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43-Magical realist elements in postcolonial feminist fiction: a comparative Study of *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm* and *Beloved*

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Abstract

In terms of race, gender, and class hierarchies, the female characters of *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm* and *Beloved* suffer the pressure of being societal outsiders along with patriarchal oppression. This outside pressure leads them to recreate colonization (sometimes a woman can oppress another woman) and sometimes to fight back more in their lives. By analyzing the conflict between the real and the imaginary in both novels, one can understand that it is possible to see suffering and the need for self-discovery by oppressed characters across different times, spaces, and stories. Toni Morrison successfully incorporates magical realist features into her masterpiece *Beloved,* which manifests Black people's tragic history and their difficult lives as a result of racism. Latife Tekin, who is a leading magical realist author in Turkish Literature, presents the problems of Turkish people who have immigrated from rural to urban environments and their strivings for *self-identification* in her novel *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm*. Typical tenets of magical realism are present in both novels, such as non-linear time and space, passing narrative voices, extraordinary events, and traditional beliefs and fantasy. By referring to the magical realist style of narration and postcolonial feminist theory, the aim of this comparison is to observe the common struggles experienced by non-white and non-Western women in todays' world. The aim of the study is to discuss the other side of the hidden and/or distorted realities produced by the oppressors, and to analyze the attendant historical, social, and psychological issues by focusing on female characters.

Keywords: Mimetic reality, Eurocentric feminism, historical heterogeneity, cross-cultural patriarchy

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Öz

Irk, cinsiyet ve sınıf hiyerarşileri açısından bakıldığında, *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm ve Beloved* romanlarının kadın karakterleri ataerkil baskının yanında toplumdan dışlanmış olmanın baskısına da maruz kalmaktadır. Bu dış baskı, onları sömürgeleşmeyi canlandırmaya (bazen bir kadın başka bir kadına da baskı yapabilir) ve bazen hayatlarında daha fazla direnmeye yönlendirir. Her iki romanda da gerçek ve hayali arasındaki çatışmayı analiz ederek, farklı zamanlarda, mekânlarda ve hikâyelerde ezilen karakterlerin acılarını ve kendini keşfetme ihtiyaçlarını görebilmek mümkündür. Toni Morrison, siyah halkın trajik tarihini ve ırkçılık yüzünden yaşadıkları zorlu hayatları ortaya koyan başyapıtı *Beloved*'a, büyülü gerçekçiliğin özelliklerini başarıyla yedirmiştir. Türk Edebiyatının önde gelen büyülü gerçekçi yazarlarından Latife Tekin, *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm* romanında

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köyden kente göç eden Türk insanının sorunlarını ve *kendilerini tanımlama* çabalarını ortaya koymaktadır. Büyülü gerçekçiliğin doğrusal olmayan zaman ve mekân, öyküleyici çatıya geçiş, olağanüstü olaylar, geleneksel inançlar ve hayal gücü gibi tipik ilkeleri her iki romanda da mevcuttur. Çalışmanın amacı, ezen tarafın ürettiği gizli ve/veya çarpıtılmış gerçekliklerin diğer tarafını tartışmak ve buna eşlik eden tarihsel, sosyal ve psikolojik sorunları kadın karakterlere odaklanarak analiz etmektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Öykünmeci gerçeklik, Avrupa merkezci feminizm, tarihsel heterojenlik, kültürler arası ataerkillik

1. Introduction

Language is the cornerstone for the preservation and perpetuation of the collective self-representation of a nation or ethnicity. Magical realism has become a popular narrative style that can achieve this preservation since it combines reality and fantasy together and is not related to an imaginary work of art but something more akin to the real world. The term was first coined by art historian Franz Roh (1925) in his seminal book *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei (Post-Expressionism, Magical Realism: Problems of the Latest European Painting),* in connection with post-expressionist art in the name of criticizing a new era for visual art. Even though he did not use the term magical realism to define literary works, his comments about the binary opposition of reality and fantasy are applicable here as well. Magical realism also crossed the Atlantic and was developed in novels from Latin America as an innovative narrative mode. Latin American writer Alejo Carpentier preferred the term "marvelous" to "magical" for Latin America. This is because, according to Carpentier, what is extraordinary for others is an ordinary situation in Latin America (Özdemir, 2013: 1288). The term magical realism has exhibited global appeal since the 1980s with increasing interest in postcolonial literary studies. Thus, in today's world, the term designates an international narrative mode bringing together different names such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Ben Okri, Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, Orhan Pamuk, Latife Tekin and many others.

Magical realism was first treated as an international phenomenon by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris in their 1995 anthology *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community.* Faris embraces a global perspective, asserting that magical realism is "perhaps the most important contemporary trend in international fiction" (Zamora & Faris, 1995: 1). As such, the book brought together literary texts from different continents and regions, including Europe, Asia, North and South America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Australia. In an effort to define magical realism and capture its multicultural and international dimensions, Zamora and Faris (1995: 7) identified the following five elements that characterize this mode of narration: (i) it originates in the "irreducible element" of magic, (ii) descriptions elaborate a strong prescence of the phenomenal world, (iii) the reader may struggle to perceive reality and magical thoughts, (iv) different realms are integrated, and (v) it disorients and disrupts time, space, and identity. Although this list as defined by Zamora and Faris provides a more precise way to define magical realism, these element may be arguable.

A new critical approach to magical realism was written by Maggie Ann Bowers in 2004 with the publication of her book *Magical Realism*. Bowers provides a detailed definition of magical realism through an exploration of the historical and linguistic backgrounds of the words "marvelous", "magic", and "magical." Bowers also compares and contrasts surrealism and magical realism in order to avoid any confusion between the two terms. She argues that, despite its magical events and qualities, magical

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realism is ultimately a realist approach to the truth because it "...relies most of all upon the matter of fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings. For this reason, it is often considered to be related to, or even a version of literary realism" (Bowers, 2004: 3).

Using these definitions as mentioned above, it is clear that magical realism is the most suitable approach to capture the opposition represented by "double-consciousness". W.E.B Du Bois used the term "double-consciousness" to capture the phenomenon of bicultural identity as experienced by Black Americans. Du Bois strove to convey African American experiences, the "double vision that is the product of the historical dialectic between Black and white cultures" (Noriega-Sanchez, 2002: 35). There is a fixed tension between choosing to join Western society and refusing to do so and thus adopting a world view from a Black perspective. Noriega-Sanchez, in her book *Challenging Realities: Magic Realism in Contemporary American Women's Fiction*, discusses double-consciousness and says that Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor are important women writers who "employ and reshape this Black cultural code in their fiction" (Noriega-Sanchez, 2002: 35). Both embrace the binary opposition experienced by African Americans. The material and the spiritual merge in their stories. Thus, magical realism is the most suitable narrative approach "because it allows the coexistence of opposite world views" (Noriega-Sanchez, 2002: 35). She also asserts that to create a hybrid reality, this double vision is used as a way to adapt to Western culture while preserving their African heritage.

In order to understand the bigger picture of patriarchal and colonial control over the identity of Third World women, and to change the perspective on the hidden truths in Black and Turkish history, the questions this study will address include: What is magical realism and how does it relate to postcolonial feminist theory? What are the features of the two novels that allow one to categorize them as magical realism? How do the features of magical realism help Third World Women to speak out? How does magical realism engage with politics? What are the common non-white and non-Western aspects of Morrison's and Tekin's female characters? How do they deal with the patriarchal control over them? What makes some female characters become violent against their families? Who and/or what is the colonizing power in Morrison's and Tekin's context?

1.1. Magical realism and Turkish literature

Although American Literature has been using magical realism as a tool to debate their own social and political issues, Turkish Literature has shown remarkable development in expanding its own typology in the closing decades of the twentieth century. In the early 1980s, Turkish literature introduced readers to magical realism through "the remarkable novels of Latife Tekin, Nazlı Eray, Buket Uzuner, and Aslı Erdoğan and Orhan Pamuk whose works have been translated into several major languages, especially English" (Halman, 2013: 122). The entrance of the magical realist genre to Turkish Literature is considered to have opened a new window onto world literature with novels such as *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm* (Dear Shameless Death)*, Berci-Kristin Çöp Masalları* (Berci-Kristin Garbage Tales) and *Buzdan Kılıçlar* (The Swords of Ice), *Beyaz Kale* (The white Castle), *Cevdet Bey ve Oğulları* (Cevdet Bey and Sons), *Sessiz Ev* (The Silent House).

Although some Turkish novels were written in the late nineteenth century, it was not until the 1980s that a substantial canon of Turkish novels started to develop. Jale Parla (2008), in her article "The Wounded Tongue: Turkey's Language Reform and the Canonicity of the Novel," explains the importance of language reform for developing a novelistic canon in Turkey. Parla implies that the novel in Turkey has been traditionally used as an instrument for social reform. For example, it was a

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tool to educate Turkish people about social and political reforms during the passage from the Ottoman Empire to a nation-state. In discussing magical realism in Turkey, she notes that the literary works of Orhan Pamuk and Latife Tekin are ground-breaking in their language usage and style of writing, "although of very different temperaments, both writers are iconoclasts whose literary idioms match the innovative and subversive content of their work" (Parla, 2008).

While there are few analyses of Latife Tekin and her first novel *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm,* it is acknowledged that her workis a continuation of Yaşar Kemal's prose from the 1950s.[2] This novel challenges hegemonic institutions and discourses in Turkish culture, such as patriarchy, forms of male-dominance, and the accepted and adopted ignorance among people. "Tekin invented a highly personal, fabricated, and poetic style to express deprivation and demonstrate how subalterns would speak if they could. The have-nots could avenge themselves on the haves by indulging in a tongue richer than the sterilely correct, educated idiom of the republican elite" (Parla, 2008). With its natural style and depiction of reality, *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm* is an authentic story of the millions that migrated from villages to urban spaces. It is at once a novel of universal themes, such as the meanings of femininity, masculinity, childhood and humanity, and a distinctly local novel as expressed through its language and stories. While offering in some ways a conventional reading experience, in the subtext, the reader is occasionally exposed to harsh criticisms of urban life, power, religion, and male-centered society.

Toni Morrison deftly makes use of statistical and historical events, placing bits and pieces of documentary reality into her stories. In fact, "her novels are rich with statistical figures on Black migration, on employment, on lynching or cases of violence against Black Americans that shocked public opinion worldwide, like Emmet Till's murder or the bomb in the Birmingham church" (Scarpa, 1991). *Beloved* is an example of documentary realism, "as it draws inspiration from the many cases of infanticide that occurred in order to prevent children born in captivity from suffering like her parents" (Scarpa, 1991: 91). According to Helene Moglen in her article "Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's *'Beloved'*" (1993), Morrison had an interest in the "female form of love" since she was influenced by two historical figures: Margaret Garner and an eighteen-year-old girl who left her lover to escape but got shot by him. For Morrison "'the best thing that is in us is also the thing that makes us sabotage ourselves". In considering 'what it is that compels a good woman to displace hers*elf*,' Morrison imagined the psychic selves of her historical subjects not as integral and whole, but rather as internally divided. Projecting the self as other to itself-as 'a twin or a thirst or a friend" (Moglen, 1993: 23).

2. Postcolonialsim and feminism

Language is a powerful tool for expressing *self*. Without language, no written or oral literary work could come into being. Thus, in order to speak out for their rights, articulate suffering, and assert their existence, women should write. Although the term"feminism" has long been in use, there is still no standard definition of it. It is not surprising then that feminist scholars also have trouble arriving at a single, common definition of feminism. When the writer Rebecca West was asked to define the concept in 1913, her frank response showed the confusion about the term: "I myself have never been able to find out what feminism is; I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute." In its most basic sense, feminism can be framed as a search for equality in social, economic, political, and judicial platforms. Nonetheless, it is still an insufficient term by which to refer to the multiple efforts to achieve full equality between men and

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[2]   See also Çur (2005), Emir (2011), Diler (2011), Bakan (2017), Özcan, (2015), Özates, (2017), Öktemgil Turgut (2003). Türkmenoğlu (2015), Uğurlu (2008).

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women around the world. According to Trinh Minh-ha, in her book *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Post-coloniality and Feminism* (1989)*,* feminist discourse is not adequate to represent the categories of woman and race all at once. Based on Trinh's approach to feminism and ethnicity, Suleri, in her article *"Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition"* (1992) questions whether a new type of language can be used to better express the inseparability of race from feminism and ethnicity. Thus, Postcolonial Feminism came out of a need for articulation by women born and living outside of privileged continents like Europe.

2.1. Third world feminism

Along with its extraordinary narrative style (such as the use of metaphor, simile, exaggeration, symbolism, repetition, local literature, irony, paradox, and mysticism), magical realism also requires some research on postcolonial and postcolonial feminist discourse since it also covers reality in an objective way, describes the *self*, and gives the reader more details about the history of the characters from the *other's* perspective. Postcolonial theory focuses on the attempts of colonizers to distort the realities of colonized peoples in order to have total control over them. It is also concerned with the production of literature by subalterns, as it is the only way they can speak out and let other people see events from the *other's side*. Postcolonial Feminist Theory, which is also known as Third World Feminism, mainly deals with the issues of non-white and non-Western women in postcolonial settings as they contend with the long-term effects of colonialism and racism. The notion of the common oppression of women was seen as a strong unifier for women of different classes and races. The concept that 'sisterhood is global' has led to many cross-cultural analyses of patriarchy. However, when the explicit differences of women were acknowledged, Third World women were suddenly identified as non-Western and non-white, thus marking them *as other*. Putting all Third World Women into one frame and treating them in the same way, for example from the same upper or lower classes, "had the effect of removing agency from Third World women, often seeing them as passive victims of barbaric and primitive practices (Mohanty, 1988)".

2.2. Eurocentric feminism

In "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference", Audre Lorde points out the position of woman by comparing Western European women to others. She explains the simplistic vision of Western European history which has enabled us to see human differences as binary opposites such as dominant-subordinate, good-bad, up-down, superior-inferior. According to Lorde, human needs are not the primary method of defining the good, but the obtained profit by the definition, thus "there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women" (Lorde, 1984: 114).

Another critical approach to Eurocentric feminism is offered by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, notably in her landmark article "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1988). Mohanty (1988) argues that "…Western feminist writing discursively colonize[s] the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular third world woman-an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse". Hence, she asserts that Western feminism and the continuation of colonialist discourse are interrelated with each other vis à vis the Third World woman. She remarks on the tendency to present and code the Third

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World woman as the absolute victim of male domination and traditional cultural practices. In this case, Western feminism functions as the norm concerning the judgment of the Third World.

Speaking of subaltern voices in literature, Spivak (1994) urged Third World women to fight for their rights. For her, it is the Western elites that oppress women in the developing countries. In her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she writes, "between patriarch and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of 'the third world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (Spivak, 1994: 102). Based on this perspective, this study will analyze not only oppressed African American women but also Turkish women who suffer from traditional and cultural underestimation as well as the harsh political effects on their place in society. For example, *othering* women in the family and refusing them the opportunity to work outside the home, while still benefiting from them in every way are basic problems which have not yet been overcome in Turkish society. Beyond these, it is Turkish women that continually oppress other women and label them negatively in order to protect their family and children. Atiye, the mother, does not let Dirmit see her 'blonde' girlfriend again and she accuses Dirmit of nearly becoming a prostitute like the blonde one (Tekin, 1983).

Non-Western and non-white women have very different problems compared to Western women. For example, they are poorer and generally live in harsher conditions. In the article, "Women and the State in the Third World", Shirin Rai focuses on the relationship between women and the state in light of Third World Feminist approaches and the specific differences faced by Western and Third World women. She claims that the state should be brought back into the discussion of Third World Women's lives. In particular, Rai (1995) argues that the common notion of the state is West-centered and that the effects of the postcolonial state on the lives of Third World women are not sufficiently understood. According to Rai, the major divergence is that Third World women do not engage with the state as forcefully as Western women. She suggests that "the lack of education, economic vulnerability, weak infrastructural social support and unavailability of information leave women in these states more dependent upon their own resources which in themselves are meagre" and maintains that "because of the deep 'embeddedness' of most Third World states in the civil society, Third World women experience pressures from and in both areas of their lives" (Rai, 1995: 402). Rai additionally indicates that the state has an important role in making women's civil and state life easier or harder. While Western women can obtain state protection after feminist activism, it is not the case for Third World women since it is often the state itself that violates women in these countries. The economic condition of the female characters of Morrison and Tekin can provide examples of this situation. While the Aktaş family, in *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm*, makes an effort to adapt to urban life, the economic struggle they face lowers their living standard. Its negative impact on women are even worse since Huvat, the father, and the sons in the family forbid Nuğber, the elder daughter, and Atiye, the mother, to work. Thus, they live in one room altogether.

Georgina Waylen, in her article "Analyzing women in the politics of the Third World" (1997), draws attention to the erroneous generalization of the experiences of Black, working-class, and Third World women to those of Western women. The common understanding of "women's interest" accepted by all women without thinking about their race, class, and sexuality has become highly criticized. According to Waylen, there are three primary factors helping to breakdown this general global theorizing. First, Black women have posed a challenge to the work of white feminists because many of the analyses by white women "were imbued with racist and ethnocentric assumptions, again generalizing the

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experience of white feminists to Black women". Second, after the discussion on 'equality versus difference', the importance of gender and sex differences lost its importance and, in some places, sexual differences have become something to celebrate. Following this, the core problem was shown to be not the debate about difference but rather how one deals with the social construction of difference. "Third, the feminist challenge to mainstream theorizing has been paralleled by the post-structuralist and post-modern critiques of the universal grand frameworks which characterized enlightenment thought and has heralded the end of the meta-narrative" (Waylen, 1997).

3. Two canonical magical realists: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Latife Tekin's *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm*

Magical realism helps the reader to empathize with the *Other* within the text itself. The language of magical realism represents not a "mimetic reality" but "the complex felt experience of human beings" (Hemminger, 1999: 223). Though it is accepted as international, it still holds the local features of the culture from which it was produced. As such, through its use of particular local yet universal language, it is a good representative of international and cultural problems experienced by different ethnicities, races, nations, and sexes. The language of magical realism mainly works as a method of storytelling which leads the reader to focus on the story while trying to capture the hidden realities. Thus, through its extraordinary language, it is the reader who is supposed to reveal the mystical and the mysterious in these fictions. In other words, the fiction does not just aim to tell a story, but also to expose the reader to the truth which is hidden intentionally by an oppressor, which can be a colonizer, a male-dominated society, or both. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Latife Tekin's *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm* are two canonical magical realist texts that differ from each other in terms of race, class, ethnicity, and history. However, what they have in common is that both treat the supernatural as an ordinary occurrence in daily life and scatter bits and pieces of reality throughout their stories. In fact, both writers were inspired by their own experiences or those of a person around them. For example, Morrison writes about the Margaret Garner incident of 1856, which led to one of the most well-known runaway slave trials of the pre-Civil War era. From the words that Tekin uses on her book's cover, it is understood that the character of Dirmit is based on herself. Dirmit is the only child in the Aktaş family that studies. Her family constantly restricts her since studying and insists that having an imaginary world are not appropriate for a girl. Her immense imagination causes her to be labelled as "jinned" and alienated from her society and family. Her struggle against these restrictions and to find her*self* can be compared with that of Denver in Morrison's *Beloved*. Both characters are limited, however, they are daughters, girls, individuals who try to grow up in a healthy way.

4. Conclusion

The experiences of women from once colonized countries is far different from those of white, European women. The needs and the expectations of Third World women are different from white women. Thus, this paper focused on two specific women writers, , Morrison and Tekin, who deal with Third World Women's oppression rather than with Eurocentric white Women's civil rights. Morrison, as a Black writer, is a leading figure in the field of Black Feminism in as much as her novels primarily deal with what is not told by slave owners and colonizers. Latife Tekin, a Turkish writer who is neither counted as white nor a person of color, is an important voice who criticized the political and social issues in her country, particularly after the coup, with a focus on the constructed identity of Turkish women and their political and economic difficulties. Therefore, by comparing and contrasting the

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magical language in their novels and the female character's experiences in both societies, this study will reveal basic questions that have persisted for a long time.

A Nobel prize-winning American author, Toni Morrison successfully incorporates magical realist features into her masterpiece *Beloved,* which manifests Black people's tragic history and their difficult lives as a result of racism. Latife Tekin, who is a leading magical realist author in Turkish Literature, presents the problems of Turkish people who have immigrated from rural to urban environments and their strivings for *self-identification* in her novel *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm*. Typical tenets of magical realism are present in both novels, such as non-linear time and space, passing narrative voices, extraordinary events, and traditional beliefs and fantasy. The female characters of *Beloved* and *Sevgili Arsız Ölüm* each try to find their *self* and achieve freedom from the oppressions under which they live. The feeling of *Otherness* and being the second—or even sometimes the third sex—is one of the main issues. As a result of traditional beliefs and individual restrictions, gaining self-autonomy is a significant struggle for the female characters of the two works. The female characters in both works experience mother-daughter issues, internal and external conflicts, and patriarchal and cultural oppression. The mother characters, Sethe and Asiye, are always in a struggle to carry on living, and to support and protect their beloveds while in search of their *self*. The daughter characters, Denver and Dirmit, are sometimes peevish, avid and rebellious; however, one way or another they still become victims of their society. By analyzing the conflict between the real and the imaginary in both novels, one can understand that it is possible to see suffering and the need for self-discovery by oppressed characters across different times, spaces, and stories.

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