which Leanne used before (Girl's Guide 196). Nikolai's insistence on baking bread with "own hands" (164) and his exaggerated feeling of being "horrified" to think of the mixers in baking bread, metaphorically emphasizes one's control over one's own life and the effort one needs to put in order to re-create one's life not to be dictated by others like the way Leanne used to be in her married life. An example to this is when Leanne was still depressed of her ex-husband's death because of cancer and she woke up one morning "with the compelling urge

to bake bread" (470). Leanne finds baking and especially "kneading the dough … therapeutic" which could help her "come more alive" (470). However, her depressing and low mood has another reason that is missing Nikolai of not having "heard from him" for "months" during which she decides to take care of her ex-husband as what hurt Nikolai. So, one may conceive that how the theme of baking bread symbolizes the heroine's practice of embracing her fear and vulnerability to move on another emotional crisis in her life; this is when she feels as if "the grief that consumed me left slowly … soon, I found I could smile again, laugh again … feeling refreshed and exhilarated" (470-471). The reinvigorating effect that bakery inspired by Nikolai has on Leanne is that it is served as a way to cultivate hope and courage to start it over afresh.

Experiencing "connection" and making "relationships" require being open and vulnerable to others (Brown, "The Gifts of Imperfection" 81). This theme is represented within the novel through the ways in which the heroines start to interact with others. They jeopardize their vulnerability and struggle to overcome their fear of starting a new relationship by re-integrating to the society and to give their trust and let them fall in love again. Nicole feels so "vulnerable" at first when being threatened by her ex-husband to "be filed for full custody of" their son, Owen, if she continues to see Rocco: "Owen made me vulnerable, and Jake knew that. My son was everything to me. As much as I cared about Rocco, I wouldn't risk losing custody of Owen" (Girl's guide 399). As the quote illustrates, even though the heroine's weakness" is her son, she chooses to fight by undertaking the risk of being hurt and by accepting the fact that she can't "lose" Rocco "no matter how much it costs" (436). However, her resistance finally leads Jake to accept the truth that he cannot "fight her" back and learns to move on his divorce too; The scene of "Owen stood between the two couples [Nicole and Rocco at one side of Sean's casket and Jake and his to-be wife at the other], one hand holding his mother's hand and the other holding on to his father's" (466) clearly illuminates the themes of re-integration and re-connection. Likewise, Leanne and Nikolai's mutual love and cooperated life is depicted in final baking scene where "the two worked together now, baking bread and cinnamon rolls for area restaurants … no one could look at them and not see the love flowing effortlessly between them" (479).

After all fears, angers, obstacles, denials and depression that both Nicole and Jake have been going through in order to take advantage of their vulnerability, they both are finally able to win the battle and counteract with the negative attitude toward life crises to achieve tranquillity in their life. Consequently, this sense of tranquillity leads to creation of happiness and satisfaction that comes with their

renewed life and re-produced love they have struggled hard to build up:

> I was happy too. Happier than I ever imagined possible. I remembered how heartsick both Leanne and I had been when we'd left our husbands. We'd never believed a failed marriage would happen to us. We were unloved and unlovable. Rocco and Nikolai had shown us otherwise. (Girl's Guide 479)

The excerpt illuminates the inevitability of divorce as one of the life crises which can possibly occur to everyone. Even though divorce leaves them with unpleasant feelings of emotional rejection and exclusion, they finally succeed in challenging the fear of its negative consequences by embracing their vulnerability and re-starting new relationships. The happy ending of the novel emphasizes and celebrates the significance of being open to life events in a hope for the optimistic and lighter dimension of vulnerability that is love, sense of belonging and re-connection that are culturally-separated in the metadiscourse.

Conclusion

The concept of vulnerability as a weapon to enable one to trust others again and to restart a more genuine social life has been neglected. It assists individuals in reconnecting to others and even making love relationships to a fuller and healthier self-identity development. Therefore, within the context of psychosocial development, self-others interactions and human communications are core concepts. Given its significant place in human interpersonal relationships, vulnerability is key to the formation of a genuine and authentic man's connection with others. However, the fear of "laying oneself bare" in order to seek for love and belonging is what causes the term usually be avoided by the individuals. This multifaceted view towards vulnerability has built the contemplative basis for the current paper. Focusing on the essential place and function of vulnerability in social interactions and psychosocial development, the present study explored the ways in which the term is represented as a two-sided coin; being vulnerable increases the risk of being emotionally hurt, while simultaneously, it is the gateway to love, belonging and connection. As represented within the selected novel, the vulnerability experienced by the selected heroines was examined within the triadic cultural ecological conceptualization of literature.

Within a society where the negative attitude towards the emotional crisis and divorce is normalized, being vulnerable means the frailty, depression and frustration. Respectively, the metadiscourse as discussed in the present paper stems from the

negative stand of vulnerability as represented by the selected author. Evidently, the discussed cultural-critical metadiscourse causes both heroines to struggle with offensive and undesirable emotions such as fear, shame, despair, frustration and sense of social exclusion.

However, the discussion indicated that overcoming fear, adopting and accommodating vulnerability by the heroines of the novel could function as a counterforce to the metadiscourse. Since human being is "imperfect" by nature, embracing the very imperfection requires courage and self-awareness which in turn brings hope for a better future. Hence, the novel is an imaginative counter-discourse due to the main characters' challenging mindsets which led them to become daring enough in order to recognize and embrace their vulnerability.

Finally, when the female protagonists of the novel decided to stand against the culturally separated system by following and exercising their own planned guide, they tried to re-integrate to the society. The novel is an indication of the re-integrative inter-discourse which directs the heroines to re-build new relationships, love, belonging and ultimately to re-connection. However, the re-connection occurs only if the characters are brave enough to venture their vulnerability again in life's gamble.

We, as human being are living in a society with an urge to beloved and socially included, therefore, being prone and exposed in the interpersonal relationships is of great significance. In other words, the individuals need to be vulnerable and open to make connection in order to develop a healthier new sense of self that is psychosocially approved. Also, this positive and optimist attitude towards vulnerability led by self-others interaction opens up an avenue which empowers the individuals to have control over their life by giving voice to the socially and culturally separated aspect of their identity. Hence, it can be concluded that one needs to be vulnerable enough to interact with the others since social interaction forms an immense part of the human growth and development.

Works Cited

Bergthaller, Hannes. "Cultural Ecology – A New Transdisciplinary Paradigm for Literary Studies?" Review of: Hubert Zapf [ed.], Kulturökologie und Literatur, Beiträge zu einem transdisziplinären Paradigma, *Literaturwissenschaft, Heidelberg*, 2008.) JLTonline, 2009. Available at: http://www.jltonline.de/index.php/reviews/article/123/413

Brown, Brené. *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let go of who you think you're supposed to be and embrace who you are*. Hazelden Publishing, 2010.

Brown, Brené. *Daring Greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live,*

love, parent, and lead. Gotham, 2012.

Campana, Joseph. *The Pain of Reformation: Spenser, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Masculinity*. Fordham UP, 2012.

Castells, Manuel. *Communication Power*. Oxford UP, 2009.

Elam, Diane. *Romancing the Postmodern*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Erikson, Erik H. *Identity and the Life Cycle: Selected papers*. Psychological Issues, 1959.

— . *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. No. 7. WW Norton & Company, 1968.

— . *The Life Cycle Completed*. Norton, 1982.

Foucault, Michelle. *Discipline and Punish-The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage, 1977.

— . *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. Pantheon, 1980.

Fuchs, Barbara. *Romance*. Routledge, 2004.

Ganteau, Jean-Michel. *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction*. Routledge, 2015.

Ganteau, Jean-Michel, and Susana Onega, eds. *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature*. Routledge, 2013.

Gaventa, Jonathan. Power after Lukes: an overview of theories of power since Lukes and their application to development. *Brighton: Participation Group, Institute of Development Studies,* 2003.

Gilligan, Carol. *In A Different Voice*. Harvard UP, 1982

Gilson, Erinn. *The ethics of vulnerability: A feminist analysis of social life and practice*. Vol. 26. Routledge, 2013.

Glaeser, Kirsten. "Threatening the Fabric of Our Society: Divorce in Modern Societies." *Oglethorpe Journal of Undergraduate Research*. vol. 4, no.1, 2014, 1. Available at: http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/ojur/vol4/iss1/1

Goodin, Robert E. *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Re-analysis of Our Social Responsibilities*. U of Chicago P, 1986.

Hirsch, Marianne. "Presidential Address 2014—Connective Histories in Vulnerable Times." *PMLA*, vol. 129, no. 3（2014): 330-348.

Macomber, Debbie. *A Girl's Guide to Moving On: A New Beginning's Novel*. Random House Publishing Group, 2016

Mackenzie, C., Rogers, W., & Dodds, S. (Eds.). *Vulnerability: New essays in ethics and feminist philosophy*. Oxford UP, 2014.

Mazloomian, Maryam, M. M. Raihanah, and Shahizah Ismail. "Love Relationships and Identity Development in Selected Asian American Chick Lit." *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies,* vol. 16, no. 2 (2016): 155-171.

McLaren, Margaret A. *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*. Suny Press, 2012.

Parker, Patricia A. *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode*. Princeton UP, 2015

Patterson, M. *Vulnerability: A Short Review*. Vol. 3. ICR Working Paper, 2013. Available at: http://www.viu.ca/icr/resources/publications/

Pearce, Lynne. *Romance Writing* (Vol. 5). Polity, 2007.

Pearce, Lynne, and Gina Wisker. *Fatal Attractions: Re-Scripting Romance in Contemporary Literature and Film*. Pluto Press, 1998.

Pylypa, Jen. "Power and bodily practice: Applying the work of Foucault to an anthropology of the body." *Arizona Anthropologist,* 1998. 21-26.

Radford, Jean. *The Progress of Romance the Politics of Popular Fiction*. 1986.

Sindic, Denis, Manuela Barreto, and Rui Costa-Lopes, eds. *Power and identity*. Psychology Press, 2014.

Updegraff, John A., and Shelley E. Taylor. "From Vulnerability to Growth: Positive and Negative Effects of Stressful Life Events." *Loss and Trauma: General and Close Relationship Perspectives*. Ed. John H. Harvey, Eric D. Miller, 2000. 3-28.

Vital, Anthony. "Situating Ecology in Recent South African Fiction: JM Coetzee's The Lives of Animals and Zakes Mda's the Heart of Redness." *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2005, pp. 297-313. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070500109482

Winterson, Jeanette. *The PowerBook*. Random House. 2000.

Zapf, Hubert. "Ecocriticism, Cultural Ecology, and Literary Studies." *Ecozon@*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2010): 136-147.

— . *Literature as Cultural Ecology: Sustainable Texts*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.

责任编辑：郑红霞