

Feminist Perspectives in Edith Wharton and Reşat Nuri Güntekin: a Comparative Study of *the House of Mirth* and *Çalikuşu*

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Abstract

Reşat Nuri Güntekin's *Çalikuşu* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* are novels written in the fashion of the nineteenth century realist fiction. Not limiting themselves with merely putting forward realistic perspectives, both novels raise significant questions about women's status and circumstances in patriarchal societies and their limited means for attaining empowerment at an early time before the advent of political feminism. Both novels are centered on the female characters who are engaged in a quest for freedom and self-realization. In the process, Lily Bart of *The House of Mirth* and Feride of *Çalikuşu* go through serious changes that influence their self-perceptions and their views of the society which ranks them below men and presents them with a severely restricted lifestyle. Feride challenges social restrictions and comes out of her experience more empowered. Lily Bart nevertheless is not as lucky as Feride.

Keywords: Social restrictions, Women, Patriarchal oppression, Quest for freedom, Self-realization, Feminist perspectives, Empowerment

Introduction

Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Reşat Nuri Güntekin's *Çalikusu* are centered on woman characters exposed to social, cultural, and economic limitations in strictly patriarchal and deeply conservative societies. Portraying oppressive and discriminatory attitudes towards women in patriarchal social environments, *Çalikusu* and *The House of Mirth* offer feminist perspectives on women's victimization. Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* and Feride in *Çalikusu* represent female subjects who struggle against social constraints and patriarchal oppression in varying degrees. Although the female spirit of rebellion is not fully overt in Wharton, rebellious spirit of Güntekin's heroine largely marks his novel. Challenging the social and cultural limitations, Feride asserts her individuality and pursues her desired goals. Lily Bart's defiance of the social norms, on the other hand, is sometimes subsumed under her desire to maintain her upper class status. The central argument of this paper is that both *Çalikusu* and *The House of Mirth* emphasize female self-realization and empowerment in the face of social, cultural, and

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economic limitations, yet Wharton presents a bleaker view of women's empowerment than Güntekin.

Both Edith Wharton and Reşat Nuri Güntekin lived through the turn of the century and experienced changes that took place with the advent of modern capitalism. Both studied the norms and conventions of the modern society and portrayed the effects of modernity on individuals in their fiction. Wharton was a member of New York high society which she had no qualms about exposing in her novels. Güntekin came from a middle class family and wrote about the conflicting modern and traditionalist attitudes in the early years of Turkish modernization. Both Wharton and Güntekin received a good education. Both lived in Paris for a while. They both started their writing career at a young age and in their novels both portrayed the ways in which women are dictated what to do and how to live their lives. What Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Güntekin's *Çalılıkusu* particularly have in common is their interventionist perspectives of the oppressive attitudes towards women.

Women, Wealth, and Status

The House of Mirth was published in 1905 and became a national bestseller, selling more than 140,000 copies in a short time. A celebrated work of American literary canon ever since, it presents the story of Lily Bart who is orphaned at a young age and looked after by her wealthy aunt. She grows up among the rich and her tastes and behavior are shaped by her class. She is enamored with wealth as much as the people of her class and has no less hedonistic pursuits than others. Yet, one remarkable difference of Lily is that she is not willing to stake her moral dignity to obtain wealth and status.

To protect her dignity, she refuses many indecent proposals, yet she pays dearly for it. Lily's impasse is created by the fact that fin-de-siècle New York high society offers very limited possibilities for women seeking self-fulfillment elsewhere other than in wealth and status. The singular goal for an upper class woman in this particular society is defined as a profitable marriage. In Wharton's picture of the high society, marriage ensures a permanent status and financial security for women.

Marrying into wealth is then Lily's priority since her privileges are not as extensive as the other women of her class. She is financially dependent on her rich aunt who gives Lily a limited amount of allowance that hardly meets her expensive purchases and her gambling debts. Despite her awareness of the vanity and decadence of her class, she cannot distance herself from its trappings: "No; she was not made for mean and shabby surroundings, for the squalid compromises of poverty. Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breath in" (Wharton 1994: 45). Lily nevertheless does not feel content at all about the obligations imposed on her. There are moments when she becomes frustrated and filled with an urge to escape from this limiting world of vanity, narcissism, and artifice: "There were moments when she longed blindly for anything different, anything strange, remote and untried" (Wharton 1994: 109). In one of her rebellious moments,

she expresses her frustration with the affectation of the society in which she lives: "Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine? Why could one never do a natural thing without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice?" (Wharton 1994: 36). Monotonous card games and tea parties revolt her, yet Lily persists in attending these social activities not because she enjoys them but because she regards them as "one of the taxes she had to pay for their [her hostesses'] prolonged hospitality" (Wharton 1994: 45). As she does not know an alternative way of being, the slightest possibility of exclusion from the upper class scares her to death. Lily then must pursue wealth and status--things her social class glorifies--and must strengthen her place in the high society which she can only achieve through a profitable marriage. In Lily's world, love, friendship, and idealism are obsolete values. What matters is material wealth and plenty of it. For Lily it is not easy to maintain her presence among the wealthiest of the wealthy. Still unmarried at the age of twenty nine, Lily feels depressed as she knows that she will not possess her charms forever. So, she is torn between her apprehensions about an insecure future and the rebellious spirit that possesses her sometimes.

Wharton describes the process in which Lily's search for empowerment paradoxically becomes a process in which she loses ground. By presenting herself as a commodity in the marriage market, Lily seems to make a deal with the devil. She accepts the terms and conditions of the market and therefore, makes herself vulnerable to its inhuman operations. Bonnie Lynn Gerard points out the central ambivalence of Lily's existence "Lily Bart's pursuit of social status as an empowered consumer presents her with a paradox: in order to become a consumer she must first present herself as an item to be consumed" (Gerard 1998: 1). Yet the major paradox of the novel turns out to be Lily's first accepting and then defying the market rules. Her more urgent moral and spiritual needs displace her search for social status and disrupt the process of her becoming a self-fashioned commodity.

Such needs of her find expression in her friendship with Lawrence Selden. Purified from the greed for money and status, Selden represents values that stand in opposition to the business-oriented values of the high society. Neither does he partake in the oppressive attitudes of the men of power towards women nor he condones their voracious materialism. On the contrary, he relentlessly critiques the decadence of the people who are born into money and privileges. Questioned by Lily about his idea of success, Selden says that success for him is "personal freedom" (Wharton 1994: 81) and goes on to explain his desire "to keep a kind of republic of the spirit" (Wharton 1994: 81). Under the strong influence of Selden, a major shift takes place in Lily's perspective of life. He manages to bring out the moral and spiritual aspects of her. For this reason, Lily values Selden's friendship more than the attention of the rich men around her. In fact, her friendship with Selden, who is neither rich nor glamorous, forces her to make an ethical choice between money and personal freedom.

To a certain degree Lily is a product of her environment and cannot easily shake off the values instilled in her throughout her upbringing, yet from another perspective, she

does not readily assume the role of a chaser of wealth and status. For example, she dismisses several opportunities for making the final move for getting Percy Gryce, the potential candidate for marriage with more than \$800,000 yearly income, to propose her. Wai-Chee Dimock calls her abandoning of her designs of finding a rich husband as “an intentional and repeated failure” (Dimock 1994: 376) and points out that “her refusal to realize her ‘asset’--as her mother designates her beauty--makes her something of a rebel” (Dimock 1994: 376). Indeed, the fact that she ruins her chances of making a profitable marriage shows that she denies the role assigned to the women of her class and seeks for a different type of self-fulfillment. Under the influence of Lawrence Selden, Lily is able to change her perspective and assume a more oppositional attitude towards the upper class. Her new awareness which is brought about by her widened perspective helps her distance herself from her high society friends and view them critically: “Under the glitter of their opportunities she saw the poverty of their achievement ... she had a shamed collection of the way in which, a few hours since, she had felt the centripetal force of their standards” (Wharton 1994: 70). The passage reveals the shift in Lily’s perception. She starts to question the corrupt values of her class which she has been identifying herself with since her childhood.

An Independent Spirit

We find a similar questioning of social norms and impositions in Reşat Nuri Güntekin’s *Çalılıkusu* which first appeared in *Vakit* newspaper in 1920 as a serial and has become one of the most widely-read Turkish novels ever since. It has been included in the Turkish curriculum as a work that promotes Kemalist feminism. An all times national bestseller, it has been reproduced in films, plays, and TV serials. The female character of the novel, Feride, has left an imprint in the hearts and minds of generations of young Turkish women, inspiring them to explore the world and seek for self-realization.

An orphan like Lily, Feride grows up in her wealthy aunt’s house. Her aunt raises her according to the western standards and provides her with a good education. Feride is educated in the French schools like the wealthy girls of her class. As she grows up, she starts questioning the norms of the society. She refuses to be neat and lady like. She challenges the gender roles by acting like a boy rather than a girl. She likes climbing the trees, roaming around the house, and making trouble. She is rather disobedient and subversive than being quiet and submissive. Clues of her rebellious nature are hinted at the descriptions of her childhood: “Evet, ben hakikaten garip ve anlaşılmaz bir çocuktum. Hocalarımın zayıf damarlarını yakalamıştım. Her birinin en ziyade neden üzüleceğini gayet iyi keşfeder ve ona göre işkenceler hazırlardım” (Güntekin 2003: 25). Her mischievous nature makes her a constant source of nuisance both at school and at home. As she grows into adolescence, she finds the over-genteel manners of the upper class people unnatural and affected. She constantly mocks her cousin--and her later fiancé--Kamuran, for being ‘too genteel.’ “Yürürken yolunda incecik bir su birikintisi gördüğü zaman telaş eden, atlamaya karar vermeden önce üç, dört kere

iskarpınlerine ve suya bakan, bir sandalyeye oturacağı zaman pantolonunu ... dizkapaklarından tutup yukarı çeken nazlı ve nazenin kuzenimin ağaca çıkmak isteğine gel de gülme” (Güntekin 2003: 41).

Feride’s refusal to assume the submissive role imposed on the female subjects of the society leads to her breaking up with Kamuran. To punish Kamuran’s disloyalty, she calls off the wedding and leaves her aunt’s house. She thus behaves in just the opposite way of what is expected of her as a female in a patriarchal society. Feride lives in a social environment in which women are seen as men’s property and required to tolerate the way men treat them—usually as domestic objects. Women are therefore expected to accept men with all their faults and misbehavior. However, Feride is no such woman and is ready to defy the submissive female identity designated by the society. Her rejection to marry Kamuran therefore marks the turning point in her life. Her decision suggests that she does not comply with the norms of the patriarchal society and wants to find ways to realize her potential as a female. She has the determination and idealism Lily Bart lacks and this makes her a more romantic heroine than the latter. Her downright refusal of passive domesticity in fact exposes the indomitable individual in her. Feride takes her strength from her determination about making a life for herself with whatever means she has. Unlike Lily, she can risk the comfort and privileges of her class. She is neither afraid of poverty nor hunger and is prepared to face difficulties. Her goal is to attain a respectable status as a woman in deeply sexist and conservative Turkish society. When she is faced with the discriminatory attitudes of the officers in the employment office, she does not even one moment retreat and think of returning to the privileges her class. She waits for months before receiving an answer for her application for a job. When she is notified that there is a teaching post at a school away from Istanbul, in a small Anatolian village, she takes it without ever feeling regret for leaving the big city and the kind of lifestyle she is used to.

The way Güntekin represents Feride’s experiences of the oppressive patriarchy and tyrannical religious and social constraints in the rural Turkish society is quite akin to Wharton’s representation of the constraining attitudes towards women in the American society. Feride lives at a time when the country is falling into pieces. While the foreign occupation of Istanbul threatens the freedom of the country, poverty and ignorance hold the countryside at their grip. Religious oppression pervades Anatolia and severely limits women’s freedom. Combined with despair and ignorance, religious conservatism takes an ever tyrannical form. The victims of such tyranny are mostly women.

Lacking the support of her family, Feride tries to survive in Zeyniler village of the rural Anatolia. She nevertheless faces so many challenges which bring her to the point of breaking. Although female liberation has partially been achieved in Istanbul, rural locations display a stronger resistance towards the goal of equality between men and women and the betterment of women’s conditions in society. The separation of male and female chambers in Ottoman houses is abolished in Istanbul by then. Men and women can communicate more liberally. Yet, the situation is the opposite in the more traditional rural society of Anatolia. The female is still isolated in the private realm.

She is not allowed to involve in public life with men let alone freely communicate and share an equal standing with them. Feride thus feels the deep conflict between the modern Istanbul elite and the religious conservatism of the rural society. The village has a heavy air of religious conservatism which frightens Feride. The atmosphere, in fact, reminds her of death:

Bu köyün evleri, sokakları, mezarları gibi çocuklarında da siyah bir neşesizlik var. Renksiz dudakları gülmenin ne olduğunu bilmiyor, durgun gözleri ağır bir melal içinde ölümü düşünüyor gibi. Ben bile, yavas yavas onlara benzemeye başlamıyor muyum? Eskiden ölümü başka türlü düşünürdüm... Şimdi onun acı lezzetini, ödağacı ve servi kokuları içinde dilimle tadıyor, ciğerlerime çekiyor gibiyim! (Güntekin 2003: 187)

The fear evoked by religious oppression is reflected in the grave faces and despairing eyes of village children that view Feride, a young woman from Istanbul, suspiciously. She therefore suppresses her femininity by wearing the veil. She lives in accordance with the Islamic rules and tries to protect herself from the male gaze which sexualizes the female. Sexualizing the female body in the patriarchal society is a common fact; yet in societies that follow the Islamic law, this takes the form of suppression of the female body. In such societies, the female and the feminine traits she represents are seen as a threat to the male because the female is constructed as a source of seduction and beguiling. Exposed to the Islamic form of life in rural Anatolia, Feride has to wear the veil and suppress her femininity. In such a deeply sexist environment, her role as an educator is very limited because she is primarily seen a domestic being. Her educator's capacity is not taken seriously and just because she claims her rights in the public life, the village people treat her as a subversive woman who defies the social rules and tries to earn an equal standing with men. She therefore becomes a threat for the village people. The prominent men of the village even take the matter further and threaten her by spreading ill rumors about her. Finding herself in an impossible situation, Feride seeks solace in the little girl Munise. She adopts this little girl who escapes from domestic abuse and becomes a surrogate mother to her. Despite the villagers' objections-- who believe that Munise's real mother is a fallen woman and therefore, Munise must be punished for that--Feride makes a life for herself and Munise in the little house above the school. She therefore challenges her oppressors and rejects the subordinate role they try to fit her in. Women of the village--Nazife Molla and Hatice Hanım--nevertheless admire her courage and support Feride's cause. She thus gains territory among her kind as she refuses to live according to the rules men dictate.

Like Feride, Lily has to deal with oppressive attitudes of men who, as Frances L, Restuccia puts it, want to "capture, clarify, and crystallize Lily Bart" (Restuccia 1994: 405). As she refuses to please their egos, to be an object of pleasure for them, and as she turns down their sexual advances, she faces more oppression. Seeing her as a threat to their male-dominated order, her high society friends start ostracizing her. Her refusal of Gus Trenor, the richest and the most powerful among Lily's friends, causes her dismissal from high society gatherings forever. Lily is at a crossroads; she either needs

to comply with men's wishes or claim her independence: "She was beginning to have fits of angry rebellion against fate, when she longed to drop out of race and make an independent life for herself" (Wharton 1994: 56). Yet, she cannot find the strength in herself to achieve this. Lily is crushed by the oppressive patriarchy to such a degree that her life as a female signifies nothing and promises no hope for self-realization and self-fulfillment:

That was the feeling which possessed her now—the feeling of being something rootless and ephemeral, mere spin-drift of the whirling surface of existence, without anything to which the poor little tentacles of self could cling before the awful flood submerged them. And as she looked back she saw that there had never been a time when she had had any relation to life (Wharton 1994: 296).

Lily's victimization is portrayed as a total dissolution of her self. Trying to fit in the role of a female ornament dictated by the patriarchal social order leaves her in utter alienation and loss. She is both alienated to her self and to the society in which she lives. Lily's death at the end of the novel shows the tragic predicament of the oppressed female in the male-dominated society. Wharton suggests that in a male-centered world, the female has no chance to survive unless she identifies with the role of an ornamental object imposed on her. *The House of Mirth* thus takes the form of an elegy for the female who is constraint by social limitations and oppressed by patriarchy.

Conclusion

Both Wharton's and Güntekin's characters undergo similar degrees of oppression and suffer from the limiting possibilities for women. Unlike Wharton, Güntekin nevertheless sees an opportunity for survival for the female. Feride comes across as an oppressed woman, yet she leaves the village like a strong army commander. She realizes her aims and attains self-fulfillment and self-respect at the end of her long struggle against the conservative male-order. She thus rises to the ranks of a heroic woman, an ideal Kemalist female, who represents the new, independent female of modern Turkish society. In the male-dominated world of *The House of Mirth*, however, women are doomed. The singular role assigned to them is to function as ornaments in men's life; if they cannot live up to this role, they face all kinds of tragic ends like Lily Bart. Wharton thus paints a profoundly depressing picture of the female existence in the turn of the century New York.

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