

Research Article

## Representations of Gender Binarism in Frida Kahlo's "Self Portrait with Stalin"

Shajwan N. Fatah <sup>1,\*</sup> , Ala Beshank Ahmed <sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Language Center, Charo Center for Research, Training and Consultancy, Charo University, Sulaimaniyah, 46001, Iraq

<sup>2</sup> Department of English Language, College of Education and Languages, Lebanese French University, Erbil, 44001, Iraq

\*Corresponding author: Shajwan N. Fatah, E-mail: shajwan.nariman@charmouniversity.org

Article Info	Abstract
Article History	Frida Kahlo's "Self Portrait with Stalin" 1954, has been related to biographical, cultural, and national references. It is examined as an allegory of the artist's troubled personal relationships with political figures; her antagonism towards the Soviet Union leader, Joseph Stalin, her affair with the Marxist revolutionary, Leon Trotsky, who was later assassinated by Stalin, and her involvement in the communist party. Moreover, critics have shed light on Kahlo's factual references, such as her Tehuana dress which is seen as an appreciation for her Mexican heritage and a disguise for her physical problems. In this paper, we try to disregard these conventions; instead, we focus on several hidden premises in the painting, such as power relations (Michel Foucault) and gender problems (Helene Cixous). These concepts are explored through the semiotic reading of the details, including the art artwork's composition, texture, and elements.
Received Apr 12, 2023	
Revised Jun 12, 2023	
Accepted Jun 19, 2023	
<b>Keywords</b>	
Kahlo	
Stalin	
Gender binarism	
Gaze	



**Copyright:** © 2023 Shajwan N. Fatah and Ala Beshank Ahmed. This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license.

### 1. Introduction

The Mexican artist Frida Kahlo was born on Jul 05, 1907, in Coyoacán town. She is widely acknowledged as an exceptionally innovative artist in the 20th century, renowned for her artistic ingenuity. Kahlo is known for her fifty-five self-portraits. Throughout her life, she managed to draw on her Mexican female identity, her political doctrine, and the pain she suffered. She is also symbolized for challenging the patriarchal Western characterization of women. Even if one is unfamiliar with Kahlo as a painter, one might have seen her face habitually – she was widely embraced for drawing her face with a serious stare – she always highlighted her big eyes and mono-brows.

Moreover, the way she portrayed her facial features – according to the 'Western standard of beauty' – was unconventional. In conformity with the accepted notion, she took pride in displaying her Mexican

heritage; "the traditional and typical Western way of painting women are mostly nude and soft figures." (Yi, 2015, p. 54). Remarkably, Kahlo never changed her features to make them "beautiful," she depicted herself exactly like she was. The cultural features in Kahlo's art examine various topics such as race, gender, sexuality, and queer (Haynes, 2006).

On the one hand, Kahlo explicitly showed her national sentiments and the significance of her culture in the pre-Spanish conquest; she wanted to symbolize the pre-Columbian society (Helland, 1990). Furthermore, in her paintings, she drew many skeletons, hearts, and Coatlicues, all of which were a part of Aztec – Indigenous Mexican culture and tradition. Helland (1990) states that the bloody images and the darkness Kahlo painted were not only related to her own struggles but also connected with her perceptions to show the Aztec's struggle with conquest. That is to say, Kahlo's art questioned and explored her own individuality and nationality – she sought to challenge topics like "how and with what effects culture is composed of regimented divisions implemented and sustained repetitively to separate, codify, order and define its varied components" (Haynes, 2006, p. 2). Critics argue that Kahlo's work exposes the trauma her people dealt with because of colonization. In addition, readers relate Kahlo's artworks to her health problems. For instance, Tibol (1993) suggests that as viewers look at Kahlo's paintings, they can understand that she suffered from tremendous pain in her physical health; at the age of six, she suffered from polio, which affected her leg. Later, at eighteen, she was involved in a devastating bus collision, resulting in severe injuries, including a fractured foot and a spinal fracture that caused considerable emotional distress. It took several months for her to heal; however, she spent the rest of her life dealing with extreme pain. Scholars consider her physical pain as a reason for her achievements; perhaps those events have deepened her imagination (Yi, 2015).

Kahlo's injured pelvis affected her reproductive organs, she was unable to bear a child, and she spent most of her life mourning this bitter fact as she stated that it was a dream of hers – to raise a child of her own (Herrera, 2018). The characterization of the female body and 'the mother figure' portraits, according to Mahon (2011), was inspired by her upbringing in Catholicism. In other words, she incorporated images of 'the virgin Mary' she transformed her pain into her paintings – which was deeply rooted in her spiritualism. In addition to that, Kahlo painted her bloody miscarriages, her back pain, and her emotional breakdowns. Then Mahon (2011) states that the French writer, André Breton, classified Kahlo as a 'surrealist' artist because her paintings depicted dream-like scenes, symbolism, and unconsciousness. The American

author, Bertram D. Wolfe, described Kahlo's work as 'naïve surrealist' because her paintings did not have any 'Freudian symbolism' – which she created for herself. Kahlo was partially paralyzed before she healed – she confined her yearning to her art. She declared that she painted her reality: "the only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint always whatever passes through my head, without any other consideration." (Herrera, 2018, p. 10).

Kahlo's art perhaps was overshadowed by her husband – the mural painter and socialist Diego Rivera; during their relationship, she was inspired and fascinated by him as Herrera declares: "Frida began to paint with new confidence and application." In the same way, Rivera thought of Frida as "the world's greatest painter, and the pleasure he took in her work made working worthwhile" (2018, p. 97).

Portraiture as a genre is commonly considered a Western creation during the Renaissance. The self-portraits mostly highlighted masculinity, yet Kahlo challenged this concept and focused on searching for her own self-identity and individuality as a female Mexican. Pentes (1998) asserts that self-portraits are never crystal-clear. They are wrapped around the representation of one's culture and political beliefs and are always a deceptive depiction of one's self. Thus, from this perspective, Kahlo's portraits were more or less political; her self-portraits depict a historical time in Mexico. That is to say, and she attempted to depict 'herself' during the period, which created a new prospect during the twentieth century. Modern Mexican artists attempted to celebrate, protect, and reclaim their Indigenous Mexican culture, which was associated with the "classical re-discovery of Greco-Roman antiquity in Renaissance Art" (Pentes, 1998, p. 11).

During the 1920s, Mexicans started to be a part of the Communist party – during the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, they were interested in Mexican nationalism and culture. After 1910, 'The Mexican Revolution' beliefs included abandoning the culture in which they gained conquest, obtaining, and restoring their own traditional identity. Consequently, the revolution began against the politics of the Mexican president 'Porfirio Diaz' – during his administration, he favoured the wealthy, privileged people in his country.

This movement bloomed during the same era, and it included various ideologies. For instance, they stood against the idea of Spanish characterization of Mexicans and the Aztecs. As well as their ideology began opposed to foreign power interference and anti-imperialism. Helland (1990) states that "in the early

part of the century, the intellectual atmosphere in Mexico was charged with cosmopolitan European ideologies, most prominently Marxism tempered with Mexican nationalism" (p. 2) in this context. It seems that Marxism was spread around in the Mexican culture, which largely influenced Frida, which is very apparent in her work.



**Figure 1.** Leon Trotsky, Natalya Sedova, Frida Kahlo and Max Schachtman, Mexico, 1937

Critics have reflected on Kahlo's paintings in terms of her personal relationships and the political issues back then. For instance, Elliot (n.d) states that Kahlo painted this self-portrait before she died, and her painting shows the figure of Stalin, known as the "man of steel". Elliot focuses on the historical event back when Stalin had authority, and he caused the death of millions of people out of poverty and starvation. In contrast, others went into exile and hard conditions. Meanwhile, Kahlo was a member of the communist party (Figure 1) in which she was involved in an affair with the Russian communist Leon Trotsky, who Stalin assassinated. Apparently, after twenty years, Kahlo hadn't forgotten the tragic event. Thus, she portrayed Stalin in her painting. Similar to Elliot, Gotthardt (2019) states that it was in the mid of 1940, back when Kahlo was taken to jail after the police suspected her association with the assassination of Trotsky, who was a Russian revolutionary. Obviously, his murder and her imprisonment influenced her deeply, especially, after they had been in a relationship in the last period before Trotsky's death. Therefore, Kahlo dedicated himself to a self-portrait. Shamsi (2016) states that this painting expresses Kahlo's hatred toward

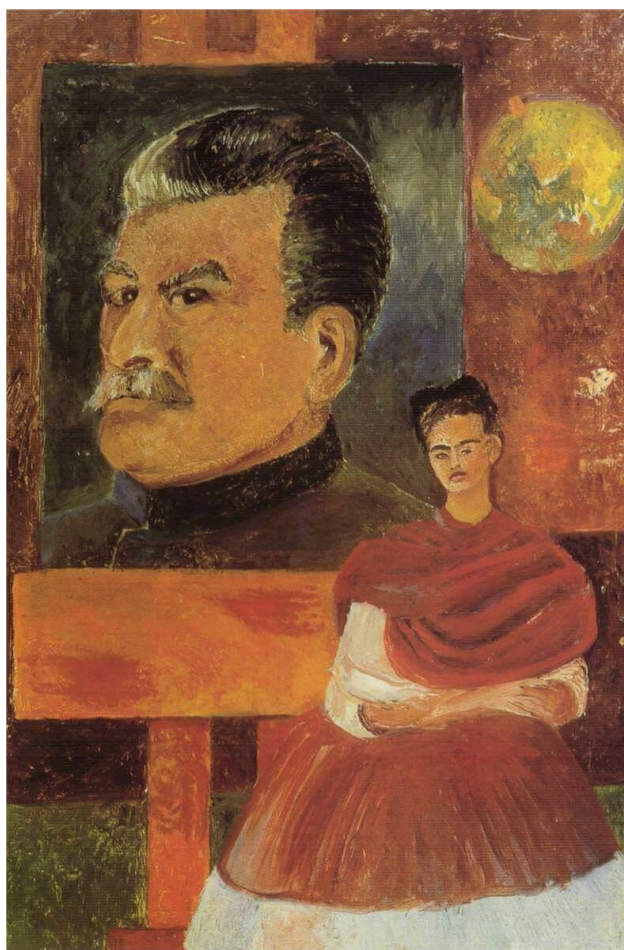
Stalin. Then, she sheds light on the details as she asserts that the artist's long dress covers her legs to "hide the stunted growth of her leg".

And her red shawl reflects Mexican culture. Later, Shamsi focuses on the figures' gazes, saying that Kahlo's facial expression seems passive, which is different from her usual look in all her paintings; this is maybe to let the viewer focus on Stalin's look. She states that Kahlo shows self-confidence as she sits comfortably in front of Stalin's portrait. Furthermore, many scholars have interpreted Kahlo's dresses in her paintings in terms of biography and culture: Healy (2018) declares that Kahlo was aware of her fashion since she was young because the physical disability she suffered from made her wear long skirts she had to wear three or four socks on the thinner calf so that she could have the balance. Kahlo was known for her Tehuana dress (Figure 2), consisting of a long skirt, a square blouse, and built-up hair. In this way, it is said that she could represent her culture and her political beliefs. In addition to that, she could hide the physical damages she had after the accident. Like Shamsi and Healy, Simonin (2020) claims that Kahlo's style was colourful and iconic, like her paintings; through her jewellery and dresses, she constructed cultural and political identities. Simonin continues, saying that Kahlo appreciated her Mexican origins. The mystery behind the long dresses goes back to her childhood. When she was six years old, she suffered from polio. Thus, she had to wear such garments.



**Figure 2.** Frida with xoloizcuintle dog at Casa Azul, Coyoacán, Mexico City.

However, this perspective seems to show the meanings from the literal level; this paper explores the other sides of the stories presented in the painting – politics and biography are the most obvious clear images in Kahlo's work. Nevertheless, the appeal of her work is revealed through the thread of a semiotic analysis.



**Figure 3.** "Self Portrait with Stalin"

## 2. Materials and Methods

Frida Kahlo's visual work regarding biography, culture, and politics has been read. This paper puts these aspects aside and focuses on the signs and symbols hidden behind the image. Therefore, interpreting these symbols and their meanings requires semiotic reading. The term 'semiotics' or 'semiology' is coined by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure explains that language is a "sign system," which consists of both signifiers (words, sounds, or images) and signified (the mental concepts or the meanings). He also asserts that arbitrary social conventions influence the language—that is, the cultural traditions or the social norms are responsible for creating the meanings behind the words we read/hear or the images we see (2011, p. 67).

Charles Sanders Peirce goes deeper with the theory of semiotics as he asserts that a sign is a "representant with mental interpretant" and calls this relationship between the sign, concept, and the real object 'triple relation'. Then, he states that a sign is divided into three categories: icon, index, and symbol. According to Peirce, the icon is the referent's physical or apparent representation. For instance, photographs represent objects through physical resemblance (2.280). An index or seme is a sign indicating the existence of the referent. This relationship between the sign and the object is non-arbitrary such as smoke, which represents the existence of fire (2.283). Later, Peirce claims that "icons and indices assert nothing". Different from these, a symbol is the arbitrary representation of the referent. For instance, words are symbols because there is no direct connection between the sign and the real universe (2. 292). Besides Saussure and Peirce, Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis of visual arts implies that artworks carry literal and non-literal meanings. In his well-known essay "The New Citroen" from the book, *Mythologies*, Barthes compares motor cars to Gothic cathedrals in terms of appreciation of artistic works by unknown artists (1972, pp. 88-89).

From these perspectives, this study unravels the sign system and focuses on power relations (Foucault), and through the analysis, it relates the gender problems to Cixous's "patriarchal binary thought".

### 3. Results and Discussions

Painted in 1954, "Self Portrait with Stalin," (Figure 3), measuring 59 x 39 cm, is Kahlo's oil on Masonite artworks. The title – traditionally – suggests a picture of the artist sitting next to the leader's portrait – Joseph Stalin. However, from deeper layers of meaning and besides the political and historical references, this title character connotes the power relation between these sexes. The term "self-portrait" indicates a painting in which artists produce themselves. On the metaphorical level, it also suggests a mirror, as painters can see their faces – the icon – or they observe their image mirroring back to them. From this perspective, the self-portrait seems to reflect Stalin, whose name etymologically means 'steel', which seems to signify the concept of firmness. For this reason, in this context, "self-portrait" means the reflection of a persistent man. Put another way, and the female figure is constructed through the observation of a man.

To begin with the composition of the painting, there are two figures – a man in a portrait and a woman sitting in front of his picture. This image instantly proposes gender dimensions. As we look closer at the painting, our eyes track from Stalin's huge face to Kahlo's passive appearance and then to the landscape in

the background. Strikingly, these two genders are portrayed in different frames – a painting inside another painting – this suggests that both figures are presented separately, and their positions appear against each other. Kahlo is sitting and looking straight at the viewer – the focus here is achieved through the symmetrical use of lines and colours. Viewers also see that Kahlo's gaze seems apathetic yet appears to convey a message in which her eyes symbolize her lips in terms of unspoken words. Besides her look, the garment iconically signifies Mexican heritage. However, the image can be interpreted as a visual representation of female oppression. In other words, her body is covered completely. Symbolically, this may connote a sense of silence or disguise; as we look at her, we are aware that underneath that Tehuana dress, there is a body, language, and ideology. Despite that, the female figure's hands and her face are the only shown parts. Unexpectedly, her facial feature appears inactive or thoughtless – this passive expression seems to reflect the portrait in which she is sitting in front of it.

Moreover, the female gaze that she proposes – appears to tell us something about gender identity, which is completely different from the male gaze in the painting – Stalin's eyes – the man who has been identified as one of the dictators in Western history. In this context, he is portrayed in his uniform, which iconically (by resemblance) depicts his political identity. Beyond that denotation, if we pay a closer look at the contrast that Kahlo made between the colours of her garment and Stalin's military uniform, it seems to be obvious that black colour symbolizes evilness or darkness while the colour of her clothes; white symbolizes youth and purity and red represents emotions. The male figure is depicted with a frown facial expression having grey hair, which iconically connotes an ageing man – his male gaze – suggests the concept of patriarchy through his authoritative look. In addition to that, Stalin's face is sketched from an angle as if he is patronizing the viewer. Traditionally, critics have read this politically. Nevertheless, symbolically, his look signifies male hegemony, which constructs the power relation towards the female figure in the painting – Kahlo's gaze – and actually towards the viewer. Michel Foucault explains this power relation in his book, *Discipline and Punish*, in the section "panopticon" as he illustrates this concept that is constructed through the act of observation (1977, pp. 195-206).

Foucault adopts the term panopticon from the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham; they suggest that the panopticon – a prison with a tower in the middle – is a metaphor for the entire society that observes the individuals' attitudes. Eventually, like anyone, a man watches Kahlo, and his power proposes to her a



female identity with unseen sentiments. Besides the male gaze, the moustache can be interpreted symbolically and indexically. That is to say, and it shows the masculine feature and power within that masculinity. Put another way, and there is a sense of a father figure or father-law of a male figure; his grey hair seems to evoke this idea. The last part of the composition is the background, in which the whole image presents a horizontal texture; the top half appears lighter than the bottom half. In other words, the sky is depicted as dark orange, which seems to be sunset. The moon's appearance is not clear whether it is daytime or night. The picture suggests a surrealistic feature from this angle – it proposes a dream-like scene.

Nevertheless, the background shown in the portrait of Stalin seems different from Kahlo's surroundings – vertical – and also, there is a mixture of dark grey and black. This shade seems to signify the echo of his masculinity. Despite the darkness, there is a light set between the back side of his head and the moon which seems to be the moonlight – a reflection of the moon on his head as an ideology for the male hegemony – power and dominance. The moon captures viewers' attention as it appears on the left side of the image. It seems to be read iconically, indexically, and symbolically. In other words, the moon indicates night and the darkness of night. From higher levels, it may symbolize dreams. Strikingly, the image of the moon appears in most of Kahlo's works. According to Aztec mythology, the moon was a goddess – Coyolxauhqui – which means golden bells, and whose sun god brother – Coyolxauhqui's – cut off her head and threw it into the sky to form the moon. From this angle, Stalin could represent Coyolxauhqui, who beheads Kahlo – that is to say, the image of the moon in this context symbolizes womanhood. Therefore, the moonlight seems to depict the fusion of womanhood and man's supremacy which constructs gender binarism. This refers to the signification in the title; the reflection of the sexes back to each other suggests "patriarchal binary thought". This concept is coined by the French feminist theorist Helen Cixous, as she examines the binaries (couples) such as "day/night, culture/ nature, and sun/moon" (1996, pp 63-64). Cixous's theory is based on how culturally these couples are thought of in terms of superiority or power, as she states:

We see that "victory" always comes down to the same thing: things get hierarchical. Organization by hierarchy makes all conceptual organization subject to man. Male privilege is shown in the opposition between activity and passivity, which he uses to sustain himself. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition: activity. (Clément & Cixous 1996, p. 64).

Put another way, a couple of men/woman has been understood as two different ones in terms of power and significance – and traditionally, a woman is always viewed as passive and inferior. In Kahlo's painting, this binary problem is presented clearly through the pose, gaze, and appearance: Stalin's military uniform indicates male hegemony and dominance – steel – or firmness, whereas Kahlo's red and white Tehuana dress expresses a female image embodied by emotions. Their gaze and pose also reinforce the idea of gender binarism. In addition to those, a closer look at the painting shows us that the size of Stalin, which is larger than Kahlo's image, indicates that he is the focal point of this artwork. Through this analysis, we conclude that these associations imply symbolism in Kahlo's work. Since symbolist works "contain personal information and communicate their own philosophies" (artincontext, 2022). Hence, these several hidden philosophical issues are covered through the symbols in this visual art rather than the external factors, such as the historical events that happened during the artist's life.

#### 4. Conclusion

The work of the modern Mexican artist Frida Kahlo is appreciated for the surreal scenes and also the concepts they present; critics have examined her painting concerning biography, that is to say, both her physical problems during her youth and also the accident in which she spent most of her life in bed portraying her body and her thought. Besides her personal issues, the political struggles at the beginning of the 20th century, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s, back when there was a serious conflict between the communists and Stalin's authority. Kahlo's painting is considered to reflect those incidents, precisely the assassination of Leon Trotsky, a Russian Marxist revolutionary. However, in this paper, we have ignored these perspectives and attempted to present another side of the story through a semiotic analysis of Kahlo's "Self Portrait with Stalin". Our study showed several invisible concepts in terms of literary and philosophical reading of the painting, such as gaze, power relations, and gender issues. These concepts mainly constructed the gender binarism between both figures, Kahlo and Stalin.

**Declaration of Competing Interest** The authors declare that they have no known competing of interests.

#### References

- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. (A. lavers, trans.) New York, United States of America: Hill and Wang.
- Clément, C., & Cixous, H. (1996). *The newly born woman*. London, United Kingdom: I.B. Tauris Publishers.

- Coyolxauhqui. (n.d.). Retrieved from Windows to the Universe: [https://www.windows2universe.org/mythology/coyolxauhqui\\_moon.html](https://www.windows2universe.org/mythology/coyolxauhqui_moon.html) Accessed 20-09-2022.
- Elliot, M. (n.d.). *Self Portrait with Stalin*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sartle.com/artwork/self-portrait-with-stalin-frida-kahlo>
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish :The birth of the prison*. New York, United States of America: Pantheon Books.
- Gotthardt, A. (2019, April 30). *How Frida Kahlo's love affair with a communist revolutionary impacted her art*. Retrieved from Artsy: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-frida-kahlos-love-affair-communist-revolutionary-impacted-art> Accessed 20-09-2022.
- Haynes, A. (2006). Frida Kahlo: An artist 'In Between'. Identity and Marginality, *eSharp*, 6(2), 1-18.
- Healy, C. (2018, June 17). *What Frida Kahlo's clothing tells us about fashion's disability frontier*. Retrieved from <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/40240/1/frida-kahlo-disability-fashion-mexico>. Accessed 25-10-2022.
- Helland, J. (1990). Aztec imagery in Frida Kahlo's paintings: Indigeneity and political commitment. *Woman's Art Journal*, 11(2), 8-13.
- Herrera, H. (2018). *The biography of Frida Kahlo*. London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Lee, S. J. (2005). *Stalin and the Soviet Union*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Mahon, A. (2011). The lost secret: Frida Kahlo and the surrealist imaginary. *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas*, 5 (1-2), 33-54.
- Peirce, C. S. (1994). *Collected writings* (Vol. 8). (C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, & A. W. Burks, Eds.). Indiana, United States of America: Indiana University Press.
- Pentes, T. (1998). *Cruel beauty: The articulation of 'self', 'identity' and the creation of an innovative feminine vocabulary in the self-portrait paintings of Frida Kahlo*. [Master's thesis, University of Sydney, Camperdown, Australia]. <http://hdl.handle.net/2123/1905> Accessed 26-09-2022.
- Rosen. (2022, May 3). *Art & culture / The role of photography in the life of Frida Kahlo*. Retrieved from Huck: <https://www.huckmag.com/art-and-culture/the-role-of-photography-in-the-life-of-frida-kahlo/>
- Saussure, F. (2011). *Course in general linguistics*. New York, United States of America: Columbia University Press.
- Shamsi, K. (2016, September 5). *Frida Kahlo's 'Self Portrait with Stalin' – 1954 (Week 6)*. Retrieved from Kareena Shamsi: <https://kareenashamsi.wordpress.com/2016/09/05/frida-kahlos-self-portrait-with-stalin-1954-week-6/> Accessed 20-09-2022.
- Simonin, L. (2020, July 23). *The true story behind Frida Kahlo's iconic style*. Retrieved from Barnebys: <https://www.barnebys.com/blog/the-true-story-of-frida-kahlos-style>
- Symbolism Art – Learning about the history and artworks of this movement*. (2019, May 28). Retrieved from Art context: <https://artincontext.org/symbolism-art/>
- Tibol, R. (1993). *Frida Kahlo: An open life*. New Mexico, United States of America: University of New Mexico Press.
- Van Ree, E. (2003). *The political thought of Joseph Stalin: A study in twentieth century revolutionary patriotism*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203221631>
- Yi, F. (2015). *Dramatizing trauma in resistance to post-colonial hegemonic culture: A magic (al) realist reading of Toni Morrison's Beloved, love and Frida Kahlo's selected paintings*. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Louisville, Kentucky, United States of America]. <https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/2241>