

27.Semiological analysis of obsession in Annie Ernaux's "*Passion Simple*": etude of a dysphoric masculinity

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Abstract

Annie Ernaux, one of the influential female authors of French literature, has become the focal point of the interdisciplinary studies of the 20th century, due to the sociological background of her writings. The simplicity of her language and the strikingness of her realism make the author popular in both individual and social identity studies. In her writings, she conveys to her readers with all sincerity: the woman, the conflict between generations, briefly being the other in a community and the burden it brings. In her novel "*Passion simple*" (Eng. Simple Passion), the author describes her interest and passion for a married man with all its simplicity and realism in an autobiographical structure. In the novel, Ernaux reveals forbidden love, obsession, the logic of irrationality, the conflict of power and willpower. For this reason, the novel in question has been examined in a social and psychological context where woman is at the centre. The aim of this study is to deal with the other part of the narrative, the man. In the context of the "Masculinities" theories put forward by R.W. Connell, it is aimed to reveal the structure of this other less-mentioned hero of the novel and the obsession it carries in the light of semiotic data. After the analysis of the hero as an individual, it is envisaged to explain and provide the role of this character, who is the focus of passion, in the social structure. In this context, it will be important to examine the adaptation of the man in the novel to gender roles, his contribution to the definition of this role, and how the intersection of culture and identity structures the phenomenon of masculinity. Consequently, the article, drawing on sociologically informed concept of masculinity, aims at bringing a new dimension to the gender-oriented literary criticism on the novel that has hitherto revolved around women, by offering reading focused on the constitution of the identities of men.

Keywords: masculinities, gender, patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity

Annie Ernaux'nun "*Yalın Tutku*" adlı eserinde saplantının göstergebilimsel analizi: disforik bir erkeklik etüdü

Öz

Annie Ernaux, yazılarının içerdiği sosyolojik altyapı nedeniyle, Fransız edebiyatı alanında, XX. Yüzyılın disiplinler arası çalışmalarının odak noktası hâline gelmiştir. Sade anlatım dili ve gerçekçiliğinin çarpıcılığı, yazarı hem bireysel hem de toplumsal kimlik çalışmalarında popüler kılmaktadır. Yazılarında kadını, kuşaklar arası çatışmayı, kısaca bir topluluğun içinde öteki olmayı ve bunun getirdiği yükü tüm samimiyetiyle okuyucusuna aktarır. "*Passion simple*" (tr. *Yalın Tutku*) isimli romanında yazar, otobiyografik bir yapıda, evli bir erkeğe duyduğu ilgi ve tutkuyu tüm sadeliği ve gerçekçiliği ile betimlemektedir. Romanda Ernaux, yasak aşkı, saplantıyı, mantıksızlığını

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mantığını, güç ve iradesizliğin çatışmasını gözler önüne sermektedir. Mevzubahis roman bu sebeple kadının merkeze alındığı toplumsal ve psikolojik bir bağlamda irdelenmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı ise anlatıdaki diğer parça olan erkeğin ele alınmasıdır. R.W. Connell tarafından ortaya atılmış "Erkeklikler" teorileri bağlamında romanın az bahsedilen bu diğer kahramanının yapısı ve yarattığı saplantı göstergebilimsel verilerin ışığında ortaya çıkarmak hedeflenmektedir. Birey olarak erkek kahramanın çözümlenmesinin akabinde tutkunun odağı olan bu karakterin toplumsal yapılanmadaki rolünün izahı ve sağlaması öngörülmektedir. Romandaki erkeğin toplumsal cinsiyet rollerine uyumu, bu rolün tanımlanmasına olan katkısı, kültür ve kimlik kesişiminin erkeklik olgusunu nasıl yapılandırdığının irdelenmesi bu bağlamda önemli olacaktır. Bu sayede roman üstüne yapılmış kadın odaklı cinsiyet rolleri çalışmalarına katkı yapılması, bütünlüyci bir destek sağlanması ve sosyoloji alanında erkek cinsiyeti üzerine yapılan çalışmalarda edebiyatın destekleyici yönünün ortaya konması planlanmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: erkeklikler, cinsiyet, patriyarka, hegemonik erkeklik

Annie Ernaux is one of the most talked about French writers of the 20th century because of the themes she addresses in her novels and the way she conveys them. Born in France in 1940, the author has made a name for herself in the literary world with the books she has published since the 1980s. The first reason for this is that she tends to write autobiographically rather than in a novelistic style. Autobiographical elements are always more attractive to readers than fiction. Another reason for the reader's attention is the themes she favours in her autobiographical works. "In the landscape of contemporary French literature, Annie Ernaux occupies a very prominent place, first by her abundant production; because it has been rewarded with numerous prizes and scientifically commented on afterwards; because she realized this paradox of being sometimes praised or slandered [...] finally, by her strange claim to 'remain', according to her own words, in a certain way, 'below literature'" (Bajomé & Dor, 2011) Ernaux, who comes from a lower class family, mainly tells the story of her family's social advancement in her writings. These stories are mostly a process in which the author also examines her childhood. This process, by the way, she calls "La Honte" (The Shame), which will also be the title of her book. She does not prefer to change her family structure and her childhood with a cheerful nostalgia, revealing herself with all her transparency. Later, the books about her marriage, love and sex life will be published. These books, like their predecessors, have a very realistic, hard and at the same time simple narrative structure. If we consider the gender conjuncture of the eighties, the self-description of a woman with such a clear voice caused scandalous discussions. These discussions will not end here, but will flare up even more with the novel "l'Événement" (Happening), in which the author recounts the events that happened to her during the abortion she had, which is on the agenda today, especially in the United States. Another factor that ignites the discussions in question is the author's writing style. The fact that Ernaux removed realism from the artistic language of literature in describing these situations and did not aim to make the reader experience a moral catharsis also provoked criticism and brought her to the centre of gender studies. The form of writing she chose, which is called 'écriture blanche' (simple/plain writing), is non-judgmental, non-comparative, and free of metaphors; it appears as a neutral narrative (Rouhana, 2008) that does not evaluate events. "Thus, his laconic, pithy, concise, stripped down, simple, flat, plain language takes on another dimension and becomes a bitter criticism of patriarchal society through a language masked by irony[...]" (Aksoy Alp, 2016) In this sense, the raw material obtained from the author's books can be studied in a scientific framework, both in literary and sociological terms. In this context, the author's short novel "Simple Passion" is examined in this study to investigate gender and masculinity. In "Simple Passion", the author describes her interest and passion for a married man with all its simplicity and realism in an autobiographical structure. In the novel Ernaux reveals the forbidden

love, the obsession, the logic of irrationality, the conflict of power and willpower. In the general and short narrative of the book, the author describes her meetings with the mentioned married man and the periods between these meetings. In this sense, the inner world of the author and her narrative were studied in the field of literature with the concepts of obsession and femininity, which are the main themes of the novel. Social and psychological studies in which women are the main focus always appear in a literature review. The purpose of this study is to look at the other part of the narrative, the man. Within the framework of R.W. Connell's theories of "masculinities," the structure and obsession he creates with this other, less mentioned hero of the novel will be revealed in light of semiotic data. After analysing the hero as an individual, the role of this character, who is at the centre of the passion, in the social structure will be explained and presented. In this context, it will be important to examine the adaptation of the man in the novel to gender roles, his contribution to the definition of this role, and the way in which the intersection of culture and identity structures the phenomenon of masculinity. In this way, it is hoped to contribute to women-oriented studies of gender roles in the novel, provide integrative support, and demonstrate the supportive aspect of literature in studies of male gender in the field of sociology.

The first data presented to us semiotically are the "amorce" (primer) given by the title of the book. "Passion simple" is juxtaposed and describes two opposing concepts. If we look at this dichotomous structure, the term Passion emerges with the definition of "a very powerful feeling, for example of sexual attraction, love, hate, anger or other emotion." together with the term Simple, which is defined as "easy, not difficult" (Cambridge). If we look at the structures of the two protagonists in the novel, we can assume that the terms simple and passion are attributed to them, as the female character herself explains:

"FROM SEPTEMBER last year, I did nothing else but wait for a man: for him to call me and come round to my place. [...] Words, sentences, and even my laugh, formed on my lips without my actually thinking about it or wanting it. In fact I have only vague memories of the things I did, the films I saw, the people I met. I behaved in an artificial manner. The only actions involving willpower, desire, and what I take to be human intelligence (planning, weighing the pros and cons, assessing the consequences) were all related to this man [...]" (Ernaux, 1993)

The depth of the relationship between the concept of passion and the heroine is conveyed to the reader right at the beginning of the novel. Later, when the hero, who is the object of obsession in the story, is first presented, he is mentioned as follows:

"He liked Yves Saint-Laurent suits, Cerruti ties, and powerful cars. He drove fast, flashing his headlights, without a word, as if carried away by the exhilaration of being free, well-dressed, and in a position of authority on a French motorway, he who came from Eastern Europe." (Ernaux, 1993)

With this expression Ernaux occasionally informs the reader how plain and simple is the man who is actually the source of her passion. We witness the association of the man in the story with the term "simple" in the title. The description of the man is not presented as a whole, but emerges throughout the narrative. In this sense, the reader experiences the same expectation as Ernaux, created by the occasional rendezvous of the man whose name is avoided mentioning because he is married. The reader has the opportunity to meet the male character as Ernaux describes her whenever she has the opportunity to meet him. The male character is thus in an easy position, both in terms of her structure and the narrative about her. As a result, one can speak of the simplicity of the man rather than the simplicity of the passion mentioned. In order to better analyse the male figure, it would be appropriate to first summarise these scattered, abbreviated and repetitive descriptions. Known as A., this male character, formerly served in Havana, travels the world for work, closes his eyes when kissing, meets

with Ernaux only at home for sexual purposes, does not send letters as a precaution specific to married men but contacts her only by telephone, is about thirty-eight years old, well-dressed man from one of the Eastern Bloc countries, who loves cars, speed and dominance on the motorway, likes to be compared to Alain Delon, prefers to watch sporting events and Santa Barbara on TV, drinks heavily, staggers, burps when kissing, does not gesticulate, has no children despite his wife's wishes. Besides all these descriptions, she also states that: "From the very beginning, and throughout the whole of our affair, I had the privilege of knowing what we all find out in the end: the man we love is a complete stranger." (Ernaux, 1993) In this short quotation, many interesting key words catch the eye. The words: privilege, at the end, we and the stranger point to a male enigma that every single person in society encounters at some point, without knowing his origins, approves of this self-created man and appreciates him for being as brutal as he is. If we make an isotopic grouping from the descriptions of the character, examine the structure of the hero in the context of ethnicity and identity, the reflection of psycho-linguistic function in the context of gender in the character, the projection of interest in cars and sports and sex life will give a holistic picture about the character in the context of theories of masculinity.

Firstly, it seems necessary to address Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity. A number of conflicts that arose in male relationships in the 1980s highlighted the need for a distinction and showed that some men were uncomfortable with the role of 'hegemonic masculinity'. At this point, Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as "white, middle class, heterosexual, middle-aged man with a full-time job". (Connell, 2005) On the outer periphery of these elements, there is also violence, sport and sex as support. This definition shapes the "standard man" after the French Revolution.

When we examine the male hero using this definition, we first learn that A. comes from an Eastern Bloc country. Although for reasons of confidentiality it is not stated which country it is, in the context of ethno-gender this information gives us some cultural foreshadowing: The economic development in post-communist countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of the GNI has contributed to these countries becoming closer to the West in terms of socio-cultural background in relation to gender roles. However, the developing economy and capitalism have unfortunately reinforced gender segregation in these countries and led to women being defined as wives and sexual symbols. Because of this, cases of domestic violence have increased in a social structure where women are seen as objects in the home. And not only the structure of men, but also the boys who have witnessed this violence in the family have changed in gender role structures under a bad pedagogy of violence. Catalin Fabian's 2010 study on domestic violence policies in post-communist Europe states, among other things:

"Gender inequality and the socially constructed division between the public and private spheres have long shielded domestic violence. Although communist societies ordered (male) privilege and the division of public and private differently from other political systems, they did not collapse these traditional hierarchies. On the contrary [...] the patriarchal heritage of the communist period not only survived but was often transformed and strengthened due to increased interactions with the contemporary international environment." (Fabian, 1999)

From this perspective, we can assume that the gender doctrine that shapes A. is hierarchical and male-centred. Even if we assume that he did not grow up in such an environment at the micro level, the gender politics he is exposed to at the macro level is entirely situated in a violent patriarchal system. For this reason, it is necessary to consider the tendency to conform to his environment. According to Pleck's paradigm of male gender role identity (Levant & Richmond, 2016), it is necessary to consider functionalist gender role theory in individuals who are standardised in terms of gender roles. Accordingly, there is a strong link between norm and personality. This results in normative gender role politics, where the desire to conform to gender role norms promotes psychological conformity. A.' In

this sense, one can say that on a conscious or unconscious level he feels the need to take on the normative male role. His gender structure coincides with Connell's definition. Therefore, we can admit that A. is the standard and simple man.

Secondly, we witness the reflection of the psycho-linguistic aspect of this man's alien nature. In the short novel A. has little to no voice of his own and always narrated through a mediator. We may interpret this narrative strategy in two main axes: the first one is Ernaux's special narrative which overlays on socio-auto-fiction. This term refers to a novel or a story that has direct connection with sociology, uses its data and is written as a first-person narrative and that commonly presents itself fictionally as an autobiography of the narrator or as an episode within such an autobiographical account. (Oxford Reference) She prefers describing events without the help of third part elements which can eventually cause a rupture in the true-life reality versus the recollection reality. As she declares, she always wants to remain loyal to what her memory serves her and not to the pure reality that she may fracture involuntarily. "I use my subjectivity to find, reveal mechanisms or more general, collective phenomena." (Ernaux, 2003) As a result, she prefers to describe A. rather than giving him a voice as she will be dictating his reflectional monologues and dialogues that she has no intention of doing. On the other hand, male silence is a common notion to understand patriarchal organisation. Inter-male relations often forbid men to reveal and express themselves on an emotional platform, in order to achieve the virile position for which hegemonic masculinities are longing. Also, women tend to overlook male emotions if they represent certain danger towards the couple integrity in terms of security both on mental and physical levels. Bell Hooks describes this as:

"We construct a culture where male pain can have no voice, where male hurt cannot be named or healed. It is not just men who do not take their pain seriously. Most women do not want to deal with male pain if it interferes with the satisfaction of female desire. When feminist movement led to men's liberation, including male exploration of "feelings," some women mocked male emotional expression with the same disgust and contempt as sexist men. Despite all the expressed feminist longing for men of feeling, when men worked to get in touch with feelings, no one really wanted to reward them. In feminist circles men who wanted to change were often labeled narcissistic or needy. Individual men who expressed feelings were often seen as attention seekers, patriarchal manipulators trying to steal the stage with their drama." (hooks, 2004)

In this matter, not only A.'s silence can be interpreted as one of the elements of being a simple man, positioned by the patriarchy and also by himself in the hegemonic system to underline his virile qualities once more, it can also be examined from the feminine view, in this case, Ernaux's implicit consideration about A. In this unilateral obsession, A.'s needs and feelings are rather unnecessary compared to Ernaux's own self-destructive yet demanding turbulence.

Next, we must try to understand the connection of passion and obsession between this standard masculinity and Ernaux. Ernaux, who is defined as a feminist writer, shows his father through the incident she calls us shame in the same standard masculinity model. The fact that two standard men have such different resonances is also a point worth exploring. At this point, it would be appropriate to consider the concepts of Forced and symbolic obedience under the title of habitus in Pierre Bourdieu's Male Domination. Symbolic obedience, resulting from the hierarchical model of relationships that the person prefers to build, is more dangerous, than forced obedience in which the pressure comes from physical and financial power, factors that lead the person to obey, such as parenthood. (Bourdieu, 2002) Because of her extreme passion, Ernaux appears in this symbolic obedience system with a desire to please A. both physically and mentally. She is satisfied by believing that she has a victory over his masculinity through the story of another friend cheating on his wife. The passion at stake does not

disappear, even if it blurs towards the end of the book. This achievement is described as a luxury for Ernaux:

“When I was a child, luxury was fur coats, evening dresses, and villas by the sea. Later on, I thought it meant leading the life of an intellectual. Now I feel that it is also being able to live out a passion for a man or a woman.” (Ernaux, 1993)

If we look at it from the perspective of domination and obedience, we see that Ernaux, who rejects the forced obedience that comes from all kinds of socio-economic conditions (for example, from his father), affirms and internalises symbolic obedience. Christian Baudelot in his analysis, also underlines the fact that this habitus that resides in the psyche of Ernaux was not only shaped through men with whom she involved romantically but rather is a primal issue:

“There is between Bourdieu and Annie Ernaux common points of view and analysis on social reality and class relations that it is impossible to reduce to the effects of reading or borrowings [...] This n It is not by reading books that habits and visions of the world are forged but under the multiple pressures of daily life, pressures exerted since early childhood and which are indelibly inscribed in the body.” (Baudelot, 2004)

In summary, Ernaux's description of passion and the way she reveals it to the public, once understood in the context, shifted to a more complex socio-critique. Naturally, the first comment was on author's female identity, without generalising and attaching it to the intellectual and/or common sorority; at times she was applauded for her courage and other times vilified for her audacity. From this sense, we see both male and female identities on a highly gendered narration of events without the revelation of their qualificative adjectives without further examination and interdisciplinary analysis. Nevertheless, the universe she created in this novel with its bold and graphic narration, could create a genuine, static duo who was placed in a natural and real environment. The male hero, identified with the role of the simple in the title, is shown to have a simple and standardised structure in relation to masculinity. His social role is quite normative within the framework of hegemonic masculinities and is reinforced and consolidated by Ernaux at both the macro and micro levels, but it is not permanent. A's possession of virile qualities, from his nationality, his character to his hobbies, described by Ernaux in the novel, reveal a lithic compound which can place him in the construction of male gender identity. The gender role structure constructed through acculturation causes a dysphoric identity and cannot qualify the word passion at this point. Ernaux, who is the architect of her own passion, stays away from simplicity. The simplicity and passion she has created in her book, the unapologetic female voice and language she uses, along with the confession that she accepts obedience, add to the contrasts between men and women. This linguistic and narrative context in which she has created the intersection of feminism and masculinism at the same time also creates the ultimate dichotomy that positions Ernaux and Simple Passion in a different place within the framework of gender studies in literature.

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