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Unruly Female Characters in Augusta Webster's Selected Poetry

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ABSTRACT

With her unfaltering dedication to fight against patriarchal convictions in Victorian Britain, Augusta Webster (1837-1894) is featured as a groundbreaking activist poet who grapples steadfastly with the problems of gender discrimination and dualistic constructions of womanhood. At the center of Webster's feminist agenda are Victorian women's educational and suffrage rights, equal employment opportunities and economic freedom. Webster's reformist character is profoundly manifested in her choice of nonconformist, radical female characters as the spokesperson of her ideas, who are condemned and marginalized by the Victorian society. The main concentration of this study, hence, is to analyze these maverick female characters in "Medea in Athens", "A Castaway", and "Sister Annuciata" to unravel Webster's political, activist impetus to destabilize dichotomous conceptualizations of womanhood, either as the angel in the house or the fallen woman in Victorian society.

Keywords: *Augusta Webster, Fallen Women, Patriarchy*

Augusta Webster'ın Şiirlerinde Asi Kadın Karakterler

ÖZET

Viktorya dönemi ataerkil düşünce sistemine karşı açtığı kararlı savaşla, Augusta Webster (1837-1894), cinsiyet ayrımcılığı ve dualist kadın kavramı inşası gibi konularla uğraşan, aktivist bir kadın şair olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Kadınların eğitim ve oy hakları, eşit iş fırsatı ve ekonomik özgürlükleri gibi konular, Webster'in feminist ajendasının merkezinde yer almaktadır. Webster'ın reformcu kişiliğini ortaya çıkaran en belirgin unsur, eserlerinde kendi fikirlerinin sözcüsü olarak, Viktorya toplumu tarafından kınanmış ve marjinalleştirilmiş, radikal kadın karakterlerini seçmiş olmasıdır. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmanın temel amacı, "Medea in Athens", "A Castaway", ve "Sister Annunciata" eserlerindeki başına buyruk kadın karakterleri inceleyerek, Webster'ın kadınların ya mükemmel ya da düşmüş olarak ikili bir şekilde kavramsallaştırılmasının önüne geçmeye çalışan, politik, aktivist yönünü ortaya çıkarmaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Augusta Webster, Düşmüş Kadın, Ataerkil*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Albeit being "one of the most politically active and informed writers of her generation", Augusta Webster has not gathered ample critical attention as much as her female contemporaries such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Bronte sisters till the end of the 20th century (Olverson, 2010, p. 27). Webster goes boisterously against the moral paradigms of the Victorian society which are premised upon a firm exercise of double standards precluding women from having an equal access to social, educational, financial, and legal rights. As Olverson notes, an access to "knowledge, was for much of the nineteenth century, more exclusive than inclusive" (2010, p. 3) Webster quite ambitiously and prolifically is committed to unveiling this ostentatious sanctimoniousness of Victorian set of values which deny women any space of freedom to exert their agency. As Leighton also affirms, Webster "was a lifelong campaigner for women's suffrage (though she failed to convert Christina Rossetti to her cause) as well as for women's education" (1989, p. 122). As a poet, translator, journalist, dramatist, and suffragist, Webster challenges the bigoted ideological constructions of Victorian society which has a strong tendency to leave women at the shadow of men and isolate them from the mainstream social and cultural life. Katherine Newey considers Webster's career as "breathless", full of accomplishments including poetry and "a novel (*Lesley's Guardians* under the pseudonym "Cecil Home"), published translations of some of the major Greek tragedies in the literary canon, and wrote journalism and literary criticism for the *Examiner* and the *Athena*" (2011, p. 128).

Apart from adopting characters from classical stories in addressing to the Victorian audience, Webster also translates classical texts into English. The story of the Greek tragedy, Euripides' *Medea* is translated into English by Webster in 1868 (Gregory, 2011, p. 28). Bearing the limited availability of education offered to women in Victorian society in mind, Webster's self-taught accomplishment in Latin and Greek is highly-esteemed peculiarity which is rarely found among women of Victorian Britain. That is because, Victorian education system gives license solely for boys to get hold of "culture and power" that can be attained by the classical education which is underlined by Dorothy Mermin as a "magic key" to the intellectual world of Victorian society that "naturally wished to keep women out of the club" (1993, p. 51). In addition to the scarcity of schools for girls, the quality of education given in these schools is estimated to be largely low-scaled. Deborah Gorham notes that the "curriculum offered in most such schools was designed to provide a basic English education, with exposure to general knowledge in the areas of literature, history and geography", and further adds that "[g]irls' schools did not normally teach the classical languages and or higher mathematics" (2013, p. 23).

Dramatic monologue which is quite a popular poetic form among the Victorian poets allows Webster to find an adequate space to contribute to the heating debates of the woman question in Victorian society and argue for her socio-political ideas with efficacy. Among them are "Jeanne D'Arch", "Sister Annunciata", "The Snow Waste", "A Woman Sold", and "Medea in Athens" in which dramatic monologues provide an opportunity for

the silenced women of Victorian age to get their voices heard. It may be for this reason that Webster's poetry usually follows an analytical trajectory of developing an argument over a problematic Victorian issue in dramatic forms, rather than exploring personal emotions or aesthetic thoughts through lyrical expressions. In Shanyn Fiske's observation, "unlike [Matthew]Arnold and many of her male contemporaries, Webster was not interested in sequestering classical knowledge within elite domains and strongly believed that poetry, while maintaining its artistic integrity, could and must function as a social catalyst" (2011, p. 471). While analyzing the problematic nature of female sexuality and gender issue through her unusual poetic personas like the mother who kills her own children in "Medea in Athens", Webster gives voice to a prostitute in "A Castaway", and a nun who confesses her suppressed sensual desires in "Sister Annunciata", who are all radical female figures suffering from and rebelling against the impediments of their society's patriarchal impositions of docile gender roles on women. These poems expose Webster as an activist who utilizes poetry as a political instrument of assailing the patriarchal oppression of women. This study, therefore, delves into the selected poetry of Augusta Webster in order to examine the nonconformist female figures from different social classes who raise their contesting voices and disturb the strongly established ideological grounds of the stereotypical roles of womanhood and femininity. A deeper examination of Webster's female characters provides a critical insight into the Victorian concept of womanhood which oscillates between the two opposite images of moral perfectness and fallenness.

1.1. Revolting Women in "Medea in Athens", "A Castaway", and "Sister Annunciata"

The dualistic Victorian thinking encapsulates and polarizes women within two completely antithetical roles; that of being an epitome of virtue and a fallen woman. An ideal woman, the contours of which is drawn by the patriarchal norms of the Victorian society entails a figure of woman who is totally unrevolting and submissive to the male authority while the fallen woman, as Angela Leighton defines, is a "a type which ranges from the successful courtesan to the passionate adulteress, from the destitute streetwalker to the seduced innocent, from the unscrupulous procuress to the raped child" (1989, p. 111). Augusta Webster, however, is interested in refashioning the notorious image of the fallen woman by impelling her readers to look into the world from the vantage point of these revolutionary female figures. Along with this unrealistically idealized image of the untainted women whose morality and perfectness are conditioned on the degree of their submissiveness to the male authority, the Victorian age has also witnessed the emergence of the "new woman" who "worked, sought education and fought for legal and political rights" (Vicinus, 2013, p. ix). The new woman's struggle for recognition uniformly finds a powerful expression in Webster's prose and poetic works. In her collection of essays, titled *A Housewife's Opinions*, for instance, Webster draws attention to a process of transition and an unprecedented change of life in Victorian Britain. In an age of progress and transformation, there is also a necessity of a fundamental change in the androcentric

mindset of the society as well as the old fashioned, traditional education system which is contingently based upon teaching women "cooking, cleanliness, thrift, home rules for health, the management of children, needlework, how to choose and to store provisions, how to choose clothing, how to make it, and how to keep it lasting" (Webster, 1879, p. 281). The only thing that remains persistently unchanged in this progressively advancing world of the Victorian Britain, as Webster argues, is the status of women:

> But there is nothing new in this: modern advance, especially in sanitary and hygienic doctrine, modern habits, and even modern retrogression, have somewhat changed in some of these points what our women must do from what their grandmothers did, but less than the practice of our doctors, our builders, our provision purveyors, our manufacturers, our diners out, has been changed from that of their predecessors. The theory and practice of household skills is no more a science left for the nineteenth century to discover and teach to women for the first time than are the theory and practice of any of the skills and trades influencing household skills which time has improved or deteriorated but has not made superfluous. (Webster, 1879, p. 281)

In an ironic tone, Webster finds nothing scientific in teaching women about domestic economy that is inherited by grandmothers and mothers and is prolonged to be imposed on women as their primary duties. Even the educational system depends on molding and grinding the minds of women to be content with their submissiveness to the patriarchal authority. As Dorothy Mermin writes, girls' schools provided a little "elementary academic instruction" and "some 'accomplishments': music, drawing, dancing, and other activities designed to make them attractive to suitors and agreeable at home" (1993, p. 50). Similarly, the only "reason the use of the piano ought to be a principal part of a girl's education", Webster argues, "is that she may be qualified to make a husband's home happy" (1879, p. 23). Similar to her prose works, Webster, in her poems, makes a strong case for the necessity of liberating women from the old-fashioned educational system and domestic obligations as well as unfettering them from the patriarchal encumbrances of the Victorian dualistic mentality. Webster's greatest perturbation lies in women's imperishable subordination to the male authority which is persevered in for centuries without slackening in this incessantly transmogrifying and evolving world of the nineteenth century.

Accordingly, Webster's "Medea in Athens", published in 1870 is an important dramatic poem in which Webster adopts the story of Greek tragic hero Medea with the aim of reconfiguring a pivotal figure of rebellious Victorian woman who daringly utters her discontent of conventional gender roles. "Medea in Athens" is categorized as a "remarkable example of the New Woman's struggle against Victorian patriarchal paradigms" (Lazaro, 2022, p. 40-41). The poem's speaker is Medea, a non-sacrificial mother who is self-autonomous and extremist and kills her brother and two children. Presenting the events from the perspective of Medea, Webster's poem unveils the underlying reasons that lead Medea to murder her own children without adding any authorial judgement or condemnation. The poem begins with Medea in Athens, happily

married to King Aegeus, yet still, she is haunted by the tragic memories of her previous marriage with Jason, which ends disastrously with the death of her sons. Upon hearing the death of Jason, Medea contemplates on her past life and tells how her marriage with Jason catalyses her conversion from being an innocent and tender-hearted person to a brutal murderer. The poem records the process of how Medea is transformed from being "a grave and simple girl" full of love for everything into a vengeful wife who commits violent crimes against her own children (Webster, 2000, p. 175). She insists on her innate purity and lack of intentional misconduct or criminal behavior by saying that: "For all things glad and harmless seemed my kin, / And all seemed glad and harmless in the world" (Webster, 2000, p. 176). Based on these lines uttered by Medea, it is obvious that before marrying Jason, she has an overbearing love even for the most insignificant creatures in nature and has an optimistic outlook of life. There is a drastic change in Medea's life when she meets Jason: "The curse of thee compelled me. Lo, I am /The wretch thou say'st; but wherefore? by whose work?" (Webster, 2000, p. 176). These lines reveal that Medea is still grappling with her past life to justify her actions and come to terms with the tormenting memories of her past:

> Who, binding me with dreadful marriage oaths
> In the midnight temple, led my treacherous flight
> From home and father? Whose voice when I turned,
> Desperate to save thee, on my own young brother,
> My so loved brother, whose voice as I smote
> Nerved me, cried "Brave Medea"? For whose ends
> Did I decoy the credulous girls, poor fools,
> To slay their father? When have I been base,
> When cruel, save for thee, until — Man, man,
> Wilt thou accuse my guilt? Whose is my guilt?
> Mine or thine, Jason? Oh, soul of my crimes,
> How shall I pardon thee for what I am? (Webster, 2000, p. 176)

Medea accuses Jason of being the chief triggering factor in her brutal murder of her brother and children. Leaving her family behind for the sake of Jason is defined by Medea as a "treacherous flight" and a worthless sacrifice made for Jason (2009, p. 176). What is particularly significant is that Medea is quite determinant in her righteousness by claiming that the guilt is not of hers but of Jason's. Medea's accusations are not only directed at Jason but also at the institution of marriage. At this point, rather than conveying the thoughts of the classical female character of Medea, Webster gives voice to the Victorian women's imprisonment by the patriarchal society within the institution of marriage, the binding and enslaving rules of which are called as "the dreadful marriage oaths", depriving women of their freedom (Webster, 2000, p. 176). Being "too much of a man and a man of his times to have presented a great woman as a monster *simpliciter*", Euripides represents Medea from a male perspetive as a horrible woman who destroys her

own children (Vasillopulos, 2014, p. 42, emphasis in the original), while Webster focuses on the thoughts, feelings, and sufferings of Medea in her poem. So, instead of casting Medea off by probing into how cold-bloodedly she slaughters her children, Webster prefers to analyze the physical, social and cultural circumstances that prepare Medea's action. Medea's confinement to the dreadful marriage oaths reverberates in Victorian women's incarceration in marriage, bereaved of their legal and personal rights. Married women in Victorian period are subjected to the patriarchal double standards which give women's ownership rights legally into the hands of their husbands who are authorized to rule over women's bodies and possessions. Women were not lawfully allowed to own property or money while the divorce was extremely strenuous for women. Edith Hall sums up the entrapping conditions of marriage for women in Victorian period as follows:

> On marriage a man assumed all legal rights over his wife's property. Worse, he owned any property she assumed thereafter, including earnings, rents, and income. This led to the iniquitous situation in which even abandoned wives were forced to hand over their money for the remainder of their lives. They were also debarred from remarriage since divorce was impossible. (1999, p. 55)

Webster's Medea, in a similar fashion, gives expression to the imprisoned women of Victorian era who are deprived of their rights, objectified, sold and bought as a property in marriage. As she plainly displays in the poem, Medea feels like "some slight purchased slave / Who pleased thee, and then tired thee, turn to thee!" (Webster, 2000, p. 177). This quotation explains how she is abused and later, disposed of by her own husband. Medea's marginalization from her society is a vivid reflection of Victorian society's isolating women who do not conform with the idealized descriptions of womanhood. In Webster's poem, the crime committed by Medea is repeatedly attributed to her husband as an insinuation of the idea that women, who seem to be the perpetrators of violence, emerge as the real victims of male offenders. Envisaging herself to be speaking to the ghost of Jason, Medea blames him for the murder of her sons: "Never could I forgive thee for my boys" (Webster 2009, 177). Webster, in this way, highlights women who are forced into violence by rigid social norms of the patriarchal society in which they live.

Contrary to the classical image of yielding woman who passively accepts her susceptibility, Medea appears as a modern, resistant woman who refuses to be victimized, and takes the revenge of her betrayal in a rather defying manner by killing her own sons with the purpose of leaving Jason with no heir, and emerges as a surviving woman out of a catastrophe. Once taking her revenge from Jason, Medea boasts of her new marriage to Aegesus with whom she declares to have found love and happiness in opposition to Victorian women for whom the divorce "was not possible in Britain except by a private Act of Parliament, an extremely unusual measure available only to the very rich and almost exclusively to men" (Hall, 1999, p. 52). Medea's consistent allusions to her happiness in her new marriage can be seen as Webster's own political projections on vigorous quarrels pertaining to women's divorce rights in the mid-Victorian period.

According to Olverson, despite the Divorce Act of 1857, divorce was difficult especially for women and they "needed to prove an additional offence beyond adultery, such as cruelty, bigamy or incest" while a man "could divorce his wife for adultery alone" (2010, p. 40). The poem ends with Medea's self-consolation at sending Jason to his grave: "Thou hast died shamed and childless, none to keep / Thy name and memory fresh upon the earth" (Webster, 2000, p. 177). Interestingly, aside from presenting Medea as a rebellious woman who does not submit to the male domination, Webster also achieves to draw attention to Medea as a compassionate mother who mourns for the death of her sons. In the last part of the poem, Medea's tortured mind and her guilty consciousness are vividly revealed: "What if I have ill dreams, / Seeing them loathe me, fly from me in dread," (Webster, 2000, p. 177). These lines uncover Medea's overwhelming trauma of the death of her sons for whom she still moans and cries. What lies beneath this tremendously strong and insubordinate female figure is a devastated, mourning mother who "turn[s] sick when the women pass / That lead their boys" (Webster, 2000, p. 177).

Similar to "Medea in Athens" in which Medea destabilizes the patriarchal conventions of her society by rejecting the submissive female role in marriage, "A Castaway" draws attention to the commodification of female sexuality through prostitution. Aligned closely with the image of fallen woman, prostitution holds an important place in the contemporary political and intellectual debates of the Victorian society, culminating in the ratification of a series of Parliamentary bills for the "Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869", forcing prostitutes to pass through medical examination in order to prevent sexually transmitted contagious diseases (Walkowitz, 1999, p. 1). The last quarter of the Victorian has witnessed great disputations about the problem of prostitution and women's sexuality. The amplification of the public disgruntlement through the end of the 19th century brings an inevitable repeal of these laws which politicize women's sexuality, take back women's control over their own bodies, and in a biased manner, hold merely women accountable for the act of prostitution. As Brown meticulously analyses, the large-scale objections were escalated in late 1869 "as the activists petitioned, lectured, lobbied, campaigned, and generally publicized both the conditions created by the Acts and the efforts to extend them to other, non-military, areas" (1991, p. 79). Underscoring the gender inequality, caused by these acts, Sutphin suggests that these acts aim to look after soldiers' health while punishing women by "compulsory examination" and "[i]f she refused examination, she could be imprisoned for one to three months (later, up to nine months), sometimes with hard labor" (2000, p. 516).

Webster's "A Castaway" is written amidst these controversial discourses and public disturbances, revolving around the concepts of women's sexuality and prostitution. The title of the poem refers to the peripheral position of Eulalie in the Victorian society where prostitution stands as the most obvious evidence showing the Victorian hypocrisy in promoting and financing prostitution while condemning and blemishing women with unscrupulousness who are forced to prostitution. At the very beginning of the poem,

Eulalie distorts the Victorian expectations of a prostitute who usually comes from working class and, by misfortune, is "[s]educed, raped, betrayed, or simply fickle" and exposed to sexual harassment of malicious men (Leighton, 1989, p. 122). As a non-stereotypical image of Victorian prostitute, Eulalie is a good-mannered, moderately educated, middle-class girl who speaks French, reads modern history and goes to " to daily services" (Webster, 2000, pp. 192-193). Her modesty is underpinned especially with these words: "I'm not drunk in the streets, ply not for hire…/Of the humbler kind; yes, modesty's my word_" (Webster, 2000, p. 194). Obfuscating the boundary between two dualistically constructed, stereotypical notion of woman as fallen or an angel in the house, Eulalie defines her identity as indistinguishably tantamount to a middle class lady who deserves an equal respect and recognition. Eulalie insistently says that: "For I am modest; yes, and honour me / As though your schoolgirl sister or your wife" (2000, p. 194). In her resolution to divulge the ignominiousness of strictly drawn ethical codes of the Victorian society riddled with hypocrisy, Eulalie defends prostitution as being less corrupt than other allegedly respectable occupations such as doctors and lawyers that are embraced by the majority of people unquestionably. She claims that she has seen more deplorable jobs which are seen admirable by the society. Lawyers, for instance, "with noble eloquence / And virtuous outbursts lie to hang a man" while preachers are "gloating on your future hell / For not believing what they doubt themselves" (Webster, 2000, p. 195). Along with doctors whose only concern is not to save lives but to be rich, journalists "juggle truths and falsehoods to and fro" and tradesmen "cheat the least like stealing that they can (2000, p. 195). All these ostensibly honest occupations, as Eulalie argues, are saturated with moral deficiencies that are concealed from the public eye. The distinction between the apparent propriety and the inherent reality of these jobs is genuinely explained by the persona:

> Our —— all of them, the virtuous worthy men
> Who feed on the world's follies, vices, wants,
> And do their businesses of lies and shams
> Honestly, reputably, while the world
> Claps hands and cries 'good luck,' which of their trades,
> Their honourable trades, barefaced like mine,
> All secrets brazened out, would shew more white? (Webster, 2000, p. 195)

In this quote, while revealing the delinquency of these superficially honored, reputable jobs, Eulalie also discloses the immorality of patriarchal predispositions which glorify men's occupations while admonishing the one and only occupation that is ascribed to women. Other occupations like "dressmakers, milliners" as Eulalie argues, demand "skill" and "apprenticeship" which Eulalie lack both (Webster, 2000, pp. 201-202). Being a governess, on the other hand, is thought to be cheaply paid and "hard" by Eulalie (Webster, 2000, p.202). Developing a logical argument to vindicate her only choice of occupation as a prostitute, Eulalie criticizes the social and political circumstances that do

not provide enough opportunity for women to gain their economic independence. Blurring the sharp-edged distinction between women's prostitution and socially approbated occupations of men, Eulalie casts a great shadow over Victorian society's moral standards which have a biased propensity to, on the one hand, protect men's concerns, and on the other hand, marginalize women who are forced to do prostitution out of obligation. Furthermore, the image of a decent woman as a wife is challenged by Eulalie who thinks that wives also take benefit of prostitutes in letting their husbands go to prostitutes for the sake of having an easier life on themselves. As Eulalie says, it is not a "mighty task / To pin an idiot to your[their] apron-string" if you really want (Webster, 2000, p. 196). With a "half envy at the heart", Eulalie argues, housewives have no right to accuse prostitutes: "How dare they hate us so? what have they done,/What borne, to prove them other than we are?" (2000, p. 196). Eulalie's questions reveal the dualistic constructs, peripheral concepts of women in an equalized status so that the morality of housewives does not make them much different or better than the dilapidation of prostitutes. When boundaries between roles, genders, and occupations are eradicated and "all secrets are brazened out", the readers are left with an enigmatic question of what is morally right and wrong in a society where values are artificially centered upon pursuing men's concerns while demeaning women's self-esteem (Webster, 2000, p. 195).

Eulalie constantly expresses her helplessness by saying that she has left with no choice except becoming a prostitute: "Choice! What choice / Of living well or ill? could I have that?" (Webster, 2000, p. 201). Essentially, these lines reveal the weakness of Eulalie in the face of the patriarchal hegemony which leaves hardly any room for women to exert their free-will. Drawing attention to the inefficacy of education system, Eulalie argues that education is not sufficient to liberate women since it turns out to be an ideological instrument of creating unquestioning, obedient, and submissive women whose ultimate responsibility is to serve men either as wives or prostitutes. Victorian patriarchal society and its double standards are complicit in bereaving women of education, and thus, construing them as unavailing objects. Eulalie points out her dehumanization process with these words: "I the thing / Of shame and rottenness, the animal / That feed men's lusts and prey on them, I," (Webster, 2000, p. 206). In her society, Eulalie as a prostitute is not considered as a human being but an object of desire whose only function is to please men. Eulalie's denunciation of the chauvinistic divisions in Victorian society is not narrowly limited with the division between morally perfect women and fallen women but extended to the whole society which is segregated between men and women as the two polarities. In this regard, women's chances to procure an access to education are deliberately intercepted by men. Eulalie comments on the uselessness of women's education as follows:

> Well, well, the silly rules this silly world
> Makes about women! This is one of them
> Why must there be pretence of teaching them
> What no one ever cares that they should know,

What, grown out of the schoolroom, they cast off
Like the schoolroom pinafore, no better fit
For any use of real grown-up life,
For any use to her who seeks or waits
The husband and the home, for any use,
For any shallowest pretence of use,
To her who has them? Do I not know this,
I, like my betters, that a woman's life,
Her natural life, her good life, her one life,
Is in her husband, God on earth to her. (Webster, 2000, p.205)

Eulalie's speech entails a profoundly serious, deprecatory annotation on the Victorian education system. She believes that the Victorian society shows a fake concern of being pervasively engrossed in women's education, but in fact, the main purpose of the education system is to block every possible avenue that can lead women to success by thriving in different career opportunities. Unmasking the malicious scheme of the dominant patriarchal ideology, Eulalie names the Victorian society and its biased gender attitude as the silly rules of this silly world which take no heed of women's education since the main goal is not to liberate women through disparate career opportunities but to enslave women within marriage by preventing them from becoming thinking, inquiring, and questioning citizens. Eulalie discloses the insubstantiality of the Victorian education system which ensures women's dependence on their husbands and is essentially organized for making women voiceless and powerless. The inutility of education provided for girls at schools is adroitly resembled by Eulalie into a "schoolroom pinafore" which is ineffective as real life garment and is discarded immediately after school (Webster, 2000, p. 205). Education, just like a pinafore, is disposed of as a trash in a patriarchal society which dictates women to worship their husbands as a "God on earth to her" (2000, p. 205). The sexist prejudices of the Victorian age are severely criticized by Webster who distills her views of Victorian women into her poetry in which infamous female characters are giving voice to groundbreaking feminist ideas about gender inequality and sexist discrimination that exist and reign powerfully in the collective consciousness of the Victorian society. Eulalie is just one of the peerless women who can discern the ideological undercurrents of Victorian education system and its dogmatically biased principles and values that are lucidly oriented towards the masculine frame of reference, the primary impetus of which is to emphatically repress women's mental and intellectual burgeoning through education.

Akin to this studious poetic exploration of the multifaceted components of the Victorian patriarchal ideology, giving shape to the common proclivities of the age towards the institutional structures of education and marriage through the eyes of a prostitute, "Sister Annunciata" focuses on religion as another powerful patriarchal institution, ensuring women's domestication and servitude, and thereby, hindering their liberation. Though not an outcast like Eulalie, Annunciata, comes to fore as a subversive woman who is

overwrought by the overarching religious dogmatism, playing a determining role in defining women's identity with a fundamental control not only over their bodies but also over their souls. Webster, in her poem, draws upon the Victorian concept of a religious female figure who should submit herself, both physically and spiritually, into God's authority by completely extirpating the worldly pleasures and bodily desires. The poem expresses a nun's fervid struggle to find a compromise between her humanly feelings and religious commitments. Webster provides a vivid exposure into sister Annunciata's tortured mind and guilt-ridden consciousness. Sister Annunciate feels guilty for feeling love for a human being instead of devoting herself totally to God. The poem begins by Annunciata's announcing her heavenly marriage in comparison to the earthly marriage: "My wedding day! A simple happy wife" (Webster, 2000, p. 53). She develops a coherent idea to defend her own logic and claims that while a married wife is allowed to leave her husband to spend some time with her God and share her love both with her husband and God, why is it considered to be a sin if Annunciata as a nun, recalls her love for a human being?: "(For if the Church bless love, is love a sin?)" (Webster, 2000, p. 53). She makes a critical assessment of religious dogmas which command an unswerving devoutness from humans whose hearts have an innate propensity to disperse around different objects. Similarly, Annunciata, apart from being a nun, is also a woman whose heart is naturally impregnated with love for a man in her youth. All throughout the poem, her ruminations fluctuate between her feeling of sinfulness and the self-complacency of her righteousness induced by her logical reasoning:

> Am I sinning now
> To think it? Nay, no doubt I went too far:
> The bride of Christ is more than other women;
> I must not dare to even such to me.
> They have their happiness, I mine; but mine
> Is it not of Heaven heavenly, theirs of earth,
> And therefore tainted with earth's curse of sin? (Webster, 2000, p. 53).

These lines overtly reveal sister Annunciata's inner conflict between her rationality and piety. While the former consoles her by showing that nothing is wrong with her humane feelings of love, the latter contradicts her reasoning by revealing the immorality of her feelings. Annunciata's consciousness, by that means, is inflicted with pain which is an immensely torturing experience, leaving her in an unremitting turmoil of moral dilemma and a fear of divine punishment due to her tainted soul and contaminated thoughts. That emotion of being a tainted and culpable woman, as Webster strives to accentuate, is not an unfamiliar feeling to Victorian women who are always felt guilty of their actions by the patriarchal ideology which imposes rigid moral obligations on women. Victorian women are intimately acquainted with Annunciata's agonizing confrontation with her inner-conflicts, dissociative identity which situate her between moral duties and personal needs, body and soul, and, ambivalent social status that can easily and swiftly drag her from the top of the society as an idealized woman, to fall and be a ruined woman.

Annunciata, like all other Victorian women, lives in an instant fear of being castigated and penalized not only by God but also by her society, functioning forcefully as a control mechanism over women's behaviors. For this reason, Annunciata constantly reminds herself that she "must not dare" even to bring these precarious thoughts into her mind, not to mention the idea of taking a direct action (Webster, 2000, p. 53).

The poem also underpins the multifaceted structure of gender inequality prevailing in Victorian society which is not only discernible in the relationship between men and women but also between women and God. More precisely, religion in Victorian society works concurrently with patriarchal paradigms to imprison women within strictly drawn profile of an orthodox morality while enabling men to enjoy the freedom of social and public life. Religion, in this respect, becomes an instrumental tool of controlling women by steadily making them feel guilty and sinful. The intricate connectivity between the "domestication of women and religious experience in the nineteenth century" is also observed by Fletcher who elucidates religion as a patriarchal instrument of promoting the idea of women as "spiritual beings" who are "sanctified" and kept under domination (2003, pp. 296-297). Hence, Annunciata, instead of finding peace of heart, is tortured by religion which is quite competent in accusing and mortifying almost every act, thought, and feeling of women. As a result, sister Annunciata is displayed in a perpetual state of pain and suffering in the poem. She prays God by saying: "Lord, let it not be numbered with my sins!" (Webster, 2000, p. 53).

What is more devastating for Annunciata is her compulsory entrance into the convent by her uncle who rules her family by an "iron rod" and has a tyrannous power over them "beyond advising" so that Annunciata and her sisters' "destinies are mapped out by him" (Webster, 2000, p. 66). Annunciata's recitation of this event is replete with her resentment and anger at her uncle who, "[s]welling himself in the authority", leaves Annunciata with no other option to choose except "mute submission" (Webster, 2000, p. 66). Annunciata's unfortunate childhood memory about her entry into the cloister is exceptionally poignant, carrying a foremost significance for the poem's emphasis on the physical and psychological captivity of women. Annunciata's confinement within social, cultural, and religious traditions is more perspicuously perceived when she contrasts her persistent suffering in the lockup of Victorian patriarchy with an avidly singing bird that enjoys a happy and peaceful life of freedom in nature:

> Little bird,
> Flitting so daintily upon the sill,
> Hast thou come to tell me with thy matin chirp
> That all the day-world is astir? I know,
> But I am fettered to my drowsy thoughts;
> I cannot gladden to the sun like thee.
> Chirp, chirp, how glad thou art.
> …

Often the weary never-ending days
Burden us helpless with their dragging weight.
Thou art happier than thou knowest — all the more. (Webster, 2000, pp. 84-85)

Webster portrays Annunciata as a victim of the patriarchal system which assumes women physically, mentally, and emotionally weaker and inferior to men, and thus, it is necessary to control and restrain them within traditionally-ascribed roles. Annunciata, addressing to a little bird, expresses her aspiration to attain her emancipation and live freely like birds, unfettered by the dualistic, discriminatory set of rules, conventions, and religious dictums. In opposition to the ultimate freedom of the bird who is hindered by no force from exerting its agency and participating in the ongoing vitality and regeneration of life in nature, Annunciata feels the heavy burden of her society, rendering her unable to think, feel, move, and act. In delineating the significance of the woman issue in Victorian age, Nigel Bell writes that "the 'Woman Question' concerned the arguments for emancipating women from the public and domestic disabilities with which patriarchal systems had always burdened them, and their struggle to claim, eventually, all the civil and political rights enjoyed by men" (2013, p. 80). Likewise, Webster's contrasting Annunciata's patriarchal oppression in Victorian society with the uttermost freedom of animals in nature carries feminist overtones in proclaiming the exigency of liberating women from the patriarchal oppression. The juxtaposition of women's misery with the joy of animals in nature deliberately alludes to the natural quality of human life that needs to be free of domination and subordination.

2. CONCLUSION

In opposition to the political, economical, industrial, and technological advances of the 19th century when progress, prosperity, and unfathomable change become trademark notions which reflect the common spirit of the age, the recuperative changes in women's social, legal, and political status are observed to be insufficient. The patriarchal conceptualization of women is relatively undeterred by the uniformly arising discomfiture and social disturbance, instigated by the female writers of the age. Augusta Webster is among these insurgent female intellectuals who work for the empowerment of women in the Victorian society in defiance of the dominant patriarchal ideology's subduing women both in public and domestic spheres. Developing an awareness of the patriarchal oppression of women whose lives are wasted by men, Webster, through her poetry, succeeds in raising consciousness about the woman question that is presented as an important social and political problem, awaiting urgent solutions. As Webster vigorously argues in her poetry, women are disqualified from active involvement in social life and confined in their houses or convents which are featured as institutional places where the hegemonic power of the patriarchy is most strongly felt, serving ideologically as rehabilitation centers whereby women are turned into the unquestioning, submissive subjects of men. In this respect, analyzing Webster's poetry discloses her strong belief in the necessity of reforming the Victorian education system which prepares women merely

for marriage without providing them with academic skills that may help them flourish in diverse occupations other than in housewifery. The imcompatibility between the school education given to women and their real life experiences are significantly laid bare in "A Castaway". Additionally, the poet also demonstrates the power of religion over the gender dynamics of the Victorian age and underscores the interplay between the religion and the domestication of women through the character of Annunciata in "Sister Annunciata". Webster's radical poetical personas intrepidly speak their dissenting ideas with the supreme purpose of unsettling patriarchal preconceptions of Victorian society, reducing women into an objectified status by depriving them of their agency, and free-will as well as barricading their equal access to educational, financial, and legal rights. Medea, Eulalie, and Annunciata, therefore, appear as marginal poetical personas, isolated by their societies due to their radical, activist ideas that do not conform to the moral and ethical standards of their current epochs. Empowering them with a speech, rather than relegating them into a position of muted passivity, Webster distinguishes herself as one of the few Victorian writers who reflect the woman question from the perspective of the silenced and fallen women who habitually remain suppressed and unvoiced. The fundamental purpose of Webster in subverting the dichotomous understanding of femininity is revealed through these radical characters who palpably obfuscate the frontiers between the images of morally perfect and fallen women by means of surfacing the humanity beneath these misogynistic terms.

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In all processes of the article, the research and publication ethics principles of Manisa Celal Bayar University, Social Sciences Institute Journal are followed.

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