THE REFLECTION OF WOMEN AS A SYMBOL IN TOP GIRLS BY CARYL CHURCHILL AND A DOLL’S HOUSE BY HENRIK IBSEN

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to show that women are symbolized differently in different societies. Mostly, symbols are used to define the other meanings of some words or actions; however when it comes to women, they are used to depict the bitter facts of their situation in society. As known, politic and economic issues are not the only problems of women. They also argue for the significance of matters traditionally considered private and personal, rather than political, the structure of families, sexual relationships, appearance-related concerns or the words that women use while speaking. For example, women argue for their responsibilities related to family arrangements and child rearing tasks and pay less than men. Women want good jobs which enable them enough time to take care of their children and do family demands and equal pay with males.

Key words: symbolism, feminism, oppression, discrimination, gender roles

SYMBOLISM IN LITERATURE

A symbol is a literary device that contains several layers of meaning, often concealed at first sight, and is representative of several other aspects, concepts, and traits than those that are visible in the literal translation alone. In order to conceal the real meaning, which is unclear/ indefinite/ ambiguous, symbols are used. That is, symbol is using an object or action that means something more than its literal meaning.¹

Symbolism is the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense. Sometimes it is difficult to use the actual meanings of lots of words which are not approved by society. So, in order to gain the acceptance of society the symbols are used instead of these words. Besides, the symbols of some words are so common that it becomes difficult to remember the actual meanings of these words.

Symbolism can take different forms. Generally, it is an object representing another to give it an entirely different meaning much deeper and more significant. Sometimes, however, an action, an event or a word spoken by someone may have a symbolic value. Mostly, symbolism takes place in literature so as to empower the main idea of the text, poetry, etc., Rather than using the concrete meanings words, it is preferred to embellish with abstract ideas. This kind of combination is more effective than home truth.

Symbols do shift their meanings depending on the context they are used in. “A chain”, for example, may stand for “union” as well as “imprisonment”. Thus, symbolic meanings of an object or an action are understood by when, where and how they are used. It also depends on who reads them.² Under the name of literature, some figures are symbolized to show the real aspects of the social life and requirements of society. Since society accepts some objects as inferior and the others superior, it is the job of literature to portray this inequality. One of the best examples for this inequality in society is man-woman aspect. Although both of them are human beings after all, they are portrayed completely

¹ http://literary-devices.com/content/symbol
² http://literarydevices.net/symbolism/
different by society. One of them is superior, the other one is inferior. In most spheres, literature undertakes the responsibility to demonstrate the role of woman in society by drawing the exact picture of it. While dealing with the role of woman in society, literature uses lots of symbols to depict it since they are exhibited differently in social environments. For instance sometimes they are portrayed as the symbol of power and disobedience; but most of the other times they symbolize weakness, dependence, vanity, and restriction. The role of men in all these depictions is notably effective. They aim to mortify women in front of the society.

Beauvoir (1953) claims that 19th century society was being codified by men, for example, decrees that women is inferior; and women can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male’s superiority. This description of women at that time exemplifies the conception of them in society. As literature is responsible for the reflection of real life, it searches to catch the main point in these spheres. That is, literature describes what women symbolize in society on behalf of gender roles.

No doubt that literature is a good and clear reflection of the society and it depicts the culture, traditions, religion, the lifestyles of people and even the politics of that time. 19th century literature reflects attitudes toward women, their status in social life, and their roles in society and family arrangements and their expectations. Women begin to express their concern about gender relations, they question their place and role in every field of life and tried to find answers. At the beginning of 20th century, women writers and all feminist writers expanded their subjects. They expressed their individualism and demanded more equal rights in public life, marriage, law and politics with men. Opperman (1994) in Feminist Literary Criticism: Expanding the Canon as Regards the Novel, asserts on Charlotte Bronte:

The tension between personal powerlessness and desire for power and control in her female characters produces a process that enables the characters to review the dominant ideologies of the times. In Jane Eyre (1847) and Villette (1853) the heroine is able to resist social confinement and social limitations by her independent mind which combines strong will and moral integrity, Brontes’s strong-minded heroine displays an integrated female subjectivity.

These sentences depict the restrictions of society upon women. They desire to become powerful and independent from men; however society confines them in a cage in order not to fly alone. The writers who are aware of this fact endeavor to help women escaping this cage. For example, Simone de Beauvoir expresses her ideas clearly in her articles. According to Simone de Beauvoir, one is not born rather becomes women; the female “becomes a woman” – the meaning of which is defined by society and culture. She adds that women are thought as the typical domestic mother, or wife, who cooks, cleans and partakes in most, if not all, domestic chores as is her apparent duty. On this, Simone de Beauvoir insisted that one is not born a woman. The female becomes one by knowingly, or unknowingly accepting and living the role a male-dominated society defines as “appropriate”. In order to make it more clear, three literary pieces are chosen to depict how women are symbolized in society.

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4 Opperman, Serpil, Tunç, Feminist Literary Criticism: Expanding the Canon as Regards the Novel, Hacettepe Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü. 1994. p.68
TOP GIRLS BY CARYL CHURCHILL

Playwright Caryl Churchill was born on 3 September 1938 in London and grew up in the Lake District and in Montreal. She was educated at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, where she read English. She was Resident Dramatist at the Royal Court (1974-5) and spent much of the 1970s and 1980s working with the theatre groups 'Joint Stock' and 'Monstrous Regiment'. Top Girls brings together five historical female characters at a dinner party in a London restaurant given by Marlene, the new managing director of 'Top Girls' employment agency.

Top Girls is a good example in order to grasp the changing identity of women as a result of third wave feminist values. The play is a good picture of this subject. While women are trying to do their best in business life by competing with men they lose their values slowly.

One of the most important character in Top Girls, Marlene is very good example at this point. We see Marlene and her colleagues at work in the employment agency. Marlene is tough. When she pushes a man out of the top position at the agency we are briefly tempted to applaud her until we see her heartless treatment of the man's wife. In addition, though she is very successful in her job and manages to do everything; she fails when it comes to her relationship with her sister and daughter whom she gives his sister Joyce. Marlene and Joyce are not in contact with each other and there is no strong relationship between these two women. This is the fact of modern contemporary world and women’s new roles. She lives a life which is more suitable for man than any woman. She does not have a special life. In addition she does not have a strong relationship with her family members and with any man. Also her speech is not kind even when her speaking with women. The way she speaks, the way she lives and even her ideas are most suitable for man than a woman. The play summarizes the role of women in modern societies.

As stated before they are confined in a cage in all circumstances; if they wish to work and succeed it they are portrayed as disobedient and like men, if they do not give any effort to become successful they are depicted as passive creatures dependent on men. All these restrictions start in families. The roles are burdened on women when they are just little children; adhere to them firmly during their whole life. Women argue that the family is the primary site of women's oppression. They begin to deconstruct family worlds, and begin to make alternative definitions of what family means. After long years of oppression in families, women start to impose different and new definitions to them. A family is a construct of meanings and relationships; a household is a residential and economic unit. To put it another way, "family" designates the way things should be, while "house-hold" refers to the manner in which women, men, and children actually come together in domestic units.

Top Girls opens in a restaurant where Marlene is hosting a dinner party for five friends. She has recently been promoted at work. There are five guests and all of them are women. One of them is long-dead, another one is a fictional character from literature or paintings. They talk about religion and love and everything about their lives. As stated; themes of this play focus on the various roles of women in society and their relationships. At the very beginning, play mentions about the story of

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5 Third Wave feminism is a philosophy that emerged in the 1990s. The Third Wave focuses on the economic, political, social, and personal empowerment of women. This newer form of feminism focuses more on the individual empowerment of women and less on activism. It celebrates women’s journeys to build meaningful identities in the complex contemporary world. (Naomi Rockler-Gladen 2007). Third-wave feminism is said to explicitly embrace hybridity, contradiction, and multiple identities (particularly, connections between racial, sexual and gender identities. In addition, the third wave is sometimes perceived as nonactivist in nature (Heywood and Drake 1997). This approach includes "taking for granted" many recent gains: women's work opportunities, combining work with family, sexual autonomy and freedom, and male participation in domestic work and child rearing (Stacey 1991).

Marlene, a successful businesswoman in early eighties Britain. But while she is successful with her business life, she has an unsuccessful personal-private life. The characters have different life styles that their own choice. In the first act three characters Isabelle, Nijo and Marlene talk about religion. In their dialogues it is clear that they do not have a definite idea about their religious beliefs:

Marlene: I do not think religious beliefs are something we have in common.
Nijo: I had never heard of Christianity. Never heard of it/ barbarians.
Marlene: Well I am not a Christian. And I am not a Buddhist.
Isabelle: You have heard of it?
Marlene: We do not all have to believe the same.
Isabelle: There are some barbaric practices in the east.
Nijo: Barbaric?
Isabelle: Among the lower classes.
Nijo: I would not know.
Isabelle: Well, theology always made my head ache. (5, act 1)

As stated before, in this play different roles of women in society are portrayed. All of them perceive the world in different styles. Marlenes determination and her devotion towards her job is a good picture of what looks like a strong women. She works very hard and she is also very courageous woman. Her determination causes envy among others. But what is clear that she does not live like a woman. She lives a life which is more suitable for man than any woman. She does not have a special life. In addition she does not have a strong relationship with her family members and with any man. Also her speech is not kind even when her speaking with women. Her words which she utters Nell and Win demonstrates this:

Marlene: “fucking tube”
Win: we have heard that one.
Nell: we have used that one.
Marlene: pass the sugar and shut your face, pet. (49, act 2)

Another interesting dialogue occurs between Win, Nell and Marlene about cheating. Win tells that she is with a married man:

Win: I spend the whole weekend at his place in Sussex.
Nell: She fancies his rose garden.
Win: I had to lie down in the back of the car so the neighbors would not see me go in.
Nell: You are kidding.
Win: It was funny.
Nell: Fuck that for a joke.
Win: It was funny.
Marlene: Anyway they would see you in the garden.
Win: The garden has extremely high walls.
Nell: I think I will tell the wife.
Win: Like hell.

Nell: She might leave him and you could have the rose garden. (49, 50, act 2)

This conversation gives definite clues about the condition and changing ideas of women through time and also it is clear that women are acting like a man. This dialogue exemplifies that there is no difference between men and women in terms of their point of view toward relationships between men and women. In the past cheating was thought as men’s behavior and just suitable for them. But now and then there is no clear boundaries and women can also cheats, take pleasure and even likes to be with a man who is married. In this play representation of women is hardly acceptable by society. Because families throughout their life impose them they are women and they have to behave like pretty women. However, in Top Girls Churchill creates different styles of women in order to show different conditions of life as well. Accordingly, women in this play symbolize peevish faces of women. They are women but they behave like men.

A DOLL’S HOUSE BY HENRIK IBSEN

Henrik Johan Ibsen is a major Norwegian playwright largely responsible for the rise of modern realistic drama. He is often referred to as the "father of modern drama." Ibsen is held to be the greatest of Norwegian authors and one of the most important playwrights of all time. His plays are considered scandalous to many of his era, when Victorian values of family life and propriety largely held sway in Europe and any challenge to them is considered immoral and outrageous. However his works examine the realities of social life. Society limits the role of women in every aspect of life. Their life is restricted to in a home by society. The traditional role of women is stated by others and they have to be behind the men.

Like every field, men regulate the life of women by depriving them of individual choice, economic opportunity and intellectual identity. In male-dominated society women cannot reach her goals and they have to accept every limitation of men, especially because of economical problems. Creating their own life by using their real identities is a luxury for women. Because in ancient societies the role of women is to marry firstly and then live a domestic life with husband and children, this is the most rational role of women. This discrimination between men and women also appears in education; women do not have any right to go university or something else. The only job they can do is being a teacher. These restrictions are obstacles for women to gain their real identities. They are always under the control of men without any chance.

Under the name of literature, it is possible to see all these restrictions and the lives of women at those times. For instance in A Doll House, we see lots of women characters, and their suffrages against the men. Firstly, Nora one of the main characters, seems happy in her domestic life. However, her life is restricted to a house, and she cannot see her real identity. She is regulated by her husband, and everything in her life is under the control of her husband. He even thinks instead of Nora. Throughout the play we see that Nora hides her loan from her husband as this is not acceptable and illegal for women at that time. But then she becomes vulnerable to Krogstad’s blackmail. This is also the other reality. In first part, Nora thinks that if she can pay the loan of herself, she can be free. Because it is a secret for her since at that time it is not suitable for a woman to take loan. She wants to escape from this restriction at first. Then she sees that, there are other obstacles for her to gain her freedom. Krogstad, other male character in the play, blackmails Nora, and Nora searches freedom behind Krogstad. She suffers from the male domination in her life because of economical problems. Behind every restriction she seeks another freedom in order to find her real character rather than being a passive housewife, and mother without any identity. In order to realize her ambitions, her beliefs she has to prove herself to the society and to her husband. And at the end of the play, she quits her familial obligations to find her real life by escaping the orders and limitations of her husband.

7 http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/2730977.Henrik_Ibsen
On the surface they have a happy marriage, however; Nora lives a secret life in herself without a man who defines every behavior and thought instead of her. In reality, their marriage is a broken picture. And Nora symbolizes the broken side of this picture. She is not happy, because it is impossible to be happy under the control of someone else. During all her life, Nora is regulated by her father, her husband and because of this passive character, she cannot know the real Nora inside her. So, she cannot be happy without knowing her real character, her wishes, ambitions, and her own limitations. She lives a superficial life without a real persona.

In the play, Linda seems much free than Nora, however, her freedom also is restricted by men, and economical problems. For instance, she leaves Krogstad in order to marry a richer husband although she loves Krogstad, and this is not the real choice of her. Society has control over the female characters in the play. They behave and live without their own decisions. There are some people who think and decide instead of them, and they live according to these real people without their own identity.

Also, the figures and the colors in the house of Nora are representative of her lifestyle. For example, Christmas tree symbolizes her own life. Like an object she stands at one side of the house, there is no other role of her by being a woman in life. She is like an ornamental object in house and in the life of her husband. In reality, she is not a silly woman who has to be controlled by someone else; however, this is the role which is stated as suitable by society. Nora and other female characters play the role not the real life and identity of themselves. So, being an unhappy wife and mother is the normal consequence of this restriction since they are prohibited by men and society to find the real persona in them.

Finally, Nora decides to find her real identity and begins to rebel against both society and men around her. She becomes aware of the truth and leaves her husband by saying that they are not suitable for each other. She destroys the society norms and goes. I think the underlying reality of the play is that nobody can be happy under control of others either society or traditions. A person should be herself/himself to be happy and there could not be such a strong rule or power to make person to fool himself.

In this literary piece, the role of women is exemplified perfectly. During all their life, most of the women are treated like little silly creatures. They are like toys in the hands of men mostly. Nora and Linde are two perfect examples for this thought. In the eyes of society and men they are like dolls. Instead of having some responsibilities, since they are inadequate according to men, they are deprived from all rights and authorities. They are the symbols of inadequacy, incapacity, and unawareness according to that time’s society.

**WOMAN HAS NO NAME BY DUYGU ASENA**

Most people believe that today women get what they want and there is no discrimination between men and women as said. Women did face barriers in the past, and they still face barriers elsewhere in the world. Woman as a symbol is portrayed differently in different cultures. However, all these literary pieces, related to women, share the common fate: they are evaluated as obscene and dangerous for family arrangements since they have a ruining effect on peaceful patriarchal society. Kadının Adı Yok by Duygu Asena is one of these examples which annoy man dominated society.

Duygu Asena was born in Istanbul, Turkey in 1946. Her grandfather was Atatürk's personal secretary. After finishing Kadıköy Private College for Girls, she graduated from Istanbul University with a degree in pedagogy. Duygu Asena began writing in 1972 with her first column published in the newspaper "Hürriyet". From the 1980s onwards, Duygu Asena became a leader of movement for women’s rights and status in Turkey with her publications in the media. She wrote about marriage, inequality and violence against women.8

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One of the most important points related to women is that their only problems are not political or economic firstly. They also argue for the significance of matters traditionally considered private and personal, rather than political, the structure of families, sexual relationships, appearance-related concerns or the words that women use while speaking. For example, in *Kadının Adı Yok*, Işık fights for her identity and freedom. During her childhood she suffers from her oppressive father and conservative society traditions. Whatever she does, is unimportant in the eyes of man dominated society. And they always give effort to eliminate women around their spheres. This point of view whips Işık and she is aware the fact that there is a reason behind her existence. In order to find this reason she leaves home and creates a world by her own. However, it is difficult to escape the marks of past. She starts to think what goes wrong in her life and whether they all are her mistakes or not. She thinks about her father and her childhood and their effects on her. As a consequence what she has is just a lonely and unhappy life.

Writing is a kind of therapy for her to escape from this situation, and it is a way to share her loneliness with other lonely ones. The significance of loneliness includes the fact that it is a common psychological problem and it is tied to a number of well known psychological distress symptoms and problems including depression, low self-esteem and anxiety. Loneliness, also, causes crucial behavioral problems including suicide, alcohol abuse and deteriorated health. So, what is more important than loneliness, are the reasons behind this psychological situation. That is, what drags Işık to this fire, which bad memories are dragged to subconscious and then become the causes of her disaster, are important? It is easy to see that there is emptiness between her inner world and real world.

The common definition of solitude is the state of being alone. But the nature of solitude is complex, since one can be alone in the presence of another person. Solitude encompasses a variety of states that may range from pleasurable to exceedingly painful. In the latter case, it is termed “loneliness”. Loneliness is a psychological situation in which people see themselves in the shape of another person. Like most of psychological situations, loneliness also comes from early childhood. The first six years are very important for child development. Many authors have argued that self-concept is developed very early in childhood and once established, it is enduring. Freudians also state that early childhood is the period self-concept is formed and stabilized. There are stages for the growth of self-concept and during each stage there is a specific task to be accomplished. The satisfactory completion of each stage is necessary to before the next stage to be attempted. So, early childhood has a crucial role for character development. Family effects the development. And when it comes to family, it can be asked what contributions might the family make to children’s feelings of loneliness? Family relations contribute to children’s feelings of loneliness in different ways. For example, children form secure attachments to their parents through positive, reciprocal interactions over time. When attachments with parents are severed by separation, children feel threatened which can be detrimental to their self-esteem and interpersonal relations. One source of separation that is quite common for children is death.

If you complete this period, childhood, successfully, it means it has positive effects on your future. However, if these stages cannot be completed as it should be, bad effects may be seen in later periods. The good memories are kept on conscious level since there is no need to escape them, they are good ones and they are the symbol of successful completion of these stages. But, bad events are kept in subconscious since they are the symbol of grief, anguish, pain and they drag person to the old, bad days. Jastrow defines subconscious as:

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At favorable moments, when the sea of consciousness is unruffled and calm contemplation seems promising, he peers intently into the shadowy depths, and is disappointed to find how little he can distinguish of what lies below the surface, how constantly the waters send back merely the reflection -- partly distorted - of his own familiar features.\(^{13}\)

Sometimes, life is not easy, as it seems. Sometimes, our grievances, pains, and burdens are too much to endure. In these situations, you do not belong to anywhere. Your subconscious is full of pains and you know it is impossible to escape from these burdens. There is no one around to help you or to share your pains. There is only one way for you to slow down your grief and deep screams: confine yourself to a deep loneliness, and write. She asks herself whether she will survive of the loneliness and unhappiness of all those years. A woman's fight for her identity and freedom as a woman can be seen in her screams. In this book woman is portrayed as the symbol of loneliness, but at the same time freedom and independence. Because throughout the novel it is witnessed that Işık does not give in to the pressures by society. Although she is grown up in that society and family, and although she suffers from the consequences of these false beliefs, she is aware that it is a fault and she does her best in order not to make all these faults in her life. However as stated before it is difficult to change the learned behaviors in childhood. Like shadows, they always go after us. As a result of this fact, Işık makes some faults and she is not sure whether they are all her faults or not. At that point she is a woman, who is the victim of false thoughts, past experiences, and dominant society rules.

In conclusion, it is clear that in different cultures woman is portrayed differently. However their representation in literature is the same as in social life. They are always behind the men; suffer from oppressive family arrangements, and restrictive society rules. All these bad effects of environment drag them to write and share their loneliness with other lonely ones. From their writings, we witness a familiar life, since I am a woman, which does not change for centuries. Woman as a symbol is like a double-edged sword; both indications of oppressed, disadvantaged, and injured but at the same time symbol of independence, rebellion and victory.

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