



Femininity as Genotext in the Works of 19th Century Female Writers

Fırat Karadaş*

The different and “strange” character of the works of the 19th century female writers has attracted the attention of critics and literary theorists up to the present. Those under the influence of the male-dominant literary tradition have labelled these works as “strange” and, to a certain extent, “defective”. What concerns this article is the feminist literary criticism, which underlines the fact that what those male-biased critics call “strange” and “defective,” in fact, represents the feminine aspects of these works. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) present that those female writers wrote in conditions of patriarchy and its literary tradition and thus ‘denoted’ their femininity only through silences, ambiguities, indeterminacies and defamiliar aspects in their works, which represent the sub-textual feminine part. On the other hand, with her idea of ‘genotext,’ Kristeva (1984) proposes a psychoanalytical approach to the sub-textual nature of femininity and handles it in terms of the conflict between and co-presence of the semiotic and the symbolic. Although Kristeva’s study is not directly about the sub-textual denotation of femininity in the works of the 19th century female writers and is rather a psychoanalytical feminist theory, this study handles Kristeva’s idea of ‘genotext’ to bring a new dimension to Gilbert and Gubar’s idea and to the study of the works of 19th century female writers.

The idea of ‘genotext’ is introduced by Kristeva to define the sub-textual nature of the ‘semiotic’ within language, which is symbolic by nature. Relying on Jacques Lacan’s theory of psychoanalysis, Kristeva argues that ‘the signifying process’ in language includes three co-existing ‘modalities’: the semiotic *chora*, which is a “non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility” (1984: 93) and in which “the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic” (1984: 94); thethetic, which “marks a threshold between two heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic” (1984: 102) and which implies the beginning of the subject’s departure from the semiotic and its first introduction into language; and the symbolic, in which the subject-object division is completed and the identity of the subject is formed according to this division in the signifying process of language.

However, the subject-object division is never total because, according to Kristeva, the subject is always “*both* semiotic *and* symbolic; no signifying system can be either ‘exclusively’ semiotic or ‘exclusively’

* Dr. Fırat Karadaş, Hatay Mustafa Kemal University, Department of English Language and Literature. Hatay-Turkey. E-mail: fkaradas@mku.edu.tr. ORCID No: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7546-717X>.

Notes

Article submission date : 4 April 2020
Article acceptance date : 23 May 2021
302-9916©2021 emupress

Not

Makale gönderim tarihi: 4 Nisan 2020
Makale kabul tarihi : 23 Mayıs 2021

symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both” (Kristeva, 1984: 93). Thus, the semiotic and the symbolic are “inseparable within the *signifying process* that constitutes language and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved” (1984: 92). In this case, although the semiotic cannot be expressed (or ‘enunciated’ in Kristevan terms) through language, it can still be detected in it, but as modified and repressed by the symbolic order. The repression and modification, however, are never total, for the semiotic ‘denotes’ itself within language as a pressure of drives surging up within the symbolic by means of silence, indeterminacy, disruption, absence and ambiguity.

The idea of ‘genotext’ emerges at this point as opposed to and co-existing with ‘phenotext’ - which represents the symbolic. Genotext represents the semiotic and includes “drives, their disposition, their division of the body, plus the ecological and social system surrounding the body, such as objects and pre-Oedipal relations with parents” (Kristeva, 1984: 120). Thus, it includes “semiotic processes” as well as “the advent of the symbolic” (1984: 86). Although genotext can be regarded as a component of language, it is not linguistic, but “a *process*, which tends to articulate structures that are ephemeral and non-signifying” (1984: 86). In this respect, like the semiotic, genotext also is denotative and it, too, co-exists and is entwined with the phenotext within the signifying system of language, because “the signifying process includes both the genotext and the phenotext. For it is in language that all signifying operations are realized” (1984: 122).

However, the question of in what respect(s) genotext is related to femininity remains unanswered. The answer can be found in Kristeva’s idea of the semiotic, which can easily be linked to genotext. Kristeva contends that the semiotic is the ‘other’ of language and is which is closely intertwined with it. While the symbolic connotes the Law of the Father, the semiotic is related to the pre-Oedipal phase and is characterized with the child’s contact with the mother’s body. The semiotic is thus closely associated with femininity but it is not specific to women, because it stems from the pre-Oedipal stage that knows no gender distinctions. However, because it is intimately linked with the mother’s body and because both the mother’s body and femininity are characterized with their ‘otherness’ to the symbolic, women are closer to the semiotic than men.

In this case, genotext—which represents the sub-textual positioning of the semiotic within the signifying system—can also be regarded as representing the sub-textual positioning of femininity in the signifying process. This close relationship between genotext and femininity in Kristeva’s theory makes it possible for us to read and reconstruct Gilbert and Gubar’s idea that the feminine aspects in the works of 19th century female writers always exist in submerged forms—or genotext (in Kristevan terms). In order to read Gilbert and Gubar’s idea within the theoretical framework of Kristeva’s idea of genotext, it is necessary first to have a look

at Gilbert and Gubar's argumentation about the representation of femininity in the writings of 19th century female writers in "Infection in the Sentence". Gilbert and Gubar contend that in the 19th century artistic creativity was presented by the dominant patriarchal ideology as a fundamentally male quality. Writing was regarded as an act in which the author 'fathers' his text and created images of femininity representing male fantasies. Accordingly, women were portrayed either as docile, submissive, subjected, and domestic or as monsters. Woman was supposed to be the epitome of angelic beauty and sweetness, but with a totally subjugated body and as bereft of the right to decide over her body; "from Dante's Beatrice and Goethe's Gretchen to Coventry Patmore's 'Angel in the House,' the ideal woman is seen as a passive, docile and above all a *selfless* creature" (Moi, 1985: 58).

Gilbert and Gubar think that this idealization of woman by patriarchy and its institutions made the women of the 19th century both physically and psychologically ill. They state, "[g]iven this socially conditioned epidemic of female illness, it is not surprising to find that the angel in the house of literature frequently suffered not just from fear and trembling but from literal and figurative sickness unto death" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 55). Thus, behind this angel there is the monster woman, who represents "the obverse of the male idealization of women" and "the male fear of femininity" (55). The woman depicted as a monster is one "who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who has a story to tell—in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her" (Moi, 1985: 58). Literature proliferates with such characters: Goneril and Regan in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Becky Sharp in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* as well as the traditional images of "terrible sorceress-goddesses as the Sphinx, Medusa, Circe, Kali, Delilah, and Salome" (Gubar and Gilbert, 1979: 34). Gilbert and Gubar claim that since no woman can totally surrender herself to the role patriarchy expects her to play and can give up her self easily, each woman has a monster side hidden within her. Thus, relying on this argumentation, it can be said that each Beatrice has a Medusa (or any other monster woman), each Gretchen has a Circe, or each Jane Eyre has a Bertha Mason hidden within her.

Therefore, since this monster side is repressed by patriarchy just as the semiotic is repressed by the symbolic in Kristeva's theory, it can be said that each woman has a symbolic as well as a semiotic side, an angelic as well as a monster side, and both of them co-exist in the signifying process. Like the repression of the semiotic by the symbolic, the repression of the monster side is never total, because it is impossible to keep it totally silent.

Now the question arises as to what is the situation of female writer under patriarchy and as to how the monster side within her finds an outlet for 'denotation' (in Kristeva's terms) in her work. For Gilbert and Gubar, as soon as she becomes a writer, a female writer experiences her womanhood as "a painful obstacle, or even a debilitating inadequacy" (1979: 50). First and foremost, she participates "in a quite different literary subculture from that

inhabited by male writers, a subculture which has its own distinctive literary traditions, even though it defines itself in relation to the ‘main’, male-dominated, literary culture - a distinctive history” (50). In this subculture, she appears to be or is regarded by literary paternity as “anomalous, indefinable, alienated, a freakish outsider” (50). The literary paternity is unable to define the female writer’s predicament while experiencing her identity both as woman and writer because its definition of femininity is in sharp contrast to the female writer’s own gender definition. So, in the process of writing, while the female writer has to conform to the rules put forward by patriarchy and creates her male as well as female characters taking these rules into consideration, she struggles, on the other hand, against patriarchy’s “*reading of her*” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 49). In this respect, she experiences an anxiety of authorship caused by the conflict of her own gender definition and her experience as a writer in the patriarchal literary tradition.

For Gilbert and Gubar, female writers of the 19th century overcame that anxiety by ‘denoting’ the monster side within them through submerged or sub-textual forms, in other words, by denoting the untameable feminine within them in genotext. Gilbert and Gubar define the sub-textual nature of femininity in the works of female writers arguing that all female writers featured female experiences from a specifically female perspective. However, this feminine aspect in their work has been generally overlooked by critics because “the most successful women writers often seem to have channelled their female concerns into secret or at least obscure corners” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 72). They have created submerged meanings “hidden within or behind the more accessible, ‘public’ content of their works” (1979: 72). In this hidden or disguised part lies “a story of the woman writer’s quest for her own story; it is the story, in other words, of the woman’s quest for self-definition” (1979: 76). Thus, “women from Jane Austen and Mary Shelley to Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsestic works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning” (1979: 73). This means that these authors managed the difficult task of concurrently adjusting to and subverting patriarchal literary forms so that genotext and phenotext become co-existing in their texts.

The main characteristic of these submerged forms or sub-texts is that like Kristeva’s idea of genotext they are not ‘enunciated’ through language but ‘denote’ themselves as ‘other’ to language through the silences, indeterminacies, absences, ambiguities, rhythm, tone, etc. of the text. Although Gilbert and Gubar underline the sub-textual nature of the feminine in the works of most 19th century female writers and argue that this feminine can be detected in the ‘obscurities’ or silences of the text, they do not focus on the fact that these obscurities and silences are ‘other’ to language, which is a property of the patriarchy. And although they argue that the feminine

aspect in the works of these female writers is 'denoted' in the form of some sort of madness -which makes the use of language in the logical/symbolic sense impossible - Gilbert and Gubar do not define this madness as directly related to the silences, indeterminacies, obscurities of the text and as representing the 'otherness' to language. For instance, when they show Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as a good example for the kind of text in which femininity appears in the form of madness and argue that in Brontë's novel behind the submissive, docile, domestic, passive and angel-like Jane Eyre lurks the monster Bertha Mason in a submerged or sub-textual form, they overlook the fact that Bertha Mason is totally 'other' to the language represented by Jane and Rochester. They also overlook the fact that Bertha's madness, the silences, indeterminacies and ambiguities which 'denote' Bertha's existence can only be understood in terms of this 'otherness' to language. Thus, the way Bertha Mason is represented in *Jane Eyre*, her being represented not through language but through silences and indeterminacies, and the close relationship that is established in her character between femininity and madness make her open to a reading according to Kristeva's idea of genotext. Such a reading enriches Gilbert and Gubar's idea by filling in the gaps in it.

So, it can be said that Gilbert and Gubar's idea that femininity in the works of the 19th century female writers exists in submerged or sub-textual forms and in the form of some sort of madness can be reconstructed in terms of Kristeva's idea of genotext. The silent, indeterminate and denotative position of the genotext in the signifying process of language presents new theoretical insights for the study of femininity in the works of 19th century female writers. Besides, such a reading can broaden our understanding of Gilbert and Gubar's idea and help us fill in the gaps in this idea.

References

- Gilbert, S. & Gubar, S. (1979). *The Madwoman in the Attic*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1984). *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Moi, T. (1985). *Sexual/Textual Politics*. New York: Methuen.