

A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN IN THE 19TH CENTURY THROUGH LITERATURE

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Abstract: 19th century is a very hot period in terms of scientific developments, economical and sociological transformations. Accordingly, the economic and social conditions of people were changing dramatically. Yet, no doubt that it was a patriarchal society and that the stage belonged to men even though women gradually started to appear on the stage as well. There were *Great Expectations*, hopes and fights for the future among men. Even after the fact that women's rights started to be advocated, the approach towards women did not really change easily. Although their existence in society was visible now, its limits were smartly drawn. Literature has a very interesting role here because it both helped women to enlarge their world and drew the line of the individuality at the same time. The depictions of women in the narratives of the male authors in this period show how it works. In this paper I am going to analyze two novels from two different cultures: *The Blue and the Black (Mai ve Siyah)* by Halid Ziya Uşaklıgil and *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. In these novels we can see both the world of women in this period vis-à-vis men and how literature works to draw the line for women socially and economically.

Keywords: 19th century, women, men, literature

Introduction

19th century is a very hot period in terms of scientific developments, economical and sociological transformations. Although it has been a long process which has started long before, 19th century was the peak. The economic and social conditions of people were changing dramatically. Yet, no doubt that it was a patriarchal society and that the stage belonged to men even though women started to appear on the stage as well. There were *Great Expectations*, hopes and fights for the future among men. Anyone could come up in the world through education, hard work and passion. Nothing was stable now, as Karl Marx manifested for the era that “all that is solid melts into air.”

Yet it cannot be ignored the fact that this is also the period that women are accepted as individuals who have some rights. Even after the fact that their rights started to be advocated, the approach towards women did not really change easily. Although their existence in society was visible now, its limits were smartly drawn. Literature has a very interesting role here because it both helped women to enlarge their world and drew the line of the individuality at the same time. The depictions of women in the narratives of the male authors in this period show how it works. In this paper I am going to analyze two novels from two different cultures: *The Blue and the Black (Mai ve Siyah)* by Halid Ziya Uşaklıgil and *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. The reason I chose these novels is to have a comparative perspective between different cultures, one of which is my country and the other is one of the representatives of the West, which is also one of the role models of Turkey at the time. Though French literature was more effective on Turkish writers at the time, what is more the protagonist in *The Blue and the Black* is fascinated by French poets, I preferred to compare the novel with one from English literature because of the analogy between the two novels regarding both the conditions and positions of characters and the external reality the novels depict. Analyzing these novels, I want to show the positions of women in society vis-a-vis men.

The Blue and the Black is a novel written in 1897. It depicts the era from Ahmet Cemil's point of view. Ahmet Cemil, the protagonist of the novel, is a student in The Military School. He has high expectations for the future: being a famous poet who has an eloquent and avant-garde style. After his father died, however, being the only man in the family he has no choice but to leave the school in order to put bread on the table for his family. He makes his living from translating books and tutoring children of wealthy families. Then he begins to work in a newspaper. Meanwhile, he works passionately for his masterwork which he believes that it will bring fame to him. One day the owner of the newspaper dies and his son, Vehbi Effendi starts to head it. Dreaming of being the owner of the newspaper and of being wealthy one day, Ahmet Cemil weds his sister to Vehbi Effendi. After then he believes that Lamia, sister of Ahmet Cemil's best friend Hüseyin Nazmi, would marry him. Yet his dreams and plans do

not come true. First Vehbi Effendi starts to live with them and behaves badly to his sister and to all family. He runs into debt and mortgages the house inherited from his father. His sister, İkbâl dies in misery. Furthermore, his masterpiece, contrary to his expectations, is mortified just in his own newspaper and he gets fired by Vehbi Effendi. Finally, he learns that Hüzeyin Nazmi, his idol in life moves to Europe as a principal officer and Lamia is engaged to a military officer. After his blue dreams turned into black realities, he decides to leave the city with his mother and heads for the east, on the contrary to his ideals.

Great Expectations, written in 1861, is also about a young man who has *Great Expectations* which he loses throughout the book. Pip, a seven-year-old orphan boy, lives with his sister who is always angry and hot tempered and with her husband Joe Gargery, a blacksmith. Sitting in a cemetery one evening he encounters an escaped convict. He orders some food and a file for his leg iron. The next day, he is recaptured with another escaped convict who came after him. One day his uncle Pumblechook takes Pip to Miss Havisham's Satis House to play with her adopted daughter Estella. Miss Havisham is a strange woman who lives in a strange house. She still wears her old wedding dress, the clocks stopped at the same time and the house is untouched since the wedding day on which her fiancé jilted her. Although Pip is always insulted by Miss Havisham and Estella being common and coarse, he continues to visit them because he falls in love with Estella. He begins to dream to be a gentleman admired by Estella. Miss Havisham, however, sends him back for his indenture as a blacksmith. Four years later in a pub a man whom Pip once saw in Miss Havisham's mansion, tells him that he is to be given monthly stipend by a secret benefactor. Thinking his benefactor is Miss Havisham he goes to London in order to be a gentleman. Years later, however, he learns the fact that his benefactor was the escaped convict, Magwitch. He is disappointed with the truth but at the end he acknowledges it and asks Joe and Biddy forgiveness, whom he ignored that much just because of thinking that they are common. His sister is already dead and Joe is married now to Biddy who once fell in love with Pip. Estella also gets married to another man. Therefore, for many years Pip goes abroad to work. Coming back, he meets Estella in the Satis House, her husband is now dead. She was bitterly regretful of what she did to him. Finally, they leave the garden hand in hand.

What we see in these novels at first is nothing but a world of men. It is not only about protagonists' gender, but rather about their relationships with women and about the positions of women in general. It goes without saying that in a novel would be men and women; but the question here is how their positions in all respects, be it social, be it economic or political etc., are depicted. The crucial point for both novels is that their authors manifest that they present things as they are. In other words, the worlds in these novels are just representatives of the outside world they just live in. It does not necessarily mean that we should accept it as a mere reality. On the contrary, we should not forget that they are fiction, but we should also keep in mind that there is a different kind of reality there. It is different from history and documentary; yet it tells something about their era. It says a lot about gender relations, class differences and the institutions of society. On this basis, these novels give us some clue on how patriarchy works and what the positions of women in the late 19th century are.

The 19th century is the period marked by the collapse of the empires like Ottoman Empire and by the rise of British power all over the world with Russian Empire. Globalization and industrialization are the keywords. Science and technology are on the rise. There is a great belief in humanity and ability to progress. Vertical and horizontal social mobility was increasing incrementally. Man could move up social ladder. This is why the protagonists in these novels have *Great Expectations* for the future. They dream of a better position for themselves in terms of economic and social. Correspondingly they always dream of a beautiful, wealthy and noble woman whom they can only reach by belonging to the upper class.

Yet here comes the point: since this is the world of men, women do not have similar positions and expectations. For instance, the female main characters in other novels like *Aşk-ı Memnu* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* which were written in the same century by Halid Ziya Uşaklıgil and Thomas Hardy respectively do not have such motives in their lives. Bihter in *Aşk-ı Memnu* wants to belong to high society and be in fashion. All Tess wants is just to survive and earn a living for her family. Bihter wants to fulfill her desires and Tess not to be condemned by something she is guilty of. What they suffer is patriarchal society which does not allow them to live as a woman. In this period women are not depicted by male authors as individuals who are working for a better world like men, on the contrary depicted as subjects always related with men through sexual relationships¹. Their lives are full of love and marriage, but no educational or career planning. They are always weak and sentimental. The only moment they are rational is the time they decide to marry to someone for his money and status.

Women who are not main characters in the novels aforesaid have similar positions, too; they are bound to male

¹ Female authors in this period may depict women from a different perspective. For example, Fatma Aliye and Halide Edip from Turkish literature tell stories of strong women who are thirsty for a better world like men and struggle for it. This is why I emphasized authors' gender.

characters somehow. Lamia in *The Blue and the Black*, for example, is the woman of Ahmet Cemil's dreams. Lamia is not a character in the novel as an individual, she is like a ghost. She is only there for her social status. With her house, her car, her piano etc. which represent her class, she stands where Ahmet Cemil just exactly wants to be. This is why Ahmet Cemil hopes to marry her one day until he burns his work with the thought of failure. When he learns that she is engaged to another man, he loses his last hope. Until then, he married her sister İkbal to Vehbi Efendi in the hope of being a printing house owner; but her sister died in misery because of this marriage. İkbal was a girl who never tells her brother her feelings and thoughts, who is submissive to her family. She is another ghost who is there to make Ahmet Cemil's desires come true. Yet, she cannot help him because she, like all her other family members, is weak and ineffective in the face of Vehbi Effendi. She has no voice in the novel. Ahmet Cemil exploits her as a capital. Vehbi Effendi abuses her mentally and physically.

There are two other women, Ahmet Cemil's mother Sabiha Hanım and the maid Seher, in *The Blue and the Black*, but they are all like İkbal. Seher is harassed by Vehbi Effendi. Although İkbal and Sabiha Hanım are aware of the fact, they say nothing. Seher cannot take action or leave the house. This is because she does not have social and economic freedom. Neither in this novel nor in others written by Uşaklıgil are there such powerful women who can support themselves. They are all dependent on men. In *The Blue and the Black* Ahmet Cemil is the only one to take care of his family after his father's death. No woman is supposed to work. This causes both Ahmet Cemil's whole world turning upside down and women's committing themselves totally to home and men. This leads Ahmet Cemil being the only authority at home, but eventually causes a total catastrophe. The novel tries to show the problematic here, but never offers a solution². Here come some solutions by female authors. Fatma Aliye, for instance, depicts women who have economic and social difficulties and needs to earn her living like men. This brings to mind some questions like what difference makes the gender of the author of a narrative regarding the world portrayed, what kind of audience they address, how literature serves ideology even if the authors claim otherwise, how literary narratives shape our vision and vice versa.

Those questions are also valid for *Great Expectations*. Likewise, gender relations, social and economic relations, expectations for the future and future anxiety can be observed here, too. Estella is raised as a misandrist by Miss Havisham who is a woman left by her fiancé on the wedding day. She wants Estella take her revenge. Both are portrayed as that cruel, proud and shallow. They do not have any concerns, but to agonize to men. Estella, like Lamia, is there as a statue representing upper class. Pip is charmed by her elegant dresses and manners. He begins to be ashamed of his family and to dream of being a wealthy gentleman in order to get married to Estella who insults him being common. Yet neither Miss Havisham nor Estella is successful at the end. Miss Havisham makes amends at the end to Pip for everything she has done to him and Estella. And Estella tells Pip that she suffered from her husband and that she feels sorry for making him suffer. Therefore, both women are depicted here totally different from men who have economic and social concerns. They are isolated from society. One may claim that they are exceptional, but telling a story of someone exceptional is a preference and tells us also something. Dickens is known by his realist attitude, which makes his preferences important. Dickens describes women through their outward appearances which indicates their inner world. But this prevents us from hearing their voice and having empathy with female characters. In fact, as Gregory Jusdanis and Rita Felski point out in their books *Fiction Agonistes: In Defense of Literature* and *Uses of Literature* respectively, literature enlarges our vision, helps us to see the world from different perspectives and to understand others different from us. Dickens' women conform with the Victorian thought which assigns women to home. A woman must devote herself to her house, husband and children; that is to say a woman must be "the angel in the house". This is why Miss Havisham and Estella are depicted as outsider and regretful at the end. It should be noted here again that they are not outsider because they seek professional training and careers but because they are misandrists and refuse to obey social norms.

Dickens' women are usually not sympathetic. Mrs. Joe Gargery, Pip's older sister is one of them. She is from lower class. She is home all day and keeps cleaning the house. She is very ambitious. She wants to get higher economically but what she does is nothing but complaining about her economic conditions and about Pip whom she sees as a burden. Always angry and stern, she makes life miserable for Pip and Joe. This is a woman "in the house" but apparently not "angel". Therefore, she is not an idol for the reader to identify with, too. Then, who is the ideal woman? Or is there an ideal one whom the narrator appreciates and the readers pattern themselves on her?

Biddy, Pip's classmate, is a kind of ideal woman of the novel. She is from lower class, but she is at peace with herself. She improves herself, and what is more teaches Pip. She is also Pip's confident till he leaves home. After then, she helps Mrs. Joe after she is attacked by Orlick and become invalid. She is depicted as naïve, plain, decent and kind as opposed to Estella and Mrs. Joe. She is never selfish. As long as she stays with Gargery family she

² Here it should be noted again that the sense of art of the author requires such an attitude. What I am trying to say is not that the novel should do it, but just to reveal the novel's position.

lives off there. Although she is cute and intelligent, her end is nothing but a happy marriage. Improving herself does not help her to build a career. At the end she gets married to Joe who is naive and decent as well, although she is into Pip at the beginning. This is a sort of reward for her. She becomes the lady of her own house and becomes happy.

Consequently, in *Great Expectations* and *The Blue and the Black* all women are somehow socially, economically and psychologically bound to men. None of them have desires and expectations from life and future, which are independent from men. If they are wealthy, they do not have economic concerns and do not need to work professionally. Otherwise, as opposed to men, they usually do housework or work as a maid. None of them have a chance to get education and do a career, unlike men. They find a place for themselves only next to men. Biddy's training only works to help a man, Pip. She has limited choices in life. She is appreciated just because of being the angel in the house. In *The Blue and the Black* there is no ideal woman. Women are just there for men to either as a symbol indicating men's social and economic position in society or as a capital for men to climb the social ladder or as a burden on men's shoulder. The depiction of women is important because literary narratives are not only shaped by outer reality but also shape the outer world. Here, the difference between female and male authors comes into prominence. Male authors, even they support women's rights and uprisings, are out of their depth in face of patriarchy. Patriarchy, as Aysel Saraçgil manifests, "is a system which expresses the most intimate forms and structures of power relations in all kinds of unique historical, socio-economic and cultural settings" (Saraçgil, 2005, p. 10-11). Therefore, it penetrates everywhere and it is really hard to get out of it. Again as Saraçgil points out that "cultural history shows us that radical changings in politics, economy and institutional organizations do not automatically lead to changes in identity. When individual and social identities started to be threatened and lose their descriptions, various forces come into action in order to protect and redefine them firmly" (Saraçgil, 2005, p. 204). Here literature works two-way. According to Althusser, it is impossible to escape from ideology because all ideologies constitutes a subject through ideological state apparatuses which are family, media, schools etc. Literature, at this point works as one of them.

The Blue and the Black and *Great Expectations* at this point corroborate patriarchy; which can be observed in the characterization of women and men. The world they portray does not only reflect the outer world as their authors claim, but also limits and restructures it. The image of women in these novels shows us that a woman's place is her home. She is always bound to a man. Her education only helps her to be a better wife. The 19th century which is depicted as the period of hope and expectation ultimately is the era of men although it is also the period that women start to speak up. Male authors, however, do not hear their voices and project it into their novels which they claim that they reflect the outer world. It is particularly seen in comparison with other novels both by the same authors telling female protagonists' stories and by female authors wrote in the late 19th century.

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