A FEMINIST APPROACH TO ERENĐİZ ATASÜ: THE CASE OF THAT SCORCHING SEASON OF YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

Erendiz Atasu is a feminist author who questions woman’s individual and social position from different perspectives in her novels, short stories and essays. All the presented values of patriarchal system has been courageously questioned in her works. In this paper the authorship of Erendiz Atasu will be examined through her female identity and her feminist aspect. How effectively has she defined herself as a “woman writer” on her fictional world? How has Erendiz Atasu dealt with women’s adventure of individual and social existence in different genres with a delicate sensitivity? In this paper the answers will be searched by an example novel in which Atasu criticizes male-dominated society, which does not allow female characters to express themselves.

“The Scorching Season of Youth” focuses on main themes such as “division of identity, fragmentation, integrity” through life stories of doctor Ayse Aysu and doctor Tomris. Female figures that discover their own body and sexuality take part in the center of novel. Female characters attempt to experience the adventure of sexuality and love despite societal oppression transform into an into freedom fight.

The author describes an individual and a social history of their transformation since first period of young in a poetic utterance. The relation between the body of women and liberation is questioned with a poetical language that contains many images. The power of a poetical language will be discussed in the paper as a tool of resistance for a feminist author.

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Erendiz Atasu is a feminist author who questions woman’s individual and social identity in her novels, short stories and essays, courageously questions all the presented values of patriarchal system. The author expresses her views regarding gender over the identity formations of female characters that are different from each other in terms of level of education, age and social class. The author benefits from her own life story while writing. Erendiz Atasu’s own experiences have
informed her fictional world, making it natural and persuasive. She experienced similar difficulties as a divorced woman in Turkey’s patriarchal society. Erendiz Atasü has chosen a female character as a representative herself like Ayşe Aysu in “The Scorching Season of Youth”.

Erendiz Atasu examines the period regarding getting an individual identity and also social identity. She questions all the stages of this period in “The Scorching Season of Youth”. This novel focuses on main themes such as “division of identity, fragmentation, integrity” by life stories of Ayse Aysu and Tomris. In this novel the struggle of women both physically and societally is approached in an original method. The relation between the body of women and liberation is questioned with a poetical language that contains many images. The novel in which divorce, marriage, love and sexuality are handled is enriched in a cultural context while discussing the affections of the political atmosphere on lives of female character. Erendiz Atasü attempts to present us the soul of Turkey and modern Turkish women at the same frame.

In the novel the woman as a subject who discovers her own body and sexuality takes part in a center of novel. The author describes an individual and a social history of her transformation since the first period of youth in a poetical utterance. The aim of this paper is to analyze female characters in this novel on account of quests of freedom and integrity. The novel will be examined by approaches of feminist literary critics focusing on themes such as “division of identity, alienation, the relation between woman and nature, integration”. The relation between the fiction of time and the breaking in the emotional world of the female subject, which occurred after many experiences, will be examined in terms of liberation. Different shapes of searching the emancipation will be emphasized by making sense of the images in the novel that is multilayered while expressing the individual stories in a historical period.

Erendiz Atasü argues that when women acknowledge and take control of their own bodies and sexuality, it empowers them to defy patriarchy. In this regard she emphasizes that the female figures need to awaken in order to change their condition and take control of their bodies. As the author stated at the end of the novel, women like Ayşe Aysu, who discover themselves and refuse patriarchal values, have to pay a price. The novel narrated Ayşe Aysu’s difficult journey to find her true self. She struggled against the mind-body dichotomy while traveling through her femininity.

Erendiz Atasü has emphasized that the educated male characters do not understand the needs of women in spite of their progressive attitudes. They have a notable role in the leftist group but are unaware of women’s rights. Known as a leftist author, Atasü has pointed out in her many works that leftist movements do not pay attention to the sexual identity of women.

According to feminist theorists, masculine language is reflected in patriarchal ideology. While Erendiz Atasü, in her works, tells the woman’s existence and social dilemmas in a female language, she makes the body and sexuality central. According to Erendiz Atasü, liberation phases feminist theoreticians point out are expressed with imaginative wording in the author’s feminist works. It is undeniable that one of the voices silenced by women’s suppression is that of their sexuality. When one
refuses to suffice by expressing the experience of a female body between the lines, like a vague shadow, but attempts to actually narrate it using words, one has to face the challenging rudeness of language which needs to be broken in order to create a female discourse. In this paper, the relationship between language and gender in Erendiz Atasü’s novel will be dwelt upon in accordance with the feminist criticism theory. Atasü, participates in constructing a private language that allows women’s voices and real identities to be heard. Accurately representing, from a feminist point of view, different women’s lives in various regions across the country is what makes Erendiz Atasü such a distinguished author in Turkish literature. “The Scorching Season of Youth” is one of the important feminist novels in modern Turkish literature, which was written to struggle all patriarchal boundaries between body/mind, female/male and self/other.

**Keywords:** Erendiz Atasü, women’s literature, female identity.

1. **A FEMINIST APPROACH TO ERENDİZ ATASÜ**

Erendiz Atasü is a widely read feminist author in contemporary Turkish literature. She was born in Ankara in 1947. She graduated from the Faculty of Pharmacy, Ankara University in 1968, and was a professor of pharmacognosy in the same institution until her retirement in 1997. Her fictional work has benefited from her professional experience.

1 This article grew out of a presentation given at Utrecht University in ACLA 2017.
She deals with women’s adventures in pursuit of an individual and social existence in her works of different genres with a delicate sensitivity. She has used a subjective technical narrative and an objective perspective at the same time, an approach influenced by her own identity as a scientist. Defining herself as a “woman writer”, Atasü criticizes male-dominated literature, which does not allow female characters to express themselves in the works. Women’s literature aims to present the problem of women’s identities, which are assumed to be second-class in male-dominated society. Opposing the patriarchal discourse, which treats the woman as an “object”, works of Erendiz Atasü reflect the adventure of the woman as a “subject” in their pursuit of an individual and social identity. As Mantoglou states “Atasü is not simply satisfied by recording women’s experiences and says in a speech of hers that all languages contain words and terms scornful of woman’s body and of her sexual experience, thus underlining the challenging aggression of language which she tries to limit” (Mantoglou, 2006, p.18).

In her novels and stories, Erendiz Atasü depicts female characters’ physical and spiritual changes within a social, cultural and political background. She has identified her self as a Kemalist and feminist. She is a defender of Republican ideals, which influences the content of her books. According to Atasü, all female authors, who are aware of their gender identities, should observe the lives of women in a patriarchal society. She says: “In these hard days, I am trying to do my bit. Because I am a woman and a product of the Republican revolution, it is out of the question for me to turn a blind eye when women are oppressed and humiliated when Republican values are under attack” (Ecevit, 1995, p.4). In her novels, stories, and essays the readers see a balance between political concern and fictional writing. She has revealed the social, economic, and historical development of Turkish society.

Erendiz Atasü has contemplated the difficulties of being a woman. She has focused on a feminist discourse that Helen Cixous and Luce Irigaray described in their books. In order to create female language and literature, it is imperative to confront the lack of conventional language that stems from the male dominated society. Atasü has criticized language that contains words of scorn for the female body and female sexual experience. She has used metaphoric prose that depicts emancipation from the jail of male centered language. “Atasü is one of the first to successfully combine her message with a technically innovative and conspicuously metaphoric prose” (Alkan-Genca, p.43)

The Other Side of the Mountain is the most famous novel among Erendiz Atasü’s fictional works, in which she narrates the lives of three generations of women from a feminist viewpoint. The novel's female characters search for their identities, just as women are known to do in Atasü's books. The author underlines the necessity of individual, social and sexual, freedom in order for the female characters to know their true selves. In her novels, well-educated female characters are subordinated in society despite their economic freedom. Erendiz Atasü has created brave female characters who look in the mirror and ask the main question: “who am I?” The author's message is that the struggle of women has the power to change the customs of traditional culture. “Women also exist” is not just the name of a book for Erendiz Atasü. She has dedicated herself to achieving equality for women.

2- THAT SCORCHING SEASON OF YOUTH

That Scorching Season of Youth is a remarkable novel, which reflects all the views and purposes of the author. The novel describes a group of leftist medics who are aware of social-political realities. The author focuses on two female characters’ search for identity and freedom. The life stories of two female doctors AyşeAysu and Tomris are depicted in order to reveal how female characters attempt to experience the adventure of sexuality and love, despite societal oppression, and transform into freedom fighters. The author narrated the inner journey in which female characters...
discover their bodies and spirits as “liberation” and “wholeness”. The novel tells the story of how female characters discover their identities through experience and adventure, the liberation that lies at the heart of human existence. In That Scorching Season of Youth, male-female relationships, marriage, sexuality, love, and the effects of a military coup on people are criticized over the notion of “freedom”.

2.1. Searching for the Self and Identity

As women’s pursuit of freedom starts with the discovery of their bodies, the theme of sexuality is often encountered. AyşeAysu, a leftist doctor, has a poignant relationship with doctor Fethi that is narrated in the novel. In her temporary love affair, AyşeAysu’s inner questioning transforms into inner-conflict. Erendiz Atasü stated that “during the adventurous struggle of being oneself, the contradictions and the conflicts between being a full person, and being a woman (womanhood as a gender carries a lot of social restrictions), the miseries female bodies suffer under the double standards of sexual morality suppress women’s lives, and make them difficult” (Andaç, 2004, p.134)

The author chooses the name of AyşeAysu consciously. Living as if she were two women, AyşeAysu’s pursuit of identity begins with the double identity in her name. Reacting differently to surrounding events, Ayşe and Aysu are different representations of the female perspective. Ayşe is a traditional name, which represents the traditional, inhibited woman, whereas Aysu represents the modern, uninhibited woman. These two female subjects have been divided into parts. AyşeAysu is a figure who has to become estranged to her own body. She tries to collect the lost pieces through love and sexuality.

While questioning the relationship between feminism and psychoanalysis, Margot Waddell states that women’s bodies and spirits, which are crumbling, broken, damaged, divided and later completed, can only be repaired through freedom and the completion of women. She states that identities are divided due to the oppressing power of the status quo, transformed into a symbol of awakening once they find an opportunity to express themselves in feminist literary works (Waddell, 1995, p.129). In the novel, AyşeAysu challenges the social codes in her subconscious as she begins a relationship with Fethi, which is a crucial step towards a self-awakening.

AyşeAysu, who is said to “have felt grasping her destiny”, transforms into an effective subject with agency in her own story, too (Atasü, 2000, p.61). In our interview with Atasü, she explained the meaning of split personality in the novel as a result of the oppression that stems from a male-dominated culture that intends to categorize women. She emphasized the fact that parts of the novel highlight the categorization of female subjects as “wise-unwise women” which causes deep cracks that are too difficult to be repaired and the real drama of women is hidden in her struggle to create a strong and meaningful wholeness out of this distinction (Önder, interview, 10.11.2010).

While analyzing the built-in structures of language, Helen Cixous points out the hierarchy of value as the product of an ideology that focuses on a passive-active dichotomy. She emphasizes the fact that discourse produced in male-dominated cultures is used to define men as “dominant, superior, oppressing, prevailing or strong” while women are defined as their opposite in each of these respects in the dichotomy of active-passive (Cixous, 1988, p.18). In Atasü’s novel, male-dominated culture becomes apparent when describing the sexual relationship between AyşeAysu and Fethi. The narrator emphasizes the dark hands of Fethi who says “Stop talking” to AyşeAysu when she says “I want to fondle you, too”. Fethi represents the patriarchal society while shouting that “women don’t fondle; they are fondled”. (Atasü, 2000, p.75). Like the critics of Irigaray, concerning the symbolic order, this dialog reveals the masculine ideology. Fethi believes that “’man is the measure
of all things’. Atasü emphasizes that two genders are defined in a male norm and there is no place for women in this male-centered system.

AyşeAysu’s colleague Tomris is another female character who is aware of her true self despite social oppression. Perceiving Tomris as “the sister of her feelings”, AyşeAysu feels that she is her “companion” in their simultaneous struggle for freedom. As Robin Morgan states in her analysis of “sisterhood” in feminism (Morgan, 1984), in women’s simultaneous experience, there is a growing emotional partnership. Solidarity among women is one of the favorite themes of Erendiz Atasü.

Feeling unhappy and alone with regards to her husband, a doctor named Turhan, Tomris, who has a dominant identity at work and in the association, cannot accept being "and his (Turhan’s) spouse" (Atasü, 2000, p.45). Accused of being “greedy” by her husband, Tomris begins a secret affair with her colleague, Can, in her moment of questioning her life. It is important for Tomris to discover the type of man that accepts her desires and respects her. In fact, Erendiz Atasü does not judge forbidden love while narrating it. She emphasizes the conditions which are not spoken of, but nonetheless influence the lives of women. References to libido, whose function is felt in the body, calls to mind Freud, who states that spiritual energy is attributed to libido, or sexual energy, which was opposed by Jung, who states that libido is made up of neutralized energy and comes up when it finds an opportunity to express herself in various ways (Cebeci, 2000, p.229). Tomris describes the lesson that Can teaches her as “not hating her body” and states that for the very first time she comes closer to the part of “her body that has always been stranger and distant” after her sexual experience with him (Atasü, 2000, p.71).

“Wholeness” is questioned through complicated emotions in the female characters’ inner-world, oppressed desires, and divided selves. Being examples of “new types of women expressing their dissatisfaction by being split”, AyşeAysu and Tomris are compared to the model of the typical woman. While narrating, the writer points out the reasons for the painful attempts of the younger generations to possess personal freedom in these words:

“Cock your ears, can you hear Second Republicans? They attach the responsibility of AyşeAysu and Fethi’s failure onto the ambition to attain contemporary civilizations. It is not a matter of falsity but deficiency. It was thought that when men and women came together, bridges were built or it was thought they would be built. That shifty illusion... However, how did it use to be? Our grandfathers and grandmothers were taught so well as to how not to love one another. The thing that second republicans and we forgot was exactly this!” (Atasü, 2000, p.157).

Erendiz Atasü underlines the different views on sexuality for different female generations in the novel. The narrator emphasized that a society doesn’t reach real enlightenment without obtaining true equality in all areas of daily life. As a Kemalist, the author engages in self-criticism with regard to the shortcomings of Atatürk’s government that brought women many rights, but did not address their individual or sexual rights. Erendiz Atasü states that Kemalist ideals forgot to free women through their sexuality. Kemalist reforms want each woman to be a modern Turkish woman “whose mind is appreciated but whose body is ignored” (Atasü, 1996, p.12) The women could not express their feelings because they did not know their female identity. They could be a good citizen, mother, and wife, but they could not discover their inner life like AyşeAysu and Tomris’ mother and grandmothers.

2.2. Imaginary Narrative and Freedom of Writing

Erendiz Atasu narrates sexuality using imagery because the existing macho language is insufficient to understand and accurately portray the emotions of women (Önder, Interview, 10.11.2010). Through the images she creates, Atasu also helps liberate the language of the oppressed female. “Ice crystal, tunnel and diamond” are some of the important images that are
encountered in different parts of the novel. The meanings that are loaded into the novel’s images are determined based on changes in the characters’ moods. These images that enrich the narrative are quite meaningful in expressing every phase of the female characters’ transformation. In pursuit of freedom that begins in the shape of an ice crystal, women’s spirits and bodies go into a tunnel, undergo painful experiences, and are destroyed and completed again to transform into strong diamonds. The image of a tunnel, a direct allusion to the vagina, is encountered very often in the descriptions and interpretations of AyşeAysu’s sexual desires: “With Fethi, she could break cycles; their bodies could be dynamited. Through the cleared tunnel, she could give birth to herself again.” (Atasü, 2000, p.59) AyşeAysu hopes to discover the tunnel through love and sexuality. But Fethi, as a representative of patriarchal society, Fethi doesn’t allow her to have any agency in her own love story.

AyşeAysu, who courageously faces her desires and decides to express her womanhood freely, sees her demands, desires, joys, and oppressed or ignored emotions in the ice crystal. The association of “diamond”, the strongest element, with her pursuit of freedom implies that losses actually help female characters discover and gain their personal identities.

AyşeAysu began to write and felt more peaceful within herself. Authorship is effective in helping women, as subjects, take possession of their personal and social identity and gain their freedom in the novel. While mentioning the writing the author uses the word diamond to refer it. Beginning to write has an important role in the metamorphosis. Ice crystal transformed to diamond in this period. The act of writing repairs AyşeAysu’s body and spirit and helps her express herself in her pursuit of wholeness. AyşeAysu describes the act of writing as “recreating life parts, the witnesses of which were destroyed” and she actually tries to bring together the parts of herself broken by painful experiences. (Atasü, 2000, p.156) It is a sign of the fact that writing is equivalent to being cured after a painful experience. As to the act of writing in the novel, Adrienne Rich’s following words emphasize freedom: “For a poem to form or for a character or an act to take shape, an image must definitely transform and the mind must be liberated in an active way” (Rich, 1979, p.43).

AyşeAysu defines autobiographical writing not as experiencing something for a second time but as swimming after seeing the depth of water and her mental freedom both feeds her authorship and it is fed by her authorship. The only place that AyşeAysu could be herself, stripping herself of all the social codes, is in the world of writing in which she can express herself openly and without restraint. The act of writing is also symbolized by the idea of swimming naked in the sea of life. After all her painful experiences, the fact that AyşeAysu continues her pursuit of wholeness and writes far from the control mechanisms of society, is a sign that she determines only to be herself. In Nazan Aksoy’s “Fictitious Selves”, her impressions of female autobiographies are remarkable on this point: “Reading female autobiographies means seeing how a woman fictionalizes herself and how she copes with judgments of her value. At the same time, it also means how she interacts with womanhood and otherness and how she shares her identity with other women” (Aksoy, 2009, p.56)

Feminist critics emphasize that literary creation is one of the main points in discovering true self. In order to be true to their bodies, the women have to break the frame of patriarchy while writing. If they could get rid of bodily alienation, they would be able to represent a real, emancipated Turkish woman. As Nil Korkut Nayki stated, Atasü’s novels “demonstrate the resonance of western feminist discourses on the body in an originally non-western culture” (Nayki, 2014, p.235) while achieving embodiment through writing. AyşeAysu represents the woman who is alone but peaceful in the awareness of her creativity.

2.3. The Relationship between the Nature and Woman

Nature in the novel has an important role for female characters, who find peace and happiness in themselves and in nature. For Erendiz Atasü, who states that “our body, which is us and ours, is
nature itself,” the relationship that people build with nature is very important. Following disappointment, female characters expect to gain personal and social identity with unconditional freedom provided by love and nature, and it is important to see them embrace nature. The relationship that is frequently built between a woman’s body and the body of a tree demands attention. The description of the tree that AyşeAysu takes shelter under after being left by Fethi is one of the finest examples of woman-nature integration:

“The tree wrapped her up with its strong body, soft branches and strong roots in order to dress the wounds caused by a human son to human daughter and by human daughter to herself. She could take some rest here for some time... One day, AyşeAysu would be that tree, the boundaries between human body and tree body would disappear and she would finally go back home.” (Atasü, 2000, p.95).

“That wiggle that started and grew in her guts” when she fell in love with Fethi is actually a symbol that she would be liberated in the eternity of nature. For Tomris, growing “blue pelargonium” is one of her life-ambitions, and her relationship with nature is quite meaningful. The theme is freedom and is reinforced with the symbol of blue pelargonium in her inner-travel.

For AyşeAysu, who frequently questions the fact that only women are forced to create a new surrounding after divorcing, a woman is like a tree “that has to find a new piece of land to flourish after being deprived of hers in order to create itself again”. In his analysis of interaction between instincts and nature, Erich Fromm states that nature is not only outside of humans but also inside. He explains integration of human-nature by taking women-nature in the center of his discussion (Fromm, 1998, p. 91). Even after their failed marriages, sad love stories at the end of which they were left alone, and their collapsed dreams of revolution, they take refuge in nature and refresh their hope, as expressed in the following dialogue:

“After all, life is beautiful. Beautiful? (...) Nature is beautiful. So, we need to unite with it”. (Atasü, 2000, p.160).

According to ecofeminism, dominant ideologies that perceive nature as weak, uneducated, and as an object that needs to be controlled, are powered by the captivity of women and nature. Like nature, which is put into a role secondary to culture, women are also oppressed by male dominance. Nature’s structure is not “stative” and its seasonal cycle has a crucial role in expressing female characters’ psychological and biological changes as it both refers to dividedness and wholeness in That Scorching Season of Youth. After their experiences AyşeAysu and Tomris explored their identities. The dialogue at the end of the novel summarizes AyşeAysu and Tomris’s loneliness, freedom, and integration with nature well:

“Through the end of 1999, AyşeAysu was with Tomris. They were in a penthouse ornamented with leathery leaves cactus and lemon trees and New Year flowers. Two lonely women. Men walked off, children were away. (...) They looked at each other affectionately, two women and a cat.” (Atasü, 2000, p.159)

**Result**

While expressing female characters’ pursuit of freedom through personal dramas, That Scorching Season of Youth brings awareness to the reflections of social dramas on women’s lives. Erendiz Atasü approaches female subjects, who are inexperienced in love and sexuality, and their adventure of discovering their bodies and spirits using the concepts of nature, time, existence, and freedom in an extensive and rich way. She underlines that the female body is critical to understanding a woman’s individual and social existence. Erendiz Atasü argues that when women acknowledge
and take control of their own bodies and sexuality, it empowers them to defy patriarchy. In this regard she emphasizes that the female figures need to awaken in order to change their condition and take control of their bodies. The author has sought to reach a ‘‘wholeness’’ and ‘‘completeness’’ for her female figures through journeys of awakening. Male-centered society does not accept the female figures through their own body and soul. The author has been writing against this constructed order. Writing of body is the main method employed in her works to portray the female figures’ ‘‘becoming process’’ that is completed to reach a unity. Erendiz Atasü asserts that ‘‘women can transcend all patriarchal boundaries between body/mind, female/male and self/other through the ‘all-encompassing female language’, which enables a non-phallocentric ‘feminine writing’ practice’’ (Subaşı, 2016, xi)

‘‘Luce Irigaray, like Cixous, wants a feminine writing practice with which to challenge a representative and determining symbolic order’’ (Morris, 2000, p.127) Erendiz Atasü has questioned a positive representation of feminine identity through the stories of AyşeAyşu and Tomris. As the author stated at the end of the novel, the women who discovered themselves and refused the patriarchal values like AyşeAyşu and Tomris, have to pay a price. The novel narrated their tough travel into their true self. They struggle against the mind-body dichotomy while traveling through their femininity. They reached to freedom after refusing to be an ‘‘object’’ in a male-centered environment. The freedom that gave them the chance to be a ‘‘subject’’ brought a deep loneliness that the female characters had to accept. ‘‘In this patriarchal world woman has become the ‘‘other’’, the ‘‘the not male’’. Woman is the object, having her existence defined and determined by the male. (Bressler, 2007, p.182)

Erendiz Atasü has emphasized that educated male characters do not understand the needs of the women in spite of their progressive thoughts. The gender roles that are produced by the patriarchal society make the male characters, like Fethi and Turhan, unhappy in the novel. They have notable roles as the male leaders of the leftist group, but are not aware of the issues concerning women’s rights. Known as a leftist author, Atasü points out in her many works that leftist movements do not pay attention to the sexual identity of women. At the end of the novel she remarks the failure of the left and the disappointments of love. The female figures often hold on to life through artistic creation.

Erendiz Atasü has reflected her own experiences in her fictional world, making it natural and persuasive. She experienced difficulties in Turkey as a divorced woman in patriarchal society. As she has often stated, she personally felt the consequences of political repression as a republican feminist academic in Turkey. Accurately representing, from a feminist point of view, women’s lives in various regions across the country is what makes Erendiz Atasü such a prominent author in Turkish literature.

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