

FEMALE SELF-ASSERTION IN MODERN FICTION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ADALET AĞAOĞLU AND DORIS LESSING

MODERN KURGUDA DIŞİL BENLİK DAVASI: ADALET AĞAOĞLU VE DORIS LESSING ÜZERİNE KARŞILAŞTIRMALI BİR ANALİZ

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Abstract

Emerged in the early 1960s in the United States, “second wave feminism” spread worldwide throughout the modern period in literature. Influenced by the social, economic and political changes after the World Wars, the second wave feminists dealt with new issues such as female sexuality, the role of women in family and society, the concept of motherhood, feminine liberty and female employment. During this period, many female authors tended to reflect both their distaste about the restriction of patriarchy over women and their desire for female self-assertion in actual and fictive worlds. The Turkish Adalet Ağaoğlu and the British Doris Lessing were notable women writers that enhanced the idea of feminine self-assertion in patriarchal societies through their literary writings. This study aimed at examining and clarifying the similar struggle of two female protagonists, created by Lessing and Ağaoğlu, for self-identity in different cultures. In this study, the novel, *Ölmeye Yatmak* by Adalet Ağaoğlu and the short story, “To Room Nineteen” by Doris Lessing were comparatively analysed to show how women sacrificed their bodies, souls and lives to gain an identity in society. It was concluded, through the findings, that Ağaoğlu and Lessing depicted how the imposed roles of patriarchy could lead to female agony, despair, depression and loneliness.

Keywords: Self-Assertion, Second Wave Feminism, Adalet Ağaoğlu, Doris Lessing, Comparatively

Öz

Birleşik Devletlerde, 1960ların başında ortaya çıkan “ikinci dalga feminizm” edebiyatta modern dönem boyunca tüm dünyaya yayılmıştır. Dünya Savaşlarından sonraki sosyal, ekonomik ve politik değişimlerden etkilenen ikinci dalga feministler, dişil cinsellik, kadının ailede ve toplumdaki rolü, annelik olgusu, dişil özgürlük ve kadın istihdamı gibi yeni konularla ilgilenmişlerdir. Bu dönemde, birçok kadın yazar, hem ataerkil düzenin kadın üzerindeki kısıtlamasından duydukları memnuniyetsizliği hem de gerçek ve kurgu dünyasında kadının benlik davası arzularını yansıtmışlardır. Türk Adalet Ağaoğlu ve İngiliz Doris Lessing, edebi yazıları ile ataerkil toplumlarda dişil benlik davası kavramını destekleyen önemli kadın yazarlardır. Bu çalışma, Lessing ve Ağaoğlu tarafından yaratılmış iki kadın kahramanın benlik için farklı kültürlerde çabalarını örneklendirme ve açıklamayı hedefler. Bu çalışmada, Adalet Ağaoğlu’nun *Ölmeye Yatmak* adlı romanı ve Doris Lessing’in “To Room Nineteen” (Ondokuz Numaralı Oda) adlı kısa hikâyesi, kadınların bedenlerini, ruhlarını ve hayatlarını toplumda benlik edinmek için nasıl feda ettiklerini göstermek adına karşılaştırmalı olarak analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular doğrultusunda, Ağaoğlu ve Lessing’in, ataerkil düzenin dayattığı rollerin kadınlarda nasıl ızdırap, çaresizlik, depresyon ve yalnızlığa sebep olabileceğini gösterdiği sonuçlarına varılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Benlik Davası, İkinci Dalga Feminizm, Adalet Ağaoğlu, Doris Lessing, Karşılaştırmalı

Introduction

Women’s Suffrage Movement emerged in 1840s in Britain and spread through many western cultures. Feminist movements are categorized in various forms and periods. The first wave feminism involved women’s suffrage movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries all over the world. The aim of the first wave feminists aimed at providing women legal rights about the right to vote, gain education and to own property along with gender

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equality in social fields. The second wave started in the early 1960s in the United States and enhanced the necessity of equality in regard to social, economic and political. Women, during this period, declared the “woman’s rights over her own body” (Walters 110) and they considered the patriarchy as a barrier to their career. Moreover, second wave feminists tended to reflect the female issues such as sexuality, family, motherhood, liberty and employment in the literary canon to awaken female readers. Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) presented new ideologies about gender segregation (Donovan, 1985) and Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1987) dealt with the discussions, based on how male power oppresses women in patriarchal codes. Beauvoir claims that the idea of womanhood is a social construct, designed by the patriarchal order and certain roles are imposed on women:

No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an Other (273).

With the establishment of the Republic, the second wave feminism initiated in Turkish culture with the influences of the western culture due to industrialization, which destroyed the gender and social balance (Berksoy 8). Similar to western authors, the Turkish intellectuals advocated that culture could prosper with gender equality (Durakbaşı 25). Moreover, the main concern of the Ottoman women was to combine modernization with traditional roles and became the symbol of ‘civilization’ of nation (Durakbaşı 89). The new Turkish women were supposed to be educated, independent, modern, enlightened, loyal to traditional values, active and decent (Berktaş 2). For Köksal the new Turkish woman “is not a house wife but she is at first an educated woman... new woman should be the educator of her children... should be complementary of man in nature” (32). In Turkish literature, the second wave feminist authors tended to be active in society, independent, educated, and competent enough to criticize the vices of the system.

During the 1950s Turkey, women became the symbol of economic changes and technology as they involved as workforce. The second wave feminism, which influenced the western culture, provided a new step for feminism and women became the center of all reformations: “After 1960s, the external conflict turned into an internal conflict” (Uğurlu 21) under the impacts of modernization. The female characters in fiction either tended to become a member of society due to internal conflicts or desired to reject all the roles, imposed upon them, to gain self-assertion. The latter ones are accepted as active women, yet isolated from the society. During the Republic period, novels presented the perception of the “New Woman” concept, gender dualisms and female trials for self-assertion. However, the novels also depicted female depression, suicides, regression and tragedies.

It would not be wrong to remind that men, in almost all patriarchal cultures, dominate

women, who are accepted as second class. While men were perceived as the breadwinners and the authority, women were accepted as caretakers, mothers and wives within domestic spheres: “The struggle of woman in society is equally associated with her economic independence. This situation became obvious when societies involve in industrialization and urbanization. Migration to cities for employment, poverty, the participation of women in workforce distanced the relations and habits from traditional” (Gökçe 174).

Adalet Ağaoğlu, as one of the most significant female authors of Turkish Republic, was born in 1929 and completed her high school education at Ankara Girls’ School. In 1950, she graduated from the department of French Language and Literature at Ankara University and enrolled to Ankara Radio, TRT. She began writing in Ulus newspaper. Among the works she produced are *Evcilik Oyunu*, *Tombala*, *Çatıdaki Çatlak*, *Bir Kahramanın Ölümü*, *Çıkış Kozaları*, *Kendini Yazan Şarkı*, *Çok Uzak Fazla Yakın*, *Duvar Öyküsü*, *Bir Düğün Gecesi*, *Ruh Üşümesi*, *Hayır*, *Üç Beş Kişi*, *Göç Temizliği*, *Ölmeye Yatmak* and *Şiir ve Sinek*.

Adalet Ağaoğlu contributed to Turkish literature with her intellectual manners, rebellious attitude and feministic views. While questioning the status of women in patriarchal Turkish society, she not only tended to reflect gender segregation, lack of communication, female sexuality, but also dealt with hypocrisy of patriarchy, male gaze, liberty and alienation of women, which all lead the reader to analyze and question the social issues in her fiction. Ağaoğlu never approved the obedience of women in male dominated societies both in her actual and fictive worlds. In her fiction, there are various female figures: domestic housewives, traditional women, rebellious young girls, masculine women, corrupted women and independent females. However, her main focus was the struggle of women with the patriarchy and she underscored that female education was the only salvation for women (Gören 177).

The British author, Doris Lessing was born in 1919 in Kermanshah and moved to Zimbabwe for a better life. After an unhappy childhood, Lessing went to Salisbury at the age of eighteen and then to London. Her fiction includes *The Grass is Singing*, *The Golden Notebook*, *The Summer Before the Dark*, *The Good Terrorist* and *The Fifth Child*. Her main focus was on the spiritual and sexual freedom of women in the 20th century. Doris Lessing (1919-2013) is regarded as “one of the early voices of the feminist movement” by many scholars and critics (Whittaker 18).

Adalet Ağaoğlu’s *Ölmeye Yatmak* (*Sleeping to Death*) (1973) begins with the suicide plan of Aysel, an associate professor in sociology, on an April morning and ends as she leaves the room after an hour and twenty second. At the hotel room, she recalls her childhood memories, her trials for education, her depressions and frustrations of marriage. In the background, the novel also reflects the social, politic and historical changes with the Republic in Turkish society. Through the suffering of Aysel, Ağaoğlu depicts the conflicts between the individuals and society during 1970s. The novel ends as Aysel ends the fight in her mind and returns to her world.

Doris Lessing's short story "To Room Nineteen" (1963) narrates the story of Susan Rawlings who commits suicide in a hotel room. The story was published when the feminist movement was at its peak and women began to discover their inner selves. At the beginning of the story, Susan is a happy young woman with four children. However, when all her children start school, she is left alone and begins to question her life. The freedom brings an emptiness for Susan who has devoted all her time to her family. In order to have private time, Susan makes one room, "Mother's Room" which she set to be alone, yet, she cannot concentrate on herself due to the noise of children. Then, she rents a hotel room ("Room Nineteen") at Fred's Hotel, where she questions her marriage, motherhood, profession and decisions in life. This questioning leads her to self-discovery. Frustrated, depressed and unhappy Susan eventually commits suicide at the end.

In this study, two texts were intentionally chosen due to various reasons. The first reason is that both Adalet Ağaoğlu and Doris Lessing were the notable feminist writers of the 1960s and their main focus was female search for self-identity in patriarchal society. Secondly, the texts involve social and historical traces of their culture in the background while presenting the struggle of female protagonists for self-assertion. Finally, the female suicide is the core in both *Ölmeye Yatmak* and "To Room Nineteen". Therefore, the following part ensures the similarities between the female protagonists to exemplify the aims of Ağaoğlu and Lessing.

Analysis

The main objective of the analysis of these texts is to explain and exemplify the expectations of patriarchy from women and how they are depicted by the authors. Although they were written by female authors from two different cultures, there are significant common remarks. The first similarity is that *Ölmeye Yatmak* and "To Room Nineteen" were written in the same decade and both involve the social and economic changes of the period along with the status of women during the 20th century. In this sense, both texts revolve around the feminine ideal and struggle of women of 1960s:

The 1950s and early 1960s...was a period of reassertion of domesticity and dependency as the feminine ideal... The reigning ideology of femininity, so well described by Betty Friedan and perfectly captured in the movies and television shows of the era, was childlike, nonassertive, helpless without a man, 'content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies and home' (Bordo 170).

1960s were the period, both in Turkish and British cultures, when gender roles began to change due to certain regulations and reforms. Women with a profession in the 1960s had to deal with the conflict based on the burdens of domestic life and their career. Many women quit work after birth or marriage: "[c]areer women who eschewed the path of maternity and matrimony confronted the inequalities of a labour market where they were neither properly paid for doing the same work as men nor rewarded with promotion to

senior positions for showing equal competence” (Whelehan 7). Moreover, feminists started protests against the inequalities in employment and salaries in the competitive business life. Thus, the female protagonists, analyzed for this study, are depicted to ensure the despair of women who were expected to fit the roles, designed by patriarchy.

Both Susan and Aysel are intellectual women, yet the “social transformation process led the recreation of limits between private-public as is seen within the western civilization and modern values” (Göle 171). Aysel’s first struggle is for education against her parents who were opposed to her education. Through Aysel, Ağaoğlu reminded the readers that education would save a woman: “What did our ancestor say? “Our women have to be more sophisticated, intellectual, and awake than our men. If they want to be the mother of this nation, this has to be done” (Ağaoğlu 95).

Having fought for her education rights, Aysel thinks that “Soon, the high school will finish. I will go to college. I will contribute to my nation and our men will not suffer from loneliness due to girls like me” (Ağaoğlu 189). Eventually, she becomes an associate professor in sociology and as an example of the Republican woman, she has spent all her life on working for a prosperous nation. She is married to an academician, Ömer, and led a peaceful and secure life. However, she begins to question her life, as well as her decisions and marriage. Aysel considers herself as a rescued woman, yet, a prisoner who has sacrificed her whole life for others. In order to feel free, she has an affair with her student, Engin, but soon, regrets it. Her riot is against both the traditional roles imposed upon women and expectations of patriarchy from women.

Similar to Aysel, Susan is an intellectual woman and has a perfect life at the beginning of the story. Before marriage, Susan was working in an advertising company and she “had a talent for commercial drawing. She was humorous about the advertisements she was responsible for, but she did not feel strongly about them one way or the other” (Lessing 254). By marrying Matthew, Susan creates an ideal life because their marriage is accepted as perfect by everyone “because of their infallible sense for choosing right” (Lessing 254). At the beginning of the story, Susan makes a right choice, as expected by the society. However, after having four children, she quits work and begins to live in a large house with a garden in Richmond suburb:

They had everything they wanted and had planned for. And yet... Well, even this was expected, that there must be a certain flatness... Yes, yes, of course, it was natural they sometimes felt like this. Like what? Their life seemed to be like a snake biting its tail (Lessing 254).

Motherhood and wifedom invalidate herself as she quits the job and becomes a housewife, recalling many women during the 1960s: “When middle-class housewives raised children as an unpaid full-time role, the work was dignified by the aura of middle-classness” (Hochschild 144). As an upper-middle-class woman, Susan embraces the social codes, and becomes an ideal mother. However, she becomes fed up with her roles and secretly decides to rent a hotel room, where “[s]he no longer was mistress of the big white

house and garden, owning clothes suitable for this and that activity or occasion. She was Mrs. Jones, and she was alone, and she had no past and no future" (Lessing 278). Susan uses a pseudonym, rather than Mrs Matthew Rawlings, indicating her search for self-identity:

What is unique about Room Nineteen is that it has enabled her to re-establish the link to her selfhood. This link, however, is destroyed when her husband learns about her secret. When her husband discovers her place of seclusion, she no longer feels free, as "the peace of the room had gone," (Lessing 279).

In the room, she begins to realize disillusionments about her marriage, which is defined as a "bondage" (Lessing 266) and a barrier for self-assertion. Susan is the mother of four, the wife and the caretaker of the family. This dependence causes the loss of individuality. In other words, social structures and expectations have exploited Susan, whose tragedy begins with the financial dependence:

No, Matthew was a full-time husband, a full-time father, and at nights, in the big married bed in the big married bedroom (which had an attractive view of the river) they lay beside each other talking, and he told her about his day, and what he had done, and who he had met; and she told him about her day (not as interesting, but that was not her fault) for both knew of the hidden resentments and deprivations of the woman who has lived her own life, and above all, has earned her own living, and is now dependent on a husband for outside interests and money (Lessing 256).

The loss of self-identity, femininity and self-respect caused the emptiness in Susan's spirit: "A high price has to be paid for the happy marriage with the four healthy children in the white large garden house" (Lessing 260). However, she knows that the disappointment in her marriage is:

Nobody's fault, nothing to be at fault, no one to blame, no one to offer or to take it... and nothing wrong, either, except that Matthew never was really struck, as he wanted to be, by joy; and that Susan was more and more often threatened by emptiness" (Lessing 259).

After leaving her profession and freedom, her despair is replaced with resentment: "Resentment. It was poisoning her. (She looked at this emotion and thought it was absurd.) Yet she felt it. She was a prisoner..." (Lessing 264). Susan has been a wife and a mother, yet never a woman on her own. That is when Susan invents a lover and lies to her husband:

Michael Plant... "He's rather like you—in looks, I mean. And indeed, she could imagine herself being touched by no one but Matthew himself. He's a publisher"(really? Why?) "He's got a wife already and two children" (Lessing 284).

Secondly, both Aysel and Susan are depressed, oppressed and suppressed under the roles and expectations of their societies. Many patriarchal societies have attributed certain

epithets for women and women are either mothers, wives, daughters or sisters and a woman can be accepted by the society if generally hides her sexuality because men perceive women as objects or a belonging (Sert 23). In a sense, they are the representatives of females “who resist[s] the domestication of women in the society” (Karabulut 182). Susan and Aysel have lost their self-identities, desires and femininity. For instance, although she is educated and a scientist, Aysel is the “wife of her husband for the society” (Sert 25). Aysel is aware of this hypocrisy as she exemplifies: “Once I quit because I could not get along with the people. They said that ‘Sure, it is easy for her to quit. Her husband is behind her’” (Ağaoğlu 225).

The main goal of Aysel is “to be herself” (Sert 24). That is why, she has an affair with her student, Engin, who reminds her of her femininity. After her betrayal, Aysel realizes her own body: “I was a lively girl again. My whole mind, wisdom, hair, lips, breasts, belly, perception, smile, discourse are wholly forth” (Ağaoğlu 179-180). While waiting for death, Aysel questions her womanhood, desires and self-identity: “I wonder whether I was myself? Have we ever been ourselves? Have I ever had a piece without duties... What is the reason that my body was apart from me?” (Ağaoğlu 182-183).

Having many roles in life: a student, a decent wife, an ideal woman of the Republic, an intellectual, teacher and a mistress to her student, Aysel has spent all her life by ignoring her femininity and sexual desires to be accepted by the society. As a woman, she was oppressed by her father in her childhood and adolescence, then by the patriarchy and its strict codes on women. Defeated by all the feminine roles, she is alienated and estranged to herself. Like Susan, Aysel is a prisoner and stuck in the routine circles of life. In her fight with the perception that considers women as second class, she realizes that she has neglected her desires as a woman.

Similar to Aysel, Susan has many roles: the mother of four, the wife of Matthew, and the employer of Mrs. Parkers. That is why, she rents a hotel room to find her identity. In that hotel room, Susan

...was no longer Susan Rawlings, mother of four, wife of Matthew, employer of Mrs. Parkers and of Sophie Traub, with these and those relations with friends, schoolteachers, and tradesman. She no longer was the mistress of the big white house and garden, owning clothes suitable for this and that activity or occasion. She was Mrs. Jones, and she was alone, and she had no past and no future (Lessing 278).

The third similarity is based on the suicide motif. Suicide tendency increases in psychologically violated individuals and depression could cause suicidality in women who are exposed to emotional abuse (Tang, Thompson et al.). Aysel desires for self-assertion and freedom, which leads her to commit suicide at a hotel room: “I got naked quickly. I opened the bed at the corner. I got in all naked; I slept to death” (Ağaoğlu 5).

The reasons for Aysel’s suicide are “beneath the perception of society that considers

her as second class, the distortion of the system, designed by people, who influence and are influenced by this perception” (Uğurlu 392). By committing suicide, Aysel tends to react against her loss of self, the roles imposed on her by society and male discourse of her society. However, even at the hotel room, lying naked, waiting for her death, Aysel thinks about her duties:

I will not go the lesson. My unannounced cancellation would surprise the secretary. She would see the students walking in the corridor. They would say “Mrs Aysel did not come”. They would be glad. They would go to the parks. They would sit in the canteen. Nobody would think I was dead...(Ağaoğlu 24).

The water was off. I must have left the taps on while leaving. There must be flow... Was the kitchen window open? The housekeeper would come soon. She has a key. She would wait my phone when she sees I am not in. Shall I call? I cannot die by considering the details...(Ağaoğlu 61-62).

In other words, she cannot get rid of her roles to feel free. Thus, she declares that the room is the only place where she has no responsibilities: “Away from everything. I have no war. I have no duty. I do not try to correct anything. I am standing, waiting in the darkness of the room” (Ağaoğlu 62).

For Karaca (2002), the reason for Aysel’s sleep for death is the “loss of self” (6) and it is considered to be a reaction to social assertions and herself: “There must be a rebel when you are thirty and could not get a place” (Ağaoğlu 104) and “I try be right by dying” (Ağaoğlu 107). Moreover, her betrayal leads to regression, and she desires to get rid of this sense through suicide. However, unlike Susan Rawling, Aysel is hesitant about killing herself and struggles between life and death because she has learnt that she is pregnant to Engin’s child:

This is a war to live. There will not be a need if we confirm ourselves! Living, no complaining will continue. Like a newborn child everyday a new thing will surprise. There will be waiting... This requires reconciliation with everything and the self (Ağaoğlu 111).

After her internal feud, Aysel decides to reconcile with herself, gets dressed and leaves the hotel room to initiate a new life with hope because she realizes that she should keep struggling to change the system: “hoping to change alone, and believing to this” is her only salvation (Ağaoğlu 189).

Similar to Aysel, when Susan discovers that she has lost selfhood for the sake of wifehood and motherhood, she desires a place of her own; however, she fails to escape. The only way to escape is by taking her own life, which can release her body and save her spirit from imprisonment. As stated at the beginning, the story is “about a failure in intelligence” (Lessing 253), yet her marriage becomes a “prison” within domestic spheres. Eventually, Susan suffers from a psychic breakdown due to the roles, dictated to her: “It is not even a year since the twins

went to school, since they were off my hands (what on earth did I think I meant when I used that stupid phrase?) and yet I'm a different person. I'm simply not myself. I don't understand it" (Lessing 265).

Suicide could liberate her spirit and body from the restrictions of the patriarchy. When she committed suicide, Susan "was quite content lying there, listening to the dark soft hiss of the gas that poured into the room, into her lungs, into her brain, as she drifted off into the dark river" (Lessing, 1965, p. 288). As Kun Zhao comments: "Finally, she[Susan] found a good place for her freedom—Room nineteen... Only in room nineteen could she feel she was a complete, happy and confident individual" (1654).

The only difference between Susan and Aysel is that Susan dies at the end while Aysel abandons the room. Aysel manages to regain her power to continue struggling for herself and for the "future generations." That is how Ağaoğlu tries to convey her message: in order to reach the ideals, women should be brave enough to survive in a male-dominated society. On the other hand, Susan dies, yet her death can be considered a revolt against the codes of her society.

Conclusion

Although both were written by female authors from different cultures, *Ölmeye Yatmak* by Adalet Ağaoğlu and "To Room Nineteen" by Doris Lessing bear resemblance to each other in various ways. Both texts reflect the female assertion during the 1960s, women's roles in the male dominated societies and social patriarchal codes. The texts depict the act of suicide by two female intellectual figures that are oppressed and depressed by the roles imposed upon them by their societies.

The only difference between Susan and Aysel is that Susan dies at the end while Aysel abandons the room. Aysel manages to reclaim her power to continue struggling for herself and for the "future generations". That is how Ağaoğlu tries to convey her message: in order to reach the ideals, women should be brave enough to survive in male dominated society. Susan, on the other hand, dies, yet her death can also be considered as a revolt against the rules of her society. Both works, thus, reveal the struggle of women for self-assertion and freedom within the traditional codes and unwritten laws of patriarchal societies. Through these analyses, it is argued that Ağaoğlu and Lessing depicted how the imposed roles of patriarchy lead to female agony, despair, depression and loneliness.

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