

Subverting The Double-Bind Situations in Woolf and Atasü Through Body-Mind Unity

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Abstract

It has always been women that become the primary victims of oppression as they have been defined in terms of their relations with men, who have been regarded as the breadwinners, heads of the household and decision-makers. Imposed to believe that they have to feed men's egos by being passive, innocent, soft, graceful, nurturing and accepting, women have internalized the ideology of self-denial and they find it improper to demand things for themselves. Undoubtedly that all of these particular experiences of women that stem from the phallogentric patriarchal structure and its dominant ideologies put women into the 'double-bind' situations, where women are judged against a masculine standard. As long as women are assessed by that standard, they are obliged to lose, whether they claim difference or similarity. In this respect, Virginia Woolf and Erendiz Atasü, carrying the double burden of being both a 'woman' and a 'woman writer' in a patriarchal society, are trapped in these double-bind situations and lose their body-mind unity as they are divided between their roles as a woman and aspirations as an artist. Considering these facts, this study, basing its argument on the theories of post-structuralist feminism, aims to present how Woolf and Atasü de(con)struct and demystify the patriarchally imposed gender roles, and achieve a spiritual balance and union, 'wholeness', through combining the masculine mind and feminine body.

Key words: Body-mind unity, de(con)struction, phallogentric discourse, androgyny, feminine writing.

Woolf ve Atasü'deki Ataerkil Çıkmazların Beden ve Bilinç Bütünlüğü ile Yıkılması

Öz

Her daim aile reisi, evin direği ve karar mercileri olarak kabul edilen erkeklerle olan ilişkileri açısından tanımlanan kadınlar, zulmün ve baskının birincil mağdurları olmuşlardır. Erkek egosunu beslemek zorunda olduklarına inandırıldıkları için, 'pasif, talep etmeyen ve razı olan' ikincil statüyü benimsemişler ve zamanla özlerini inkâr ederek talepsizliklerini içselleştirmişlerdir. Hiç şüphesiz ki, fallosentrik ataerkil yapı ve onun egemen ideolojilerinden kaynaklanan bu durumlar, kadınları eril yaptırım ve buyruklarına göre oluşturulan 'ataerkil çıkmazlar' la karşı karşıya bırakmaktadır. Kadınlar bu eril ideolojilerce değerlendirildikleri ve tanımlandıkları sürece, ister farklılık ister benzerlik talep etsinler, kaybetmeye mahkûmdurlar. Bu bağlamda, yaşadıkları ataerkil toplumlarda 'kadın' ve 'kadın yazar' olmanın maddi ve manevi zorluklarını deneyimlemek zorunda kalan iki yazar, Virginia Woolf ve Erendiz Atasü, bu ataerkil çıkmazlarda sıkışıp kalmışlar; yaratıcı yazarlıkları, erkek egemen ve cinsiyetçi kadın rolleri tarafından sınırlandırıldığı için beden ve bilinç bütünlüklerini

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kaybetmişlerdir. Bu gerçekler göz önünde bulundurularak, bu çalışma, Virginia Woolf ve Erendiz Atasü'nün erkek-egemen ideolojilerce oluşturulmuş ataerkil çıkmazları nasıl yeniden yapılandırdıkları ve bu süreçte 'eril zihin-dişil bedeni' kapsayan 'bütünlüğe' nasıl eriştiklerini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Beden-bilinç bütünlüğü, yapısöküm, fallosentrik söylem, androjenlik, dişil yazın.

Introduction

Language combines the functions of a mirror, a tool, and a weapon: [It] reflects society ... human beings use it to interact with one another ... [and] language can be [used] by groups that enjoy the privileges of power to legitimize their own value system by labeling others 'deviant' or 'inferior.' (Frank, 1989, p.108)

As Francine Wattman Frank has explained above, language is not simply a vocabulary shared by a group of people, but it is a structure that constitutes meaning. It is the main force behind the construction and continuation of any ideology. In the light of such awareness, all values regarded as 'universal' have come into question and scholars and critics have focused on unveiling the hidden ideologies behind these 'universal values' that shape and limit one's interpretation of the world. They have realized that language not only reproduces ideologies but also perpetuates them, and eventually creates repressive attitudes and atmospheres, in which people are divided easily into oppressors and oppressed. In this case, it has always been women that become the primary victims of oppression as they have always been defined in terms of their relations with men, who have been regarded as the breadwinners, heads of the household and decision-makers. Imposed to believe that they have to feed men's egos by being passive, innocent, soft, graceful, nurturing and accepting, "women have so interiorized the ideology of self-denial that they feel it is illegitimate and presumptuous to demand things for themselves" (Tappa, 1988, p.33).

In fact, all of these particular experiences of women that stem from the phallogentric patriarchal structure and the man-made language put women into the 'no-choice choice' situations, where women are judged against a masculine standard. As long as women are assessed by that standard, they are obliged to lose, whether they claim difference or similarity. This is what Marilyn Frye has described as the 'double-bind' of oppression, in which a woman confronts lots of difficulties and restrictions in her path. According to Frye, no matter what ways a woman chooses to think or to do, she is doomed to lose: "One of the most characteristics and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by the oppressed is the double-bind situations in which options are reduced to very few and all of them expose to penalty, censure or deprivation (1983, p.2). Therefore, the male oppression creates more constrained situations for women, so even the would-be liberated women realize eventually that they have to obey the demands of "femininity", as Beauvoir explains in her famous work, *The Second Sex*:

The individual is not free to shape the idea of femininity as she pleases. The woman who does not conform to it devaluates herself sexually and, consequently, socially ... It is a bad move to choose defiance unless it represents a positively efficacious action: one consumes more time and energy than one saves (1989, p. 724).

Trapped in this double-bind situation, women are bound to fail. For instance, if a woman defies the norms of sexual restraint, she may be censured or punished for being 'loose, promiscuous, or a whore'. On the other hand, if she abstains from sexual intercourse, she is threatened with labels like 'frigid, bitch, or man-hater'. By going too far, the male discourse and its sexist language may charge her with lesbianism, because men have the power and the language that "perpetuates trivialization,

marginalization, and invisibility of female experience” (Sheldon, 1990, p. 4). That is why, this bind must be broken and de(con)structed. Women must stop defining themselves in accordance with the appropriate behavior and language created by men in order to change their submissive and secondary position. This is only possible through the de(con)struction and demystification of the gender roles imposed by the man-made language and patriarchal ideologies. Only then are women able to achieve a spiritual balance and union, ‘wholeness’, by combining the masculine mind and feminine body.

The cartesian duality: masculine mind and feminine body

One of the problems of the feminist critique is that it is male-oriented. If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be (Showalter, 1979, p. 27).

Feminist critics and scholars whose core idea is to find a voice for a ‘muted’ female culture have all turned their attention to the philosophical, linguistic and practical problems of women’s use of language, as it is the language that “has trapped as well as liberated [women]” (Rich, 2004, p. 237). However, they are faced with a kind of paradox called “double-voiced discourse” (Lanser&Beck, 1979), embodying the heritages of the muted and the dominant. When a woman prefers to say ‘I am the Queen’ in an attempt to assert her difference from man by rejecting the word ‘King’, she also – somehow – accepts the fact that she is the queen who occupies the subordinate position to the king. Realizing this paradox, Showalter quotes Xavier Gauthier lamenting that “as long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But if they begin to speak and write as men do, they will enter history subdued and alienated” (1981, p.191). It is certain that the issue of women’s language has its political as well as emotional aspects, but despite these difficulties and paradoxes, there is still hopeful evidence that female tradition and female culture have been a center of concern inspiring women writers to take brave actions to state their independence. All they need to do is to de(con)struct all the binary oppositions, such as ‘mind/body, active/passive, public/private, reason/emotion, subject/object, and self/ other’ emanated from the primary ‘male/female’ opposition and create a new state of difference and awareness – sexual, cultural or gender – that does not have to be defined within a hierarchical relationship of same/opposite or true/not-true. To be able to challenge the logocentric thought, first, the underlying reasons of these false and misleading dichotomies must be clarified and subverted.

These misleading dichotomies are the foregone conclusion of the Cartesian tradition, which promotes and perpetuates a sexual dualism through masculinizing the ‘mind’ and feminizing the ‘body. It places men at the center of rationality while confines women to the emotional margins. In fact, the sexist distinction between ‘masculine’ rational mind and ‘feminine’ emotional body has a long-lasting history reaching back to the mind-body dualism of Descartes, the seventeenth century philosopher, who asserts that the ‘mind’, the “I”, is separated from the ‘body’ and is closer to knowledge than the body. His theory about the body-mind split and “his insistence on the essence of the “I” has contributed to an understanding of the “I” as a mere thinking thing, a consciousness that loses contact with things, its body and the world” (Matlok-Ziemann, 2005, p.27). This radical separation of mind and body may be the explanation why women writers are torn between life and art, or more precisely between their roles as a woman and aspirations as an artist. That is why, the ultimate aspiration of women writers is to draw attention to and challenge the historical subordination of women to men that is reinforced by Cartesian tradition.

For Virginia Woolf, a seminal figure in feminist thought and women’s writing tradition, and Erendiz Atasü, Turkish feminist woman writer, who struggle for subverting and de(con)structing masculinist domination, reject the patriarchal Cartesian rationality that assigns dominance to the masculine at the expense of the feminine, as this dichotomous distinction dismantles the wholeness of female existence, and "splits [it] up in such a way that her body, mind, willpower and consciousness are ignored"(Atasü,

2009, p.vii). Hence, women gradually acquire a split identity and self-understanding as they are merely considered speechless objects for a male gaze. That is why, Woolf and Atasü are in a ceaseless search for bringing split selves together and creating a “synthesizing unity” (Kristeva, 1984, p.237) that embraces the masculine mind and feminine body within her being. With this unity, they aim to disrupt the hierarchically structured patriarchal culture and achieve ‘whole existence’, which is “man-womanly ... womanly-man” (Woolf, 1929, p. 82) living in harmony together.

Being aware of the fact that life itself is comprised of both the inner and the outer, the objective and the subjective, the conscious and the unconscious, fact and vision, experience and what lies beyond experience, Woolf and Atasü aim to provide women for the ways of getting rid of the chains of their ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1977), lifting the veil of mystery that blinds their minds and achieving the ‘whole personality’ that embraces both the feminine and masculine traits. Bearing all these facts in their minds, Woolf and Atasü encourage all women to establish a visible world for themselves in which they will no longer be defined by the fallacy of masculine power and its sexist distinction. They must bring their split selves together, which is merely attainable through the expression of mind and body.

Expression of mind and body through ‘the artist/woman’

For centuries, the phallogocentric patriarchy, claiming that man is the “procreator and ... his pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984, p. 6) (italic is mine) has placed emphasis on ‘ancestors’ rather than ‘ancestresses’ and sentenced these ‘ancestresses’ and their future generations into confinement and dispossession. However, it is high time women replaced ‘forefather’ or ‘ancestor’ and created a new figure. Throughout the world, this new figure has become the ‘literary mother’, the source of poetic inspiration for women writers as Woolf declares in *A Room of One’s Own*: “We think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, ... Lamb, Browne, Thackeray, Newman, Sterne, Dickens, De Quincey—whoever it may be—never helped a woman yet” (1929, p.64-65).

Personally experiencing the difficulties of having to manage a double-burden of domestic life and literary life in patriarchal societies, these ‘literary mothers’ have an essential role to pave the way for future women writers and help them break free from the confines of the phallogocentric Cartesian duality. Keeping the works of their forebears in mind, women writers struggle to establish a female tradition of writing and inspire the future generation with feminine texts, which subverts the prevalent patriarchal logic and its man-made language. In this way, they prepare the way for revolutionary change in women’s lives. Thus, by ‘thinking back through their mothers’, women writers overcome the ‘anxiety of authorship’ and begin to write as women, not as men. They create their own system of self-expression to be able regain their ‘wholeness’ back, which has been destroyed by the double-bind situations of the phallogocentric ideologies and discourses. Without differentiating between white/black, West/East or lower/upper class concerns, works of women writers interweave and interlace with each other and open new space for all this ‘oppressed group’, where difference is enveloped into the text.

In fact, the need of blending, dissolving and merging disparate narrative pieces of fragments into a “coherent and comprehensive whole” (Woolf, 2000, p. 189) is so evident “in literary works written up with a distinctive female consciousness” (Atasü, 2009, p. viii). Comprehending that life itself is comprised of “a constant dialogue or tension between the semiotic and the symbolic” (Walker, 1997, p.35), traditionally associated with maternal body and paternal mind, Woolf and Atasü focus on de(con)structing the rigid boundaries between body and mind, female and male, self and other to be

able to multiply the experiences of the self. For them, women should stop serving “as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Woolf, 1929, p.30), and get the other side of the looking glass and be one with their image instead of seeing it from the outside as ‘other’. Only then the archaic and narcissistic structure of phallogocentric literary tradition, cursing ‘the nymph Echo/the female artist’ to repeat the last words of her interlocutor, can be challenged and Echo’s dependence on ‘Narcissus/the male artist’ can be violated, as Cixous points out:

Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven't written. (And why I didn't write before the age of twenty-seven.) Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great-that is, for "great men"; and it's "silly." ... Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you. (1986: 877-878)

In this process of realization and awareness, women begin to oppose banishment from the sphere of knowledge just because of their female bodies and “reject the mythic woman of literature written by men, reject a stereotype of the “animus” conceptualized by Jung, ignore the theory of penis envy postulated by Freud, . . . to create the artist/woman, the task seems Herculean rather than feminine. She must die as this mythic “feminine” woman in order to give birth to herself as an artist, a creator of myths” (Stewart, 1981, p.109). Upon their achieving this ingenious elevation of womanhood, which is possible through body and mind unity, women are ready to create, thereby giving them a chance to subvert the norms of society with their works of art. Through art, all ideologies can be reconstructed, as Griselda Pollock explains in the following quote:

Not only do we have to grasp that art is a part of social production, we also have to realize that it is itself productive, that is, it actively produces meanings. Art is constitutive of ideology; it is not merely an illustration of it. It is one of the social practices through which particular views of the world, definitions and identities for us to live are constructed, reproduced and even refined (Pollock, 1988, p.30).

Believing in the power of art as a challenge to the patriarchal discourse, Woolf and Atasü encourage women to express their experiences through art, where they have previously been ignored or trivialized. Despite the widespread belief that “women can’t paint, women can’t write...” (Woolf, 1990a, p.41), Woolf and Atasü make much of creating women tradition, whereby they can express themselves, find their own voices and revitalize their self-esteem. They are well aware that there has been a longstanding male bias within the aesthetic and the philosophy of art, and women “ha[ve] no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it [is]of little help” (Woolf,1929, p.64). Unless they challenge the norms created within androcentric art, men will keep promoting women as being painted or written rather than them performing the acts of painting and writing. However, the dominant forms of patriarchal power, perceiving women as objects without voices can be de(con)structed: “Women, having been silenced for thousands of years, need to find their own voices, not to repeat what they have been taught and dictated so far. They need to express and transfer their demands, repressed feelings, opinions and lives – trapped inside the patriarchal system – to the collective consciousness of humanity through their own words” (Atasü, 2014, p.33).

Since the field of art is traditionally male-dominated and gender-biased giving importance to mind over body, reason over emotions and male over female, the female artist/writer must seek ways of bringing split selves together, which is only possible through art – a primary means of resistance to all patriarchal norms violating the individuality of women. That’s why, to subvert the objectifying lens of the male gaze and challenge the historical passivity of women, Woolf and Atasü create female characters dealing with art in their works. These artist figures, like Lily Briscoe/painter in *To The Lighthouse*, Orlando/poet in *Orlando*, AyşeAysu/writer in *That Scorching Season of Youth*, and Feride/writer in *A Midlife Dream*,

transmit their personal visions, values and opinions through symbols including various mediums, melodies, colors, or words that emanate from the ‘semiotic’ – associated with maternal and feminine aspects in Kristeva’s term, because they cannot express and articulate their experiences with the man-made language, which is “too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman’s use” (Woolf, 1979, p.48). Atasü voices a very similar observation: “one has to face the challenging rudeness of ‘man-made language’ which needs to be broken in order to create a female discourse; let alone the difficult task of shaping into words an age-old silence of feelings and sensations (n.d., The Author’s Ideas about Women Fiction, erendizatasu.com) (*italic is mine*). Thus, in order to de(con)struct the man-made nature of language in the symbolic order, in which men cannot escape their appetite for possessing, both writers try to find reconciliation between the semiotic and symbolic, or in other words body and mind respectively, in order to create pleasure without possession. Having similar views, Woolf and Atasü assert that a woman embraces all that considered ‘other’ within her being and lets all of them flow through the medium of art that integrates both the symbolic and semiotic mode of communication. As a consequence, their readers grasp the art as an expression of the desire to find unity, stability and meaning. Indeed, Virginia Woolf and Erendiz Atasü regard ‘art’ as the valuable source to achieve unity; as they put it:

One has a profound, if irrational, instinct in favor of the theory that the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness. But the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness? And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man’s brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman’s brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating (Woolf, 1929, p.82).

My mind and emotions has begun to create texts when the pressure of the life reaches unbearable dimensions. I haven’t chosen to write, but writing has chosen me. It has become a physical need, such as drinking water or sleeping! Like an irresistible love... I have been writing to be able to resolve the dilemmas existing between real and imaginary worlds; to make sense of the experiences (Atasü, 2014, p.32).

Conclusion

What both Woolf and Atasü intend to clarify is that women have always been suppressed and exploited within and through their bodies, which are regarded as the sources of male pleasure and fantasies. Being reduced into the male-defined feminine bodies and discourses with the assigned roles – a speechless woman, a self-sacrificing mother, a devoted and faithful mother – women lose their mind/body unity and thereby acquire a split identity. That is why; Woolf and Atasü desire to unit these split selves together and remain included within the dominant mainstream by creating a dynamic feminine world, where all aspects of life blend, dissolve and merge into each other to achieve a spiritual balance and union – ‘wholeness’. According to Woolf and Atasü, for women, this wholeness is merely achievable through ‘art’, highlighting connections rather than the oppositions, and ‘female artist figures’, who succeed in translating “inarticulate words into art” (Williams, 2000, p.13-14) (*emphasis in original*). Thus, women get rid of the “perpetual admonitions” (Woolf, 1929, p. 63) of the patriarchal male voice and put an end to the conflict between the two parts. As a result, women get liberated from the confines of the appropriate, obtain the enduring creativity through mind and body unity and become a perfect example of what Kristeva calls a ‘subject-in-process’, one capable of dissolving similarities and differences in the body, and hereby, de(con)structing all kinds of binary mechanisms to create fluid identities. These new identities destabilize the Cartesian subject and its man-made language. From now

on, they do not have to adapt, mediate or subordinate their beliefs and opinions in accordance with the allowable forms of patriarchal structures that consider them 'nonsensical mind' or 'hysterical body', but rather create and redefine a world, where they can reclaim autonomous 'wholeness' back. Once recovered from the confinements of their 'docile bodies', she dismantles the veil of mystery blinding their minds and grasp the truth. Getting rid of the binaries, the contradiction, or rather, the patriarchally constructed 'conflict' between a woman's body and mind ends and the distance between them is diminished. Eventually, women regain their 'wholeness':

I am a woman... You cannot abstract my personality and my temperament from my body... You cannot take them independently of each other. I am a whole (Atasü, *A Midlife Dream*, 2013, p.146).

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