

The Representation of Women in Eric Barnes's *Above the Ether* (٢٠١٩)

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Abstract

This article examines Eric Barnes's *Above the Ether* (٢٠١٩) from a feminist perspective. It relies on climate change fiction and feminism as a theoretical framework. It investigates the sufferings and struggles of women in a post-apocalyptic world, which is induced by climate change. This novel is set in an environment where there are different natural disasters as floods, bad weather and earthquakes. There is a total absence of law and government that protects people, especially women. Therefore, women are either discriminated and abused or left alone. This study attempts to put emphasis on different female characters. It puts emphasis on the father and his wife, the investor, the doctor's wife, the stranger and an unnamed woman to highlight their sufferings in the post-apocalypse. It shows how these women's experience when it comes to their relationships with their husbands, colleagues or, which can be either a positive or negative one.

Key words: women, representation, victimized, survive, Eric Barnes.

American contemporary novels describe the lives of female characters in different contexts such as a bad environment and climate change. They portray their sufferings, hardships, struggles, loneliness and discrimination in the twenty-first century relying on climate change fiction. Therefore, some American novelists represent how can natural disasters cause the post-apocalypse where the government is unable to control both natural disasters and people's lives. Under these circumstances, people cannot have a normal life because of the rise of insecurity, violence and cannibalism. Some writers uncover its negative effect on society, especially on women. Indeed, Eric Barnes is a contemporary American novelist who recounts women's lives in a post-apocalyptic world. This study, subsequently, explores Eric Barnes's depiction of female characters in *Above the Ether* (٢٠١٩). It also investigates their lives and how they try to cope and survive.

Climate change in Eric Barnes's novel

Since both novels are set in a climate change environment, it is worth analyzing the context of both novels relying on eco-criticism. This theory is defined as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical world" (Glottfelty and Fromm, ١٩٩٦, xviii). Put simply, there is a connection between a human and his natural environment. More importantly, humanity faces "global warming" nowadays (Andersen, ٢٠٢٠, ٥). This has led to the rise of climate change fiction, which is a genre of literature that emerged in the twenty-first century. In this context, Gregers Andersen argues that "what defines cli-fi, thus, that it uses as a narrative element the scientific global warming" (٥). Hence, novels can deal with the causes of climate change and its result on human beings. There are several contemporary authors who have examined this theme such as Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Steven Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming* and Eric Barnes's above mentioned novels. Furthermore, climate change can bring about the rise of post-apocalyptic environment. In this context, Carlton Smith and Deborah Paes de Barros argue that

Central to many contemporary novels is the sense that something terrible- if indeed undefined- has happened and the text is the record of its aftermath. What this disaster is –global, personal, or cultural- can be read- can be read as a defining novelistic trope. (١٩٩٥, ٣)

This means that post-apocalyptic contemporary fiction tackles a catastrophic event and its consequences. It refers to people's lives after the end of the world, which is induced either by man-made or natural disasters (Curtis ٢٠١٠, ٥).

Barnes represents both the source of climate change and its effect on the government and society. In Barnes's fiction, human actions are the main cause of climate change. In this study, I am going to analyze *Above the Ether* first because it is a prequel. It revolves around a post-apocalyptic environment that is induced by climate change; hence, characters struggle to live under these conditions in the South End because most of them have lost their houses and belongings and face displacement. One can deduce that the main reason that leads to climate change is the misuse of oil in different parts of the world. To illustrate, an unnamed father listens to radio news where the journalist is saying that "oil leaks in the Gulf. Twenty oil rigs. Maybe more. All damaged, some completely overturned, sinking or already sunk" (Barnes, ٢٠١٩, ٤٦). This causes the death of thousands of people. Another example, there are two young characters who refer to the influence of chemicals and oil on the river. The kid and the epileptic are two friends who mention the negative effect of oil on water and animals (٩٠). As a result, Barnes portrays the presence of pollution in this city; he argues, "Cities where, every day, people must cover their faces with masks because of the pollution" (١٤٦). This entails that people have to struggle with pollution and global warming in the South End.

In this city, characters do not live as one community due to the deficiency of security. These characters are unable to find a government and police that ensure law and protect citizens. There are some corrupt commissioners who do not have the intention to ensure safety or help citizens to have a stable life. Consequently, Barnes devotes different chapters for his six

characters to show that they have to live alone or in pairs to avoid violence, barbarity or cannibalism. Even though they try to evade from them, they find themselves victims to different forms of violence in a post-apocalyptic world. In this context, Souhila Kentouche and Feriel Kaci argue that characters “struggle with the same issues of lawlessness, crime, disorder, risk and terror in the aftermath of the end of the world” (٢٠٢٢, ٣٤). Therefore, characters’ goal is to survive. More importantly, natural disasters have an impact on characters’ identities since they do not have names or documents that prove their identity. By the end of the novel, a natural disaster destroys the city; the remaining characters have to escape to the North End. Hence, Barnes’s novel describes how people can cause global warming and climate change, which can be exceedingly harmful and destructive. This environment threatens characters’ safety mainly when there is no efficient government. Subsequently, characters become more violent toward children and women. Since women are targeted, it is paramount to focus on the representation of women. This study delves into the development of discrimination, abuse, alienation and love relationships.

Feminism: Theory

Women were discriminated against, abused and exploited since antiquity due to males’ belief that women are inferior. The latter started to claim their rights in the wake of nineteenth-century (Walter, ٢٠٠٥, ٤١). Feminism emerged during the twentieth century in USA and Europe to defend women’s rights and to talk about their harsh experiences. In this sense, Sophia Phoca explains that binary oppositions came to light to favor only one category such as “male over female” (٢٠٠٦, ٤٦). It may refer to “social, cultural or psychic constructions” (٤٨). Feminism strives to celebrate all that is feminine to subvert binary oppositions. It means that it opposes the previously constructed discourses of man/ woman, center/ other and subject/ object; therefore, its goal “is to deconstruct masculine division and assumptions” and rejects patriarchy

and gender issues because they are “culturally acquired” (Habib ٢٠٠٥, ٦٦٨). Simply put, Feminism opposes male discourses, domination and discrimination of women.

Feminists believe that binary opposition is reductive since it divides both genders into opposites. Due to the rise of patriarchy, women are considered as the ‘other;’ this affects both representation and perception of women (Phoca ٢٠٠٦, ٤٨). This means that women do not have a voice to represent themselves and are not understood by people. Furthermore, men have to be careful and objective while representing women. In this context, Phoca argues, “men are invited to keep vigilant by not making a hegemonic claim to speak on behalf of women” (٤٩). In other words, men do not have the right to suppose that they can voice women because they have undergone the same experiences. This entails that Phoca pinpoints a neutral portrayal of women without relying on the male discourse of ultimate truth. Subsequently, “feminism has been configured as an ideological category that promotes gender equality and emancipation,” Phoca writes (٤٧). Put differently, Feminism is a literary theory that calls for women’s basic rights.

Several feminists tackle feminist writings since they scrutinize women’s struggles. For Jill Lebian, the emergence of women’s literature is significant because it creates a new model for “female experience” (٢٠٠١, ١٠٥). In the same regard, Catherine Harnois argues that every single woman has her own experience and perspective, which can never be the same when it comes to other women (٢٠٠٨, ١٣٤). Authors, therefore, attempt to portray males’ different types of abuse, discrimination, domination and oppression of women. They also provide images of injustice women can face due to abusive men as husbands, fathers or leaders. This illustrates that feminist literature is crucial since it examines how women can face injustice and inequality. The role of literature, as a result, is to voice different categories such as ethnic minorities and women.

The Representation of Women in *Above the Ether*

In *Above the Ether*, Barnes devotes different chapters to women or their husbands to highlight their experiences. The novel opens with a prologue, which is divided into different sections to describe characters' relationships in a post-apocalyptic world. There are different types of connections as love, hate, neglect, abuse and discrimination. They are represented through female's ties with their family relatives or strangers such as gangs. More significantly, this novel is polyphonic and represents female characters' lives who are the father's wife, the investor, the doctor's wife, the stranger and the unnamed woman. It also gives hints to the lives of some girls who are owned by gangs.

The first section is devoted to a father and his love relationship with his wife. According to Elaine Hoffman Baruch, while women can fall victim to the romantic illusion to attain their interests, men do not change. She argues that feminism examines male discrimination basically when they believe that women are "reproductive objects" or "valued for their bodies" (١٩٩, ٣). In the same vein, Germaine Greer argues that love is a "temporary state" (٢٠٠٨, ٢٠٢); hence, it can never last for a long time even though women have feelings. To illustrate, when a natural disaster is hitting, the father is with his children. His daughter asks "Where's mom?" (٢٠١٩, ١). This pinpoints to the difference between children and their father. While they care about her presence, he does not care about her presence or absence. Her husband does not even come back to save her from the flood. In this sense, Barnes writes, "It's strange. He knows he'd once cared about her. But for years he hasn't cared. And so what he isn't clear... He knows he does not miss her... he knows that he no longer loves her" (٢٠١٩, ٤٩). This may entail that he doubts his feeling towards his wife. Because of his carelessness, she is stuck in the mud and is unable to save herself. This suggests that a husband's love for his wife cannot be trusted since a wife is an object and can be changed. After receiving a message from her, he assumes that she drowned; he thinks about how to "tell the kids that their mother died" (٥٤). It seems that he is not moved by this news of her death because he is not romantic. Besides, Barnes's use of the

word “father” rather than husband implies that there is no connection between a husband and his wife.

The investor is another female character, who lives alone. She enjoys her loneliness and spends most of her time in the hotel room after work. According to Edward Said, an intellectual is interested in different specialties because he/ she does not restrict him/herself to one profession (١٩٩٤, ٥٧). In this context, Barnes writes that “She hates the television. In all and every form... She only reads. Newspapers and magazines, and she reads books about string theory and biogeography and black holes and the role of famine and coal and salt in the development of civilization” (٢٠١٩, ٣١). The investor can be viewed as an amateur because she is not only interested in making money but also in other specialties. She loves reading books on physics, biogeography, black holes and food. She also enjoys cooking and eating at the same time. This female investor is not married because she is a wealthy woman who is powerful.

In her office, she focuses on hundreds and thousands of derivatives to gain money for her company. In this context, Catherine Harnois argues that women are active agents who seek change because they see culture as the main “site of political change” (٢٠٠٨, ١٣٥). In other words, women can be powerful once they attempt to change something in their own culture. The investor is an active agent since she is in a state of power. She is portrayed as a smart businesswoman who can make money by connecting her computers to several countries. She wants to be a wealthy person even though she lives in a post-apocalyptic world. In this sense, Barnes describes,

She grinds numbers in her mind, transaction on top of transaction, equations that circle in upon themselves as she closes her eyes, money multiplied, money spawned, more money than she ever considered making. More than she would want to spend. More money than she could ever possibly need. (٢٠١٩, ٢٣)

Barnes uses different words in the novel such as ‘multiply,’ ‘spawn,’ ‘equation,’ ‘transaction’ and even the verb ‘connect’ to show the investor’s obsession with money. She is very careful

in increasing her money even if a normal person will not need them or make them. This demonstrates that she does not need a husband who is supposed to support her, protect her or love her. However, loneliness and wealth are seen as a positive thing since she is not discriminated by a man.

To increase her wealth, she thinks of different possibilities in the post-apocalyptic world. Indeed, she is a successful woman since she bets on everything. Barnes says,

In the morning, she bets on oil. She bets on natural gas. She bets against a basket of new heart drugs after reading research that makes it obvious the drug will be only marginally effective. She bets on diabetes. She bets on joint replacements. She bets on gambling. She bets on gun sales, mood disorders, certain foods. She bets on water. (٢٥)

This shows to what extent this investor is a smart person as long as she gains money from different fields. Furthermore, she bets against grocery stores, national banks, 'insurance companies,' and 'city finances' wherever there are problems (٢٨). Put differently, the investor does not solve other problems around the world but cares for profits and wealth. Thus, being a woman does not prevent her from becoming wealthy in the post-apocalypse as no government punishes corrupted investors.

The investor is a corrupt person because she gains money from betting on natural disasters. Barnes writes, "She never thinks about the morality of making money off natural disasters. The rules say she can say. There's nothing about what she does that is illegal. Her job is to make money" (٥٩). She can gain money because she is in a state of power; she is also aware that she is not going to be punished because of the absence of a state. Besides, when she makes a billion dollars for her company, an old investor helps her to hide their fraud in administrative documents. This suggests that a male colleague can assist a woman in the post-apocalypse to hide fraud. Therefore, this female investor is empowered rather than discriminated by male colleagues due to her wealth.

In other chapters, Barnes provides other examples to show the investor's power. She accompanies analysts to check if they can make profits. She believes that it is fine if she cannot find a problem from where she can gain money. She claims, "we'll go back to the office. And find another way to multiply money" (١٧٩). She is fond of making money for her company. Once she notices an abandoned airport in the South End, she tries to bet against abandoned houses. Hence, she bets against poor people who live in deserted houses and poor conditions. The investor, consequently, is portrayed as a dangerous person since she has no feeling of empathy toward people.

Barnes represents women's power and its impact on their life as sexuality. Harnois argues that erotic power is considered by feminists as "something that women should be able to use when... they are in a position powerful enough to control the tools of patriarchy" (٢٠٠٨, ١٣٧). In other words, powerful women can express their sexuality freely. The investor rejects the notion of marriage to avoid male domination and oppression. Besides, she does not think about marriage because she can have sex using her money and power. She loves a teenage boy because he is a calm person and satisfies her sexual needs. As a result, she feels powerful as she controls this teenager. Furthermore, she sexually abuses a young girl because she is a very shy person. In this context, Barnes states that "She never thinks about why she pays people to have sex with her. She doesn't question it. Debate it. Doesn't feel guilt or shame or insecurity" (٢٠١٩, ٥٧). She expresses her sexuality freely because she is in a state of power. She does not care if it is legal or not because she is aware that she will not be judged.

Owing to natural disasters, a flood causes havoc; hence, the investor follows a man who helps her reach a safe place. Some male writers are not objective; they are biased while representing women's issues because they do not share the same experience (Phoca ٢٠٠٦, ٤٩). Barnes describes women as weak since they cannot remain powerful. The investor is an example because she was "once an investor;" however, she has to follow a stranger (٢٠١٩,

٢٢٨). Barnes states, “The woman stands in the ad hoc line. Moving toward the base of one of the ladders. The man is still with her” (٢٣١). The man is described as a savior because without his help, the investor is unable to survive. Barnes, subsequently, is biased by male discourse since he represents the investor as weak without her money.

The doctor and his wife are two other characters who live in a camp because the doctor works for gangs. He has chosen this camp owing to the safety it provides for people and his job. Indeed, there are a few women present in his sections; they first show his relationship with his wife. They are unable to have children even if they have tried several medications before the apocalypse but this is not a problem for the couple because they love each other. In this regard, Baruch explains that in a love relationship, the object is crucial since he is “longed for” by a male lover (٣). Unlike the father, the doctor does not leave his wife because the object, his wife, is loved. The doctor’s love for his wife proves to be strong because they live together in the post-apocalyptic world. Consequently, Barnes uncovers a good connection between the doctor and his partner to highlight his good nature, manners and behaviors.

The main problem for the couple is that his wife does not enjoy her life in this camp; she rebels by not using the English language. This might uncover that she might be a Mexican woman since her spoken language is Spanish. Furthermore, the idea of gangs frightens her because she had a bad experience owing to her father’s death. It is worth noting that women can fall to sexual violence as they live in a patriarchal society; Lina Martin Alcoff argues that “feminists began to define rape as a cultural... problem rather than an individual pathology” (٢٠١٢, ٢٧١). In other words, feminism refutes rape and sexual violence because male discourses promote these kinds of discrimination (٢٧٤). In the novel, Barnes describes,

That the daughter, his wife, was only thrown out to live in the street is hard to believe. Just fourteen. Most like her, the fallen families of drug lords deposed, are raped, are tortured, and eventually also killed... But she is only thinking. Waiting. Wanting to leave this horrific place (٢٠١٩, ١٠١).

From the above excerpt, the doctor's wife is afraid because she is traumatized as she is aware that if there is a rebellion in camps, women fall victim to discrimination, exploitation and abuse. She is unable to overcome her fears and past trauma once she is experiencing the presence of gangs in a post-apocalyptic world. She is also conscious that the absence of law can promote men's victimization of women. As a survivor, she cannot talk about her past experiences because she does not have a voice.

As the novel develops, the doctor works for the gangs and has to diagnose their girls and prostitutes, who use Spanish language. Women can be marginalized because of their race and class (Harnois, ٢٠٠٨, ١٤٠). Barnes portrays the doctor's diagnosis of a pregnant girl whose fate cannot be 'discussed' because pregnancy is forbidden (٢٠١٩, ٩٩). In another section, he also diagnoses another girl who thinks that she is pregnant and needs a pregnancy test. Once confirmed, she asks for doctor's help. "The doctor gets the pill for her from the dispensary. He is supposed to tell the gang when any of the girls are pregnant. But he doesn't. The same if they have any disease," Barnes writes (٢٠١٩, ١٣٠). These examples exhibit that young unmarried girls are discriminated and victimized as they are used by gangsters. These girls are owned by gangs and deprived of their rights. Due to the absence of a state and law, girls are dehumanized since they are not protected. The doctor is the only male character who has a feeling of empathy towards these girls because he helps her by hiding the truth.

Barnes portrays to what extent these gangs are dangerous because they sell girls in the post-apocalyptic world. According to Tamar Diana Wilson, violence comes in different forms such as domestic, forced prostitution, trafficking and rape (٢٠١٤, ٣). In the same vein, Harnois explains that postmodern feminism examines race and ethnicity because women are oppressed (٢٠٠٨, ١٢٥). Because of the use of Spanish language, the gangs' origins might be South America. Hence, these young girls are trafficked to northern states every week. This may uncover male discrimination against colored women because men consider them as the other.

The doctor has a feeling of empathy because his diagnosis encourages the gang's abuse and slaughter. His feeling may entail that he has not lost his humanitarian feeling in a post-apocalyptic world; however, he does not stand for women because he thinks about his safety. The doctor, thus, is portrayed as a selfish male character that helps the abuser. It is worth noting that these girls are either used as prostitutes or sold to wealthy men to gain thousands of dollars every night. Being sold is the only "way to escape the torture of a timeless darkness" (٢٠١٩, ١٥١). Hence, the relationship between gangs and girls is that of self vs. other, man vs. woman and superior vs. inferior. Gangsters rely on binary oppositions to label girls as objects. Therefore, gangsters cannot think of girls as free entities who can do whatever they want; nonetheless, they think that girls can be a property that can be used and abused. This shows that the absence of a state or government in a post-apocalyptic world enhances the dehumanization of girls.

As a witness of women's abuse, killing and rape, the doctor's wife does not want to become dehumanized. Thus, she kills some security guards to escape from the camp because she does not love being kept and protected by gangs. She is conscious that there are no laws that protect people in the post-apocalypse. Barnes writes, "This was part of the bargain she made. The price of killing those four men." (١٧٣). This unveils that an imposed violence can create a violent person who can kill to save her life. This is the case of the doctor's wife because she turns out a brave and violent person who seeks freedom in this post-apocalyptic world. She does not care if they become 'Exiled' (١٧٣). Thus, displacement can be bearable in the post-apocalypse because it save her life from abusers. For her, being an exiled person is better because she feels safe and ensures that they have a new life. This exhibits Barnes's portrayal of the wife's suffering because she had to bear dominations, fear and trauma for several years. By killing men, Barnes deconstructs and reverses male's discourse and dichotomy of man vs. woman. He shows a wife's abilities when she feels endangered in a dangerous world.

The stranger is another female character who lives with her husband; her section opens with her looking at fires from the window for hours. The feelings of 'sadness' and 'trauma' are recurrent in her daily life after the loss of her children (Barnes ٢٠١٩, ٤). Besides, she thinks of her husband's point of view on her. In this sense, some women feel 'unattractive,' 'unhip' and 'rejected' by their husbands; the latter do not care about their children or the continuity of their marriage (Shulman ١٩٨٠, ٥٩٣). Barnes states, "She is vulnerable. That's part of it. She wonders what he's thinking... What he might want or think of her" (٢٠١٩, ٣٣). Simply put, this stranger always thinks of her husband's lens; his gaze makes her feel weak, harmed and oppressed. This might pinpoint her loss of self-confidence as long as she cares about his attitude. Furthermore, the absence of communication between the stranger and her husband has an impact on her self-esteem and self-confidence because she is unable to know if he loves her. In the mean time, her partner does not care about the continuity of their relationship.

The stranger and her husband are unable to communicate in the post-apocalyptic world due to the loss of their children. Like the father who left his wife, this male partner can be considered as a careless character because he does not assist his wife. Trauma can be defined as "a body wound or shock produced by sudden physical injury, as from violence or accident" ("Trauma"). Authors of trauma fiction can rely on a non-linear plot and use "temporal sequences" to examine the character's psyche (Balaev ٢٠٠٨, ١٥٩). The stranger is traumatized after the loss of both her children because she is unable to bear their absence. Barnes writes, "Their old child died. The other run away. It's been two years since this happened. Pictures of children on their walls... she doesn't recognize the faces. She has only memories. Mental images of her children when they were very young" (Barnes ٢٠١٩, ٣٥). She has only some traces of her children which are either from pictures or memories. Hence, she is a careful mother because she does not want to forget them. This unveils that a mother's feeling does not change. More significantly, trauma is regarded as a violent experience that haunts the character (Caruth

١٩٩٦, ٣-٤). In the novel, the stranger feels 'sick' because she believes that it is not supposed to happen to educated parents. This makes her deceived, traumatized and depressed. She also does not want to admit mental illness to avoid falling apart.

Through the different sections of the novel, Barnes goes back to the stranger's relationship with her sons. In the post-apocalypse, she drives to the ocean and avoids cities because they are crowded with homeless, dangerous people and criminals. This uncovers that she is a protective mother who cares about her children's safety and well-being. Barnes, thus, provides the reader with a positive image of mothers. Even if the stranger has chosen the suburbs and a good environment to raise her children, her oldest son's behavior has changed and started to abuse her mentally. In this context, Sarah Wendt argues that domestic violence includes abusive behaviors whether they are physical, psychological or social (٢٠١٦, ٢١٢). In the novel, "Her son turned on her... Angry that she made him angry... That's when he decides... that the source is you," Barnes states (٢٠١٩, ٣٧). Once he becomes a depressed teenager, he attacks his mother several times and blames her for his mental illness. Barnes delves into a mother's suffering because she is unable to bear her child's mental abuse. She finds life unfair since "mothers are targeted" (٣٨). The stranger is portrayed as a victim once she does not find a supportive husband or institution. The stranger, therefore, is oppressed by her male children because she has to make sacrifices. It is worth noting that Barnes does not name his characters to reveal that mothers might experience the same thing. Implicitly, the absence of names has a meaning in Barnes's text, which is to highlight a mother's miserable life.

Even though her child becomes violent, self-abusive and mentally sick, the mother has tried several times to assist her child through her intense care and the help of institutions. However, he is still a drug addict. The stranger is suffering due to her successive efforts. Barnes claims, "The boys became strangers to their mother... Of course, the woman is a stranger too

now. A stranger even to herself” (٧١). It seems that she considers her children as ‘strangers’ because she does not recognize them in a post-apocalyptic world as long as she can neither understand nor help them. Even the mother is a ‘stranger’ since she is alienated from her family members. She also considers herself a stranger because she cannot communicate with others, suffers from trauma and forgets things. Because of trauma, she cannot concentrate or remember current events or moments. She tries to remind her husband to buy a gift for her neighbor because she gave birth to a baby. Her husband has given them a gift several weeks ago because his wife has forgotten about it. In this vein, she says that “I’m sorry. I forgot that. But I’ll be sure never to forget such a thing again. Actually, I won’t forget anything. Nothing” (٣٩). She has to apologize for her recurrent loss of memory because she wants her husband to have a positive image of her. Simply put, Barnes represents the stranger’s inability to cope because she does not have a supportive partner. While portraying the father, the doctor and the stranger’s husband, Barnes focuses on women’s relationships with their male partners to uncover their sufferings.

In the last part of the novel, she finds her little kid and she becomes happy. Through a stream of consciousness, Barnes makes the reader aware of how she tries to calm herself. She says to herself, “Tell yourself you’d do better... Tell yourself your love for your children and your faith in your spouse would never falter, never change, never exit” (١٩١). She convinces herself that she has to control her emotions albeit she lives in an unknown world where there is no forgiveness, connection, or mercy. It is, subsequently, difficult to survive in a post-apocalyptic world. Moreover, she attempts to show her love for her little kid. A few days later, the stranger’s husband cannot wake up due to a serious injury; she has to leave with her child because a storm hits their city to a nearby city. It seems that there is a reconciliation between the two since the son allows his mother to hold him. She also “kisses him” (٢٤١); this ending

may entail that there is a new beginning and a new relationship between a mother and her son. Although mothering can be difficult, the stranger loves her child and tries to move on.

Barnes also portrays an unnamed woman who lives with her child in different sections. The unnamed woman is a minor character who is mentioned a few times; she is the missing woman in *The City Where We Once Lived*. Feminism focuses on male sexist discourse because it discriminates against women by focusing on class, marriage and motherhood (Shulman ١٩٨٠, ٥٩٤). This woman takes care of her child as she wakes up early to prepare his food, his things and his bedroom. She makes sure that he goes to school and then “she leaves” (٢٠١٩, ١٨٣). Furthermore, she enjoys sitting sometimes with her child and watching movies or animation. However, the county government decides to take her child because she is condemned as unfit to raise her child and gives him to a foster family. She is viewed as unfit because she is not a powerful woman; she is from the lower middle class and her husband is absent. This mother discovers that her son is abused by the foster family; Barnes says, “during a visit, the woman simply takes her boy and run. Running with her son” (٢١٧). She wants a safe place for her child because she is a protective woman. This unveils that a mother’s feelings do not change in a post-apocalyptic world. Moreover, she is always a protective and loving mother since she holds him tight. Once the storm hits, they become refugees with other people. In this sense, the “woman sits near the tent. Watching her young son” (٢٤٢). Through the stranger’s ending story and this unnamed woman, Barnes uncovers mothers’ role, feelings and abilities when their male partners are absent. They become protective mothers whose aim is care about their children. Hence, mothers are given a positive description.

To conclude, this article traced the representation of women in Eric Barnes’s novel. In *Above the Ether*, we have various representations of women. The father decides to save his children from a natural disaster and leaves his wife back home because she informed him that the city is already flooded. Once he becomes aware that she died, he does not show any feelings

of empathy or love. The investor is a powerful woman since she makes money for her company. She also refuses the notion of marriage because she can have sex out of wedlock. In the doctor's chapters, his wife does not like camps because she is traumatized due to their abuse of women. Gangs sell girls and prostitutes to gain more money. Besides, the stranger is traumatized after the loss of both her kids. Through her different memories, she is mentally abused by one of them; however, she tries to show love for her little kid. Finally, the unnamed woman is a minor character who loves her child; hence, once the government takes him to a foster family, she saves her child from abuse.

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