THE IMAGE OF A WOMAN IN THE EPISTOLARY STORY *"AĞLAYAN KADINLAR"- KOLAJI İÇIN TASLAK*[1] BY THE TURKISH AUTHOR ERENDIZ ATASÜ

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes the issue of unifying women's suffering as shown through the letters of two friends, Idil who lives in England, and Sirma who lives in Turkey. Through the letters they send to each other, both women mirror the current time and places in which the determiners of the patriarchal worldview are written, whereby each woman is destined to be in a subordinate position in relation to a man. In the short story titled "Ağlayan Kadınlar" Kolajı İçin Taslak (1997) the author Erendiz Atasü tries to free her heroines from the burden of serving the patriarchal ideology. However, the supremacy of the male over the female gender limits a woman, no matter how successful she might be in the public eye, where one can once again witness gender inequality. The presence of a woman in the space assigned to the male gender means an end to various forms of male domination. By contrasting the feminist/gender perspectives of the two main protagonists, this paper will attempt to demonstrate that the string of letters is arranged in such a way as to present a picture of the world as presented through the eyes of a woman, and a woman's experience.*

Key words: *patriarchy, letter, woman, feminism, Erendiz Atasü*

Introductory notes

In a patriarchal society, specific character traits are attributed to both women and men, which, in turn, determine their roles within the society itself, and the strict division of gender roles has always placed women in an inferior position. The inscription of patriarchal culture into the traditional Turkish system promoted a strategy of excluding the female subject from the public sphere, while allowing men to establish dominance over women, implying their exploitation and subjugation. The male role becomes the norm for the entire society, and ideological and stereotypical concepts of "femininity" and "masculinity"

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stand in the way of raising awareness about gender equality. Gender relations have historically reflected the deeply entrenched nature of patriarchy, which continues to shape contemporary society. This patriarchal system positions women as the 'Other' – a subordinate and devalued category – ultimately leading to their marginalization and ghettoization within the social order. Kos (2021) argues that woman was initially constructed in binary opposition to man. Over time, differences among women themselves became increasingly visible, shaped by geographic, social, and cultural contexts. Ultimately, woman as an individual came to represent a site of internal heterogeneity, reflecting the complexities emphasized in intersectional feminist theory. The marginalization and discrimination of women in all social fields, as well as the dominance of men over women, are consequences of a societal system based on patriarchal foundations. It is the woman who must be a flawless project of the social reality that surrounds her. Her "normality" is maintained through her subordination to men and prescribed norms of behavior, and any deviation from this is punishable. Inferiority, invisibility, oppression, *otherness*, exclusion, and discrimination are just some of the states women have found themselves in, while men have been attributed superiority, prominence, and dominance as socially more valuable beings. Judith Butler, in her work *Gender Trouble* (2000), emphasizes: if you are a woman, that is certainly not all that you are. A woman does not build her identity based on societal expectations nor does she wish to compete with men, but rather to equalize her rights and ensure her freedom. Whether due to women's physical inferiority or the learned pattern of a woman's role in society, women have remained consistent in their primary role of childbirth and child-rearing, as well as household duties. Namely, women (have) performed their tasks in the private sphere, while the public sphere belonged/belongs to men. The philosophy of the binary opposition of mind and body, in which masculinity appears as the bearer of reality, reason, and intellect, and femininity as the irrational, the illusion, the emotional – something to suppress in order for the mind to maintain its integrity – has left deep consequences on the relationships of sexual domination in society (Bećirbašić, 2011, p. 20). This viewpoint was present in the world, but in Turkey as well, until the the establishment of the Republic when the rapid development of industry began, and women started to be employed in large numbers, contributing economically to the household budget. However, the question arises of how much this actually helped women, given that in addition to performing household duties, they became workers, which multiplied their responsibilities. Furthermore, they were paid significantly less than their male colleagues in the same jobs and with the same level of responsibility. The term "feminism" emerged in Turkey at the end of the 19th century and in the early decades of the 20th century, during a period when women gained most civil and political rights (Karataş, 2009, p. 1655), but they had been aware of their oppressed position much earlier. Regarding the education of women, a crucial role was played by the period of Tanzimat reforms (1839-1876), when the Ottoman Empire began its modernization at the social, political, and economic levels. In the period following the establishment of the Turkish Republic, a significant

number of female writers emerged, which marked the women's emergence from the shadow of men. However, all of this was superficial, as women were still discriminated against, and the empowerment of women through education did not bring full freedom to all women. Only women from the upper and partially from the middle class enjoyed their rights, while deeply rooted patriarchal relations continued to pose a problem for women from the lower classes. The "woman question," which forms the foundation of feminism, did not go unnoticed in contemporary Turkish literature. Therefore, many advocates of this movement in Turkey sought to highlight the woman as the central figure in their works, portraying a woman with all the problems she faces throughout her life. In doing so, they attempted to liberate the marginalized, neglected, and discriminated woman – the keeper of the hearth – from the "cage with golden bars," symbolizing her confinement within four walls. The female figures in the short stories of Erendiz Atasü[4] reflect the social life of Turkey during the period in which they were written, but it is not impossible to recognize in them women from other cultural environments as well. In her stories, Atasü portrays a woman who, regardless of the modernized state, is still discriminated against and oppressed by her husband as the head of the household as well as the entire social system based on patriarchy. In her stories, Erendiz Atasü presents women from different social backgrounds, of varying social status and education. Through her works she aims to liberate the woman – "the guardian angel of the home" – from such determinism, and open the doors to her freedom. However, she also believes that this is an exceptionally difficult and long process in a patriarchal society in which we live. The short story *"Ağlayan Kadınlar" Kolajı İçin Taslak* by Erendiz Atasü is part of the collection *Onunla Güzeldim*[5] (1997) and falls under the genre of epistolary literature, primarily because it consists of letters exchanged between two friends, Idil and Sirma. This story seeks to unify their lives by generalizing the quiet suffering of women, regardless of where in the world a woman lives or what she does. Idil lives in England and works at a university, while Sirma has left university, married, and lives in Turkey. From the letters they write to each other, we conclude that both women are caught in the mechanism of dominant collectivism, searching for meaning in the unknown, and striving to conquer it. In the context of feminist/gender reading, this short story addresses the processes of marginalization and the production of marginal entities and identities, questioning concepts of sexual/gender difference, which this paper will attempt to illuminate. The author questions the phallocentric value system, and the strict, oppressive hierarchical relationships that prevail within Turkish society, which this work also aimed to demonstrate.

4 She was born in 1947 in Ankara as an only child. Her mother was an English language professor, and her father was a mathematics professor. Speaking about her childhood, Erendiz likes to emphasize that her house was always full of books, and that books were her greatest friends. In 1968, she graduated with a degree in Pharmacy from Ankara University, and in 1971, she received a scholarship and went to England, where at the age of 25, she began writing her first short stories.

5 *With Him, I Was Beautiful.*

Positioning a woman – as a housewife and mother and/or intellectual! Does one exclude the other, and vice versa?

The supremacy of one gender – male – over the other – female – as well as Erendiz Atasü's desire to liberate her female characters from the burden of serving patriarchal ideology, and her efforts to free them from the confines of the domestic sphere, are critically examined in the short story *"Ağlayan Kadınlar" Kolajı İçin Taslak*. The main heroines, Sirma and Idil, exchange letters from which we can read about gender inhibitions, and the double standards of a patriarchally coded society. Sirma is in a long-term marriage and has a son, and despite finding meaning in her husband and child, and spending her days making herself available to them, she initially convinces herself of her own happiness. From the letters she writes to her friend Idil, asking for postcards from the various places she visits, it becomes clear that she is repressing the actual truth within herself. Marriage, which can sometimes represent a negation of a woman's freedom and autonomy, is her choice, as she states in her letter.

> If you ask me, everything is the same as before. Özdemir and Javuz are doing well. They are the meaning of my life. I spend all my days trying to please them. You know how men are – actually, maybe you don't – they are like children. Don't think for a second that I'm complaining. I'm happy. We made our choices a long time ago. I chose family, you chose science. Anyway... Write me long letters about England, about the places you've visited and the people you've met. Send me postcards, pictures of museums and castles (Atasü, 1997, p. 122).

On the other hand, there is Idil, a heroine whose life has been determined by education as a process in which the promotion and advancement of a woman in society takes place, which is also a guarantee of her survival in leading social trends. For this modern woman, marriage did not seem like a good option because it would restrict, subordinate, and imprison her, ultimately rendering her "invisible." Therefore, she found fulfillment in the role of an intellectual, but also in the role of a lover. Since the short story mirrors contemporary times and the places where the worldview is embedded, it is quite clear that Sirma had endured for years in a seemingly happy marriage primarily because she lives in Turkey, a society whose rules are based on patriarchy. It is also clear why Idil, as an intellectual, found herself in England, and why she, as a lover, ventured into the tabooed territory, thus opposing the tradition from which she emerged.

Interestingly, in one of her letters, Sirma boasts to her friend that she has discovered Virginia Woolf and is deeply fascinated by her inner freedom and independence. Even though she does not specify which of Woolf's works she is reading, it is clear that, after this "enlightenment," she gathered the courage to tell her husband that she wanted to take painting lessons.

> (...) I discovered Virginia Woolf. I can't describe how impressed I am by her. She lives a life independent of everyone and everything around her! And that is the most important thing, actually, that a woman lives a peaceful life according to her own rules and her own terms (Atasü, 1997, p. 121).

Since she had never dared to reveal her desires before, considering it her duty to be exclusively a wife and mother, this step out of the enclosed space of the home represents her form of resistance to the norm. In the letter, she describes the animalistic expression her husband's face took on when she shared the news, emphasizing that she would pay for the painting course partly with the money that had been set aside for food, which meant meals would be scarcer from then on.

> Ah, dear Idil, I can't describe the expression on his face. He turned red, then purple, then yellow, cleared his throat a few times. He looked so ridiculous; I could barely stop myself from bursting into laughter! The mister will humiliate me every day, and I – the poor woman who hardly leaves her four walls – am supposed to bow my head and be content with his selfishness. Let's see what happens now that we've turned the game around (Atasü, 1997, p. 127).

Considering that Virginia Woolf herself advocated for the equal upbringing of women and men, it is very likely that Sirma's action was based precisely on the book she had read. However, Sirma is aware that she will "pay dearly" for this small "victory" she has won in the future. To the letters that Sirma initially sends to her friend, where she completely bares her soul, she rarely receives responses, and Idil justifies this by citing her own overwhelming busyness. When Sirma herself eventually stops writing, feeling betrayed by her best friend, Idil sends a letter expressing concern, stating that she misses her friend. She also mentions that she has discovered the writer Ruth Berlau, Brecht's lover, and promises to write about her and her life. Resigned by the abandonment and infrequent letters, Sirma writes a letter to Idil, informing her that she is getting a divorce and reproaching her for not replying and not writing about her own life. However, in the end, she does not send this letter but instead writes a much shorter one in which she states that she is going through a difficult period and may get a divorce. Idil tries to dissuade her from this decision, believing that Sirma will not be able to live on her own since she has always been tied to a man – first to her father, and later to her husband.

> Dear Sirma, what are you talking about? No one gets divorced after so many years of marriage! Don't even think of making such reckless moves! Focus on your painting lessons and stop worrying about Özdemir. Best, Idil (Atasü, 1997, p. 131).

The question of female identity realized through Sirma's marriage to Özdemir stands at a crossroads, and her attempt to break out of the confined identification frameworks is the first step toward self-realization – a step for which she does not even receive support from her closest friend. The happy ending is also absent in the story of Ruth Berlau, whom Idil writes to Sirma about. This young artist falls in love with the married Bertolt Brecht, and blinded by love, she co-authors many plays with him, which were performed by his wife, actress Helen Weigel. However, where Helen shone, Ruth faded. In the end, she turned to alcohol, and was hospitalized several times in a psychiatric clinic. Even Idil, as a representative of the emancipated woman, the intellectual woman, did not fulfill her primordial role – she did not marry nor become a mother, and as such, she

was socially ostracized and incomplete. Speaking of the emancipation of women, Emma Goldman argues that emancipation brought women economic equality with men; they could choose their own profession and trade. However, physically unprepared to compete with men, they are often forced to drain all their strength, all their vitality, and stretch every nerve to prove their worth in the marketplace (Goldman, 1996, p. 29). Contrasting these two heroines from a feminist/gender perspective, one concludes that the storytelling, that is the sequence of letters, is organized in such a way as to allow for a perspective on the characters. The redistribution of perspectives on the characters, and their connection at the level of the primary narrative thought, achieves the effect of a whole with a clear vision of the world presented through the eyes of women and the female experience.

> Sirma initially represents the embodiment of a woman who has fulfilled her symbolic role. However, by redirecting her sense of self, she resists the patriarchal system and finds meaning in life outside of the traditional concept. On the other hand, Idil, the intellectual who exists beyond rigid patriarchal boundaries, embarks on a love affair with a married man, but fortunately, she ultimately manages to avoid the tragic fate that Ruth Berlau experienced (Botalić, 2021, p. 113-114).

In this way, both Sirma and Idil challenge the prevailing belief and the dominant stereotype that women have no right to choose. There is, however, a small digression that highlights the fact that (these) women do indeed have the right to choose, but that choice comes at a price. In the short story *''Ağlayan Kadınlar' Kolajı İçin Taslak*, two friends – the housewife Sirma and the intellectual Idil – exchange letters, and, as we have seen, this correspondence allows for a revision of the concept of woman and her position within the category of the marginal.

> I paint portraits of women who cry. They are scared, humiliated, sad... I paint their curled up bodies that resemble the bodies of frightened animals... All the muscles on these bodies cry!... Hey, you muscles, external and internal, can you hear me?... Dark, gloomy colors... I paint ugly, extremely ugly scenes! I paint the bodies of abandoned and forsaken women twisting... Özdemir and I haven't been intimate for years. Have I told you that lately, he doesn't even want to touch me? (Atasü, 1997, p. 136).

The resistance to repression and dominant ideology evident in both protagonists of this story seems more like a form of disguise than a genuine overcoming of gendered stereotypes.

To conclude...

Equality between men and women in both the public and private spheres is one of the fundamental human rights and freedoms, and equal educational opportunities are the first step toward achieving this goal. In any case, the modern era has brought about a greater number of employed women, which is the result of the continuous pressure from feminist movements. However, women are still significantly less paid than their male colleagues in the same jobs. Thus, dualistic criteria prevail in all fields within the patriarchal social order. A woman, in her constant effort to be equal, not *other*, to be accepted, not ostracized, to have the right to choose, to

have freedom – has placed herself at the center of the struggle, where, oppressed, stigmatized, and silenced by male authorities, she is still searching for a way out of her confinement and invisibility, which is one of the fundamental problems of the main heroines in Erendiz Atasü's short stories. Even in this story, it is clear to see a woman in transition, who at times experiences a revelation, shedding the chains placed on her by patriarchal social order, but then, unprepared for such a shift, falls back into the dangerous web of imposed rules and roles assigned at birth. The deprivation of women in the field of education is visible in the character of Sirma, who, bound by the chains of tradition, tries to break free from the limited space of the private sphere in search of identity. She tries to (re)define her place, and despite the fact that she can choose and build her identity, her freedom is limited because it is not entirely hers, nor does she fully belong to herself. Dependent on many factors, a woman is again condemned to suffer and endure because her identity is a construct manipulated by others. On the other hand, Idil is surrounded by the illusory idea of freedom and emancipation, but societal expectations based on patriarchal norms have condemned her to feel that she has failed in her role as a woman. Idil is a victim of patriarchal (superior) power, even though she seemingly represents a breakthrough from the dominant construct of the female gender identity. The (non)belonging to the male space, as well as the gender inhibitions of the woman, is described by Atasü through the inner state of the women, who in this story are reconciled/conflicted with their fate. Building a female world within the male one is a painful battle that Idil and Sirma face every day. They are, in a way, both within and outside of that world, they are both saints and witches, pushing boundaries, breaking taboos, but still submitting and returning to their world (which again is not their own). They are powerless, but not defeated, because there are countless opportunities to fight. They do not give up, so for them, a lost battle does not mean a lost war.

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