THE COLOR PURPLE BY ALICE WALKER IN TERMS OF FEMINIST CRITICISM

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Abstract
This paper mainly focuses on the most important theme of Walker's well-known novel The Color Purple; abuse of women in terms of Feminist Criticism. For centuries, the role and the relations of men and women are regarded according to their societies' way of living. Men are regarded as the ruler or, in a sense as the dominant part of the society while women are seen weak and thought to be helpless. As in the case in Walker's prize winning novel, women are forced to live under the dominance of their rulers, until one between them realizes her value, stands against the abuses and declares her identity as a powerful women in the society. This article aims to reveal Celie's struggle as a child first then as a grown up woman in the light of her hearth-wrenching fight for survival in terms of Feminist Criticism. In this context, this study focuses on the novel, The Color Purple, with respect to its well-known themes of woman abuse, sexism and racism, male dominance, power of narrative voice and power of strong female relationship.

Key Words: Feminism, Feminist Criticism, abuse of women, male dominance, sexism, racism

Edebi Eleştiri Bakımından Alice Walker'ın Mor Yıllar Romanı

Özet
Bu çalışma, özellikle Alice Walker'in en meşhur romanındaki en önemli tema olan kadına taciz ve şiddet konusuna Feminist Eleştiri açısından yoğunlaşmaktadır. Yüzyıllarca, kadın erkek rolleri ve ilişkileri içinde yaşanan topluma göre değerlendirilmişdir. Kadınlar zayıf görülüp caresiz olduklarını düşünülürken, erkekler hükümran, bir bakıma toplumun basın parçası olarak değerlendirildiler. Walker'in ödül kazanan romanında da olduğu gibi, kadınlar hükü严厉打击larının egemenliği altında

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 Anahtar Kelimeler: Feminizm, Feminist Eleştiri, kadınların sömürülmesi, erkek egemenliği, cinsel ayrımcılık, ırkçılık

Introduction

Feminism represents the important social, economic, and aesthetic values of the times which is especially concerned with the problems or rights of the women. Friedan states that Feminism refers to a diverse variety of beliefs, ideas, movements, and agendas for action (34). “I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is “ British author and critic Rebecca West remarks. (Guerin, 196) “Feminism is concerned with the marginalization of all women: that is, with their being relegated to a secondary position.” (Guerin 196)

Feminism as a concept seeks to better the lot of women who are perceived to be sidelined by men in the prevailing scheme of things in the society. It also views issues from the woman’s angle. Putting it in other words, feminism alleges that woman as “the other” of man, has (since the genesis of human beings) been at the receiving end of society’s injustices such as oppression and suppression. Feminism thus aims at to establish or assert equality between men and women in a world which it regards as male-oriented. (James 89)

To Emin feminism, having French roots as a word, is used as the general name for all the woman thoughts and movements in the word (20). Feminism, as a crucial movement to pave the way for equal rights for women, helped literary criticism became an important subject matter with the progress of the new movement initiated in the early 1960s. Actually, feminist criticism started as the part of the international women's liberation movement. "The emergence of feminist literary criticism is one of the major developments in literary studies in the past thirty years or so” (Oppermann,1). In this point of view, the first main book which contributed to the emergence of the new women's movement was The Feminine Mystique (1963) by Betty Friedan. In the book, Friedan
criticised "the dominant cultural image of the successful and happy American woman as a housewife and mother" (Leitch, 308).

According to Friedan, in the 1950s women had gone back to the house abandoning their jobs to men who came back from the war to claim their positions, and a feminine mystique was created in the media making the housewife and mother the ideal models for all women. Promoting women's ideal reality within the domestic realm, this mystique had reduced the identity of women to sexual and social passivity. (Oppermann, 11)

Described as "a world confined to her own body and beauty, the charming of man, the bearing of babies, and the physical care and serving of husband, children and home" (Millard, 155) by Friedan, herself, attempted to make over the false feminine mystique and to support the women in their fight for equal rights. Friedan, as a leading feminist, contributed to raise a new consciousness for women, and developed a new understanding for women studies.

In 1970s, by the publication of Kate Millet's Sexual Politics (1969), feminist criticism became a rise against to traditional English studies. With her book, Millet started the first modern basis of feminist criticism, by paying attention to the issues of sexism and sexist assumptions which were important in feminist literary studies.

Oppermann notes that Feminist criticism is especially notable as regards its diversity of aims and methods (14). As Elizabeth Abel states in her "Introduction" to Writing and Sexual Difference (1982), deciphering the interplay of writing and sexual difference requires a variety of critical approaches (2). What makes Feminist criticism so appealing is the pluralistic literary methods and theories of Feminist critics. Annette Kolodny, in her Dancing through the Minefield, also says that only by employing a plurality of methods will we protect ourselves from the temptations of oversimplifying any text (161). Friedan states that Feminist beliefs can be as varied and unique as the individual feminists who hold these beliefs (70). It is clear that Feminist literary critics make use of different methods to explain their point of views and to declare their ideas, yet, as Kolodny also states, there is a basic principle that combine feminist literary critics under one roof despite their multiplism of theories and methods.

What unites and repeatedly invigorates fem-inist literary criticism... is neither dogma nor method but an acute and impassioned atten-tiveness to the
ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within our literary inheritance: the consequences of that encoding for women -as characters, as readers, and as writers; and, with that, a shared analytic concern for the implications of that encoding not only for a better understanding of the past but also for an improved reordering of the present and future (162).

Feminist criticism is the examination of women from all races, cultures and classes from all nations. “Feminist critics, therefore study social, political and especially sexual issues once thought to be ‘outside’ the study of literature.” (Guerin, 197)

In this study, *The Color Purple*, the well-known novel by Alice Walker will be analysed in terms of Feminist Criticism. In the very opening of the novel, the reader is presented with a small girl who is abused and raped by her step-father. In her lonely world, she cannot find anybody to trust in and share her despair. Since her step-father Alphonso says “You better not never to tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy.”(Walker, 11), she finds the only solution to express her hopelessness in writing letters to God. Too insecure to even give her name, we soon learn through the mouth of another that her name is Celie. While her mother is away Alphonso, presumed to be her ‘Pa’ rapes Celie saying, “You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t.(Walker, 11).

The novel is an epistolary novel which consists of her, Celie, letters addressed to God, and then to her sister Nettie. Letters becomes the only way for Celie to express herself, and only key for reader to have a better and deeper understanding for Celie, the protagonist.

From the very beginning of the novel, the reader becomes familiar with a fourteen year old poor girl who is used to do the works of her husband. In the novel, Celie is just a servant who is responsible of looking after her husband, Albert, and his four children and to meet the sexual desires of him. He always abuses Celie until she declares her identity as an independent woman. When his oldest son, Harpo, asks Albert why he beats Celie, he says simply “Cause she my wife.” (Walker, 30) He thinks he has the right to beat and abuse Celie merely because she’s his wife. For a long time, Celie bears the abuses and her sister Nettie says her that “You got to fight. You got to fight. Celie’s answer to this, - But I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive.” (Walker,25-26) She just tries to stay alive after the abuses, because she doesn’t know how to fight with the men around her. She is always abused, firstly by her
step-father than by her husband, Albert. She accepts the abuses by expressing her feelings in a letter to God saying; “He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don’t never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man.” (Walker,30)

In the course of time, Celie experiences some changes, and as a result of these changes the novel turns out to be not only a story about pain and despair but also a story of ultimate triumph. Novel begins in the early 1900’s and ends in the mid 1940’s and, between these time spaces, the readers witness Celie’s changing from a small girl who is abused continuously in to a mature, young woman, realized herself. She frees herself from her husband’s repressive control, and her conditions improved dramatically. Improved by her friendships with other women, especially Shug Avery, Albert’s mistress, and by her fondness for her younger sister, Nettie—who went to Africa with a missionary group with the help of Celie, Celie decides to leave Albert and moves to Memphis. She starts a business designing and making clothes, and becomes a business woman and earns her own money. The most ironical part of the novel is, it is Albert’s real love and, Shug Avery, Albert’s mistress, and his rebellious daughter-in-love, Sofia, who gives the emotional support for Celie’s personal progress and helps Celie to realize her dreams in the life. “And, in turn, it is Celie’s new understanding of an acceptance of herself that eventually lead to Albert’s evaluation of his own life and reconciliation among the novel’s major characters.” (Gates, 16-17) When the novel ends, Albert and Shug sit with Celie on Celie’s front porch ‘rocking on a fanning flies,’ waiting for the arrival of Nettie and the missioners.

Clearest focus in The Color Purple is the role of male domination in the abuse of black women, and the struggles of these women for freedom and independence. Walker-Barnes states that;

It is an allegory of forgiveness and reconciliation, a story about a group of people—Albert, Shug, Harpo, Sofia, Nettie, and Mary Agnes—learning to be, to love, and to celebrate themselves as authentic human being. It is the story of people who learn to resist the forces of racial and gender oppression that have shaped their notions of who they are and how they are to behave in relationship to others. It is the story of people who realize that while they live in a world that oppresses blackness and femaleness, they are not required to be willing participants in the cycle of victimization. (2)
Walker explores a triangular love affair through Celie, Albert and Shug. Shug Avery is the focus; Celie is married to Albert, Albert is in love with Shug, and she is the friend of Celie, and it’s Shug Avery who forces Albert to stop brutalizing Celie and supports Celie’s struggle to be free from the abuses. In addition, it’s Shug with whom Celie first constitute a satisfying, loving relationship.

In a deeper study of the novel, it's easy to see that almost all the women are under the domination of men. Women are abused; especially Celie is raped, beaten and abused by all the men around her, firstly by her step-father and by her husband. The novel is told through the eyes of a woman, Celie. We can say that camera-eye narrator is used, because Celie tells every detail she experienced. She tells the novel in epistolary form, that is, in the form of letters; firstly to God, then to her sister Nettie. At the beginning of the novel, an apologetic language is dominant, because Celie is always scolded and writes to God because she feels that she has nobody else to turn to, she cannot even pray for fear of somebody hearing her. She draws the figure of a frightened woman and she always behaves timidly, since she is afraid of the men around her. As the novel progresses, Celie is also grows in experience, her observations become more real, and more informing. Her letters take on the authority and a better telling through the eyes of a self-motivated, mature and experienced young woman. The novel declares the clear development of the main character, and by Celie's physiological and emotional development she experiences deeper insights towards the problems she encounters. Her expressions becomes more clear, and her writings gain more insight and sincerity about her feelings.

Writing becomes the only way left to Celie to express her being and her absence. To Oppermann, to be a writer one has to destroy the stereotyped image of house-wife and mother. In other words, women writers had before them the enormous task of defying their marginality and subversion, not only in the house, but in society as well (3). She accepts the difficulties of rejecting the traditional abused woman's roles, and creates a self-confident and prosperous woman from a lonely child. At the beginning of the novel her sentences and letters are lack of grammatical correctness, however, through the end of the novel, in accordance with her self-development her writing style also develops and becomes more correct in grammatical aspect as in the example;

After all the evil he done, I know you wonder why I don't hate him. I don’t hate him for the reasons. One, he love Shug. And two, Shug used to love
him..plus, look like he trying to make something out of himself and he appreciate some to the things God was playful enough to make. I mean when you talk to him now he really listen, and one time, out of nowhere in the conversation us was having, he said Celie, I’m stisfied this the first time I ever live on Earth as a natural man. (Walker, 230)

We understand that with the progress Celie experiences, Albert also changes and develops his character. He begins to ask Celie’s thoughts, and gives importance to her. In a letter, Celie writes “One good thing bout the way he never do any work round the place, us never miss him when he gone.” (Walker, 49), but at the end of the novel he and Shug sits with Celie on Celie’s front porch ‘rocking on a fanning flies,’ waiting for the arrival of Nettie and the missioners. This shows us that in the course of time they develop a good friendship, and have the intimacy to sit and have a talk together.

In the novel, Celie symbolizes a good house wife who tries to look after her husband and his children. Simone de Beauvoir, in his book *The Second Sex* says that "one is not born a woman; rather one becomes a woman", and Celie is the most suitable example to prove this thesis. She tries to do her best to provide a better life for them and even her husband’s sisters realizes this. Albert’s two sisters, Kate and Carrie, comes to visit them. They say “Celie, one thing is for sure. You keep a clean house . Good housekeeper, good with children., good cook. Brother couldn’t have done better if he tried.” (Walker,27-28) She is suitable for the social norms which supports the idea of a woman being a good housewife, a good wife and a good mother. With the development Celie experienced, Celie adds something more to the idea of woman who just sits in the house and look after the children, she also becomes a working woman and gain her own money which gives her the self-confidence and the power to remain standing by herself.

Celie’s early life experiences pave the way for her to shape her future life. Celie’s step-father is the first to rape, beat and abuse her, since her mom is always ill and he uses Celie to satisfy his sexual desires. And he says to her that “You gonna do what your mammy wouldn’t (Walker,11). It’s really hearth-wrenching that Celie starts her letters with one of her pa’s saying “You better not never to tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy.”(Walker, 11), and after that Celie starts to write letters to God about her bad experiences since she has noone to speak about all these around her. Here we see the male domination over the woman, even over a fourteen year old girl, Celie. She is just a simple
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girl responsible of looking after her siblings and doing the house works. But, through the time, when Celie starts a business and earns her own money to support herself and her stepchildren and also her husband, Albert, Celie’s voice becomes dominant both in the life and in the novel. After declaring her female identity by supporting the family with the money she earns, female voice becomes dominant instead of male domination of Albert or any other men who give harm to Celie in any way.

When we have deeper look at the equality of the sexes in the novel, we see that there is no equality between men and women. Almost all the women we met in the novel are under the oppression of the men, in the form of a father, step-father, or husband. In this point, it becomes against the doctrins and teaching of both Feminism and Feminist Literary Criticism. From the first leading voices of Feminism including Mary Wallstonecraft, Betty Friedan and Josephine Donovan to latter critics such as Virginia Woolf struggled to obtain equal rights with men. The abused women, in the same time, repress the struggles of the Women's Movement and prevent the others to have equal rights and opportunities with men.

The only exception reflected in the novel who stands against the men is a beautiful, eye-catching, and independent blues singer named Shug Avery. She can be labelled as a fan fatal woman who uses her sexuality and sexual power to seduce the men around her. Her relationship in the novel symbolizes sex and her power on men. She has a sexual relationship with a married man, Albert who is Celie’s husband. I’m not sure what to call this, an irony or a paradox, we see that it’s Shug Avery, Albert’s mistress, who supports Celie to be independent and and she gives Celie insight to free herself from the domination of her husband Albert. Shug also wants Albert to stop brutalizing and abusing Celie, shows clearly that if a woman decides to help her fellow, no other man can hinder her from doing it. Sometimes friendship of a woman can be more valuable and important than the love of a man.

Conclusion

The Color Purple presents us good examples in terms of Feminist Criticism. We see the male domination over the women in every part of life, but in the course of time, women want to release themselves from the abuses of man and be independent. They are succeed in their aim and we see the traces of female domination in the name of Celie, the protagonist.
Being in an abusive relationship continually, as a small girl first then as a woman, Celie proves the effects of early childhood memories on her future life. Christian Froula writes: “The abusive or seductive father does serious harm to the daughter’s mind as well as to her body, damaging her sense of her own identity and depriving her voice of authority and strength” (635).

In the novel, the sequence of the incidents are planned so properly that, we see a developing character instead of accepting her situation and continuing her life in the way she is thought to behave. In the story, the effects of the time period can be observed clearly, which is a vehicle to remind the readers the facts of that society. Michael states that while analyzing women’s situation, it is necessary to learn and know the features of that era (14). In her article, Walker-Barnes states that,

It is a story of people who come to forgive themselves for being black in a world that hates blackness, for being female in a world that subjugates women, and for being same-gender-loving in a world consumed with heterosexism. It is the story of a group of people who grow to appreciate their own beauty, who recover their own voices, and who learn to be happy, fulfilled, loving, truthful, and free in the midst of oppression and loss. (3)

Without knowing the characteristics of the time period, it is not possible to have a clear picture about Walker's society and about the general situation of the women who are obliged to surrender the desires of the men. The general disadvantages of the time period also affects the upcoming events.

Although the hidden theme of the novel is the importance of the family, it becomes not really clear nearly until the end. Celie tries to constitute a family union and make a real family, Albert hinders this though by bringing her mistress to home, moreover Celie becomes responsible for the comfort of that woman. In Neff and Ratcliff’s book (1995), Nick and Nancy Stinnett wrote about their search for strong families. To them, a strong family is one that creates a sense of positive family identity, promotes satisfying and fulfilling interaction among members, encourages the development of family group and individual members, and is able to deal effectively with stress and crisis (166).

To conclude, Walker's award-winning novel The Color Purple presents that women are forced to live under the dominance of a man, either father or husband. In the course of time, if one is really courageous enough and have the belief to make a better life for herself, then it can be possible for her to start a brand-new story. Celie is one of the good example of these brave women to
build a new life for herself and to declare her identity as a working and self-confident woman and it becomes "a story about finding and being reconciled with God" (Walker-Barnes,3). In this sense, Feminist Literary Criticism sheds light to make the unseen details to be apparent. Starting with great wounds on the heart, Celie becomes one of the leading voices to show the woman the possibility of a new, better life, without the pressure of the men and without their help.

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