

COMIC VISION AND COMIC ELEMENTS OF THE 18TH CENTURY NOVEL MOLL FLANDERS BY DANIEL DEFOE

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Abstract

"It is hard to think about the art of fiction without thinking about the art of comedy, for the two have always gone together, hand in hand" says Malcolm Bradbury, because the comedy is the mode one cannot avoid in a novel. Bradbury asserts "the birth of the long prose tale was, then the birth of new vision of the human comedy and from that time it seems prose stories and comedy have never been far apart" (Bradbury, 1995: 2). The time when the novel prospers is the time of the development of the comic vision. The comic novelist Iris Murdoch in an interview in 1964 states that "in a play it is possible to limit one's scope to pure tragedy or pure comedy, but the novel is almost inevitably an inclusive genre and breaks out of such limitations. Can one think of any great novel which is without comedy? I can't." According to Murdoch, the novel is the most ideal genre to adapt itself to tragicomedy. Moll Flanders is not a pure tragedy or pure comedy. On the one hand, it conveys a tragic and realistic view of life; on the other hand, tragic situations are recounted in a satirical way. Moll's struggles to live, her subsequent marriages, her crimes for money are all expressed through parody. The aim of this study is to analyze 18th century social life, the comic scenes and especially the satire in the novel by describing the novel's techniques of humor.

Keywords: *Comic, Amiable humorist, Humor, Laughter, Parody.*

18. YÜZYIL ROMAN YAZARI DANİEL DEFOE'NUN MOLL FLANDERS ADLI ESERİNDEKİ KOMEDİ VE KOMİK UNSURLAR

Özet

"Kurguyu komedi sanatını düşünmeksizin ele almak imkansızdır" çünkü her ikisi de her zaman hep elele yürümüştür" der Malcolm Bradbury çünkü eğer roman hayattan izler taşıyorsa içinde muhakkak komik öğeler bulundurur. Bu yüzden ki, uzun düz yazı hikayenin doğuşu, komedinin yeni bakış açısının doğuşuyla başlar ve öyle görünmektedir ki o zamandan bu yana düzyazı hikayeleri komediden hiçbir zaman uzak kalmamıştır (Bradbury, 1995: 2). Romanın ilerleme kaydettiği zaman komik vizyonun da gelişim gösterdiği zamandır. 1964 yılında verdiği bir röportajda, komedi roman yazarı Iris Murdoch şunları söyler: "bir tiyatro oyununda, izleyen kişinin kavrama gücünü salt bir trajedi ya da salt bir komedi ile sınırlandırmak mümkündür, ancak roman neredeyse kaçınılmaz bir şekilde kapsamlı bir türdür ve bu tarz kısıtlamaları aşar. Komedi içermeyen mükemmel bir roman düşünebiliyor musunuz? Ben düşünemem" Murdoch'a göre, roman kendini trajikomediye adapte edebilen en ideal türdür. Moll Flanders ne salt bir trajedi, ne de salt bir komedir. Moll Flanders bir yandan, hayatın trajik ve gerçekçi görüşünü taşıırken; diğer yandan, romanın trajik olay örgüsü için sanatı kullanılarak anlatılır. Moll'un hayatta kalma mücadelesi, art arda yaptığı evlilikler, para için işlediği suçlar roman boyunca parodi kullanılarak anlatılmıştır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, 18. yüzyıl İngiliz sosyal yaşamını, komik olay örgülerini, ve özellikle romandaki hicvi, mizah teknikleri kullanarak analiz etmektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Komik öğeler, Dost canlısı mizah yazarı, Mizah, Kahkaha, Parodi*

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“It is hard to think about the art of fiction without thinking about the art of comedy, for the two have always gone together, hand in hand” says Malcolm Bradbury, because the comedy is the mode one cannot avoid in a novel. Bradbury asserts “the birth of the long prose tale was, then the birth of new vision of the human comedy and from that time it seems prose stories and comedy have never been far apart” (Bradbury, 1995: 2). The time when the novel prospers is the time of the development of the comic vision. The comic novelist Iris Murdoch in an interview in 1964 states that “in a play it is possible to limit one’s scope to pure tragedy or pure comedy, but the novel is almost inevitably an inclusive genre and breaks out of such limitations. Can one think of any great novel which is without comedy? I can’t.” According to Murdoch, the novel is the most ideal genre to adapt itself to tragicomedy. *Moll Flanders* is not a pure tragedy or pure comedy. On the one hand, it conveys a tragic and realistic view of life; on the other hand, tragic situations are recounted in a satirical way. Moll’s struggles to live, her subsequent marriages, her crimes for money are all expressed through parody. The aim of this study is to analyze the satire of 18th century social life and especially the comic scenes by describing the novel’s techniques of humor.

Although some critics argue that *Moll Flanders* is not in the category of comic prose fiction, others suggest this novel is nothing but a parody of the early eighteenth century’s follies and Moll’s tragic life. Bradbury agrees that comedy and fiction have been constant companions; however he does not consider *Moll Flanders* as a comic novel.

“*Moll Flanders* is closer to comedy than any other mode and in it such ironies aren’t always punitive. Jemmy, Moll’s highwayman husband, had believed that she brought him a fortune; when they are united in Newgate and transported to

Virginia, she does. Her money gets them to Virginia in comfort, makes them prosperous there, and is augmented by the fortune from her incestuous marriage.” (Backsheider, 1990:28). Especially when Moll becomes wicked and hardened, her criminal adventures and matrimonial adventures become comic. For instance, a scene, in which Moll steals a horse is a Defoe’s use of comedy. Moll dresses as a beggar and goes out one evening. She is given a gentleman’s horse to look after it outside an inn, but stealing has become an obsession with Moll. After stealing the horse, she has no idea what to do with it. She takes the horse to another inn and sends a note saying where the horse can be found. This is just an adventure for her. This obsession makes us laugh at her. Another extract that makes us ridicule Moll is her poor condition while she is trying to pick up goods during a fire. She tells this occasion with a comic eloquence:

We had at that time another fire happened not a great way off from the place where my governess lived, and I made an attempt there, as before, but as I was not soon enough before the crowd of people came in and couldn’t get to the house I aimed at, instead of a prize, I got a mischief, which had almost put a period to my life and all my wicked doings together; for the fire being very furious and the people in a great fright in removing their goods and throwing them out of the window; a wench from out of a window threw a featherbed just upon me; it is true, the bed being a soft, it broke no bones, but as the weight

was great and made greater by the fall, it beat me down and laid me dead for a while; nor did the people concern themselves much to deliver me from it, or to recover me at all, but I lay like one dead and neglected a good while, till somebody going to remove the bed out of the way. (Moll Flanders, 173)

Her colloquial language when she says 'wench' and her style in the phrase 'instead of prize I got mischief' as she makes fun of herself also makes us laugh at her. Her turning to crime due to her poverty and desire for 'Money' constitutes a life of hustle and bustle. Another comic scene involving stealing takes place at Bartholomew Fair. Moll visits it and runs into a gentleman. The gentleman takes her to an aristocratic place where he drinks. Then; they go to a hotel, he drinks much more and he gets drunk and Moll steals all his valuable possessions. There Moll quotes Solomon: "They go like an Ox to the slaughter, till a Dart strikes through their liver" (Moll Flanders, 175) Moll believes that the gentleman should have been careful of his possessions, but he was not, so Moll considers herself right in stealing.

The extent to which Defoe uses irony which is "a technique of humor" (Berger, 1997), is a matter of debate, but most critics like David Gooding and Paula Backscheider agree that Moll Flanders is a work of irony. One of the critics who assert that Moll Flanders is an ironic work is David Blewett. He asserts that:

The critical argument, even the protracted controversy over irony, is formal. Is it a picaresque novel? A fiction version of the Puritan spiritual autobiography? A

bourgeois romance or anti-romance? A work of irony? It is not without reason that Ian Watt, whose influential book, *The Rise of the Novel*, excited much of the subsequent debate, particularly over the question of irony. The question of the kind and degree of irony in the novel, like most of the other critical questions, depends very largely on whether or not we think Defoe knew what he was doing. Although divine providence ultimately governs the world, man is left with the freedom to make choices. Moll Flanders is the story of a woman who finally makes the right choice; repents of all her former wickedness and is rewarded both by a happier life on earth and the expectation of heaven rather than hell, afterwards. It is this understanding, this ancient set of assumptions about the place of the unstable world of man in the stable macrocosm that ultimately makes Moll Flanders, a work of irony (Blewett, 1989: 18-19).

The novel is surrounded by ironical scenes. How harshly Moll experiences her misdeeds and how helpless she is, how she sinks into despair; she copes with all the difficulties as if nothing happened. She goes on with her life and overcomes her handicaps. "One consistency of Defoe's novel is the consistency of irony." (Green, 2007:5)

It is an undeniable fact that there are lots of ironical occasions throughout the novel, in other words, from the beginning to the ending. Ironical situations are dealt with as follows:

The narrator of the novel is Moll herself and this mature 'Moll' recounts her own story, as in the preface

When a woman debauch'd from her youth, nay, even being off-spring of debauchery and vice, comes to give an account of all her vicious practices and even to descend to the particular occasions and circumstances, by which she first became wicked, and of all the progression of Crime which she run through in threescore Year, an Author must be hard put to it to wrap it up so clean, as not to give room, especially for vicious Readers to turn it to his Disadvantage (Moll Flanders, 3).

Ironically Moll gives a warning of her vicious life to her readers, but at the same time the narrator has the character's mind. There is an ironic difference between the kind of life that Moll expects and works for. She always wants to be a 'Gentlewoman', but she never achieves this, on the contrary, her life is ruined she becomes, as in the preface she states, a whore, a thief, a bawd, a mistress, a convict even a transported felon but she never becomes a gentlewoman as she hopes and dreams.

Whenever she seeks security in her marriages, she is left alone, either a widow or a mistress, but she is never in the safe hands of any of her husbands. It is terribly ironic that she thinks that her first marriage is an incestuous relationship because the brother of her husband has a love affair with Moll, but he does not marry her. Although she is bothered by the fact that

she is married to his younger brother despite being in love with his older brother, Moll turns out to be married to her half brother in the second marriage. Despite learning this occasion, she lives with his brother as husband and wife for eight years. She is annoyed at her incestuous affair; however, she is damaged by her second marriage because she learns that she is married to her half-brother.

This is another example of irony; Moll's own mother gives a cry of surprise and terror when she finds out her own daughter:

Unhappy Child! What miserable chance could bring thee hither? And in the Arms of my own Son too! Dreadful Girl! Married to thy own Brother! Three Children and two alive, all of the same Flesh and Blood! My Son and my Daughter lying together as Husband and Wife! All Confusion and Destruction forever! Miserable family! What will become of us? What is to be said? And what is to be done? (Moll Flanders, 75)

Moll's mother overstates her case and cries out in pain expressing tragic condition unnecessarily by screaming 'My son and my daughter lying together as husband and wife' It is such an unnecessary repetition that it turns into an irony.

Moll's irony is conscious. She uses words which are sarcastic and insulting. "The truth is, I hadn't so much principle of any kind as to be nice in the point of religion; and I presently learn'd to speak favourably of the Romish Church" (Moll Flanders, 110) Here Romish is an insulting word, because Defoe was a Dissenter, so Defoe makes his character 'Moll' a Puritan.

Moll is reprimanding herself while the gentleman is proposing marriage to her because the gentleman says that he wants to get rid of his first wife, who is a whore, but the gentleman is not aware that Moll has the same characteristics. Here the irony lies in his unawareness of Moll's real nature:

Then it occur'd to me what an abominable Creature am I! and how is this innocent Gentleman going to be abused by me! How little does he think, that having Divorc'd a Whore, he is throwing himself into the Arms of another! That he is going to Marry one that has lain with two Brothers, has had three Children by her own Brother! one that was born in Newgate, whose mother was a Whore, and is now a transported Thief; one that has lain with thirteen Men, and has had a Child since he saw me! Poor Gentleman! (Moll Flanders, 141)

Even if Moll is in a miserable condition, she feels pity for the gentleman. Coincidences make novel comic, by some unlucky chance, the gentleman is supposed to marry a whore twice, but this is known just by Moll. It is comic that Moll is herself telling the story and says 'poor gentleman'.

Moll's maternal love is disputable like her love affairs, because she cannot look after any of her children. From her first marriage, she leaves her two children to live with their grandparents. Then she leaves a child with his father. She pays a stranger to care for her child. These tragic departures may result from poverty, but it cannot be an excuse, because she doesn't mention her children. The only thing she focuses on is 'Money'. Although she earns

much money illegally, she is not satisfied with what she saves. The irony lies at the end of the novel when she encounters her son in Virginia and even learns his name. Moll, deprived of maternal love, mentions a child's need of affection and care.

"These are partly the reasons why affection was placed by nature in the Hearts of Mothers to their Children. Since this care is needful to the life of children, to neglect them is to murder them; again to give them up to be managed by those people, who have none of that needful affection, is to neglect them in the highest degree...this even an intentional Murther."(Moll Flanders, 135).

This is maybe because of Moll is neglected in her childhood and implicitly to her mother because, Moll is left at the hands of the convicts in Newgate prison, but it is not a surprising fact that Moll doesn't show affection to her children except for only one child which is ironical.

I can neither express or describe the Joy that touched my very Soul when I found, for it was easy to discover that Part, that he came not as a Stranger, but as a Son to a Mother, and indeed as a Son who had never before known what a Mother of his own was; in short, we cried over one another a considerable while, when at last he broke out first, MY DEAR MOTHER, are you still alive! I never expected to have seen your Face (Moll Flanders, 258).

Her cries, sobs and hugs don't seem to be sincere. Moll bears children in England, but she doesn't have pity on them and she makes her son in America, Humphry, absurdly significant.

According to Asa Berger, 'affectation and exaggeration are techniques of humor' (Berger, 1997), therefore Moll's behavior is considered as affectation and causes the readers to laugh at her.

Throughout the novel, another exaggerated subject is the concept of 'gentleman'. At earlier times, to be a gentleman was a virtue, but in the eighteenth century, it is satirized because gentlemen do not behave as the name deserves. The gentleman should not drink too much to be disgraced, but in this novel he gets drunk and robbed. The gentleman marries a lady from the top of the social ladder, but in Defoe's novel, he marries a whore. There is a satire against 'gentleman', which is reality in the eighteenth century.

"I find you don't know Sir why he is as civil a gentleman, there is not a finer man, nor a soberer grave modester person in the whole city.... I can assure you Sir he is no hypocrite, he is really an honest sober gentleman." (Moll Flanders, 178)

The gentleman is believed to be honest, graceful and well mannered, but Defoe breaks the taboo and he reveals that the gentlemen could cheat on his wife and have an affair with Moll and he is robbed. These wicked things can befall a gentleman because the society is full of follies at that time.

One last ironical scene mentioned is that the old sinful Moll finds herself in Newgate prison in which she came into the world. Moll describes it as "the place had so long expected me, and which with so much Art and Success I had so long avoided" (Moll Flanders, 212). On this occasion "Earlier she had been unable to visit her friends there, the place affected her so deeply. To her, prison is both hellish and a gateway to hell. Newgate functions as Moll's destiny, as place of punishment, and as a turning point." (Backscheider, 1990: 27) She makes us laugh in that she says that this place expected me so long.

According to Blewett "The question as to

whether or not Moll Flanders is a work of irony is closely tied to the problem of its episodic richness and is, ultimately, a debate over form. If we see the work as ironic we recognize that the discrepancy between the surface of the novel, the episodic variety of Moll's life, and the underlying meaning, based upon the ultimate justice of divine providence, is intentional." (Blewett, 1989: 21) Even though the examples of irony are stated above, it is still a debate over form and it is thought that making this work ironic is either intentional or spontaneous. Monica Green comments on that: "the problem arises whenever trying to decipher between ironic parts intended by Defoe and the ironic parts that come along naturally in writing a novel." (Green, 2007: 5)

Whether this irony is made intentionally or made naturally, it is obvious that the use of irony results in a kind of humor and it makes people laugh because the reader doesn't think that use of irony is intentional or non-intentional. The character and the narrator are the same person but even they are different because, the narrator is the old penitent and the character is the young sinner. It causes inconsistency because the reader cannot find out the character's mind or the narrator's, so this inconsistency is ironic.

"Related to this problem is the question of the picaresque nature of Moll Flanders, that is, whether or not it is a genuine example of picaresque. In a sense it is really much the same question, viewed from a different angle. The debate over the picaresque nature of Moll Flanders is another attempt to account for the episodic form of the book." (Blewett, 1989:21)

Some critics support the idea that Moll Flanders is a picaresque narrative. One of the reasons that this novel conveys picaresque characteristic is that "mode of fiction is satirical and verbally ironical." (Blewett, 1989: 21) The use of satire and irony make substantial contribution to the humor of the novel.

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In a picaresque narrative, there are a series of adventures and “a rogue (dishonest, immoral person) who survives by her wits.”(Blewett, 1989:22) In this condition, Moll is a rogue who often overcomes difficulties and satirizes the society around her; for example, Moll warns the parents of the little girl from whom she steals a necklace. Moll says that parents should not leave their little daughter alone in the street with a valuable jewel. Theft was a real problem in the eighteenth century, and Defoe shows the misdeeds of the eighteenth century. By drawing the character ‘Moll’ as a thief, a whore, a convict, he satirizes the misbehaving, miserable society. Defoe uses humor to show people’s faults and weaknesses. “Moll Flanders clearly possesses many of the features of the picaresque narrative, including the lowborn protagonist, a protean ability to disguise a sense of the random uncertainty of life exemplified in a series of adventures, sexual freedom, the opting for survival over personal integrity and social and spatial mobility.” (Blewett, 1989: 22) For example, Moll, at first called Mrs. Betty, turns into Moll and then Moll Flanders after then; she turns into Moll Cut-Purse. She doesn’t use her name for a long time in order to disguise her identity.

Richard Keller Simon delivers an opinion on irony related to Kierkegaard. It is more precise to say that rather than Fielding, Kierkegaard’s assertion is more close to what Defoe as a novelist defends. In the mid-eighteenth century Fielding wrote a labyrinthine study of the comic that is interplay between the consciousness of the narrators and their abilities to construct devious and intricate fictions, both of which are comic. In the mid-nineteenth century Kierkegaard wrote a labyrinthine study of the comic that is interplay between the consciousness of the pseudonyms, their abilities to construct devious and intricate fiction. All of these

are comic. For Fielding theory and fiction are comic; for Kierkegaard, theory, fiction and reality. (Simon, 1985: 79)

Moll has a pseudonym and her real name is just known by the records. She says: “My true name is so well known in the records or registers at Newgate and in the old Bailey. There are some other things of such consequence still depending there, relating to my particular conduct that is not to be expected I should set my name or the account of my family to this work; perhaps after my death, it may be better known.” (Moll Flanders, 7) As a fiction, it is more applicable for the vision of Kierkegaard. Reality is a key word for Defoe’s novels. As Kierkegaard says, reality in Moll Flanders makes it comic. The woman who struggles for life, falls on evil days becomes an object of ridicule, simply because of the course of events and the narrator’s locution.

Another famous critic of comedy, Henri Bergson says on his *Laughter* that:

Repetition –our present problem deals with a situation, that is, a combination of circumstances, which recurs several times in its original form and thus contrasts with the changing stream of life. Everyday experience supplies us with the type of the comic, though only in a rudimentary state. Thus you meet a friend in the street whom you haven’t seen for an age, there is nothing comic in the situation. If, however, you meet him again the same day and then a third and a fourth time, you may laugh at the coincidence.

Such are the repetitions produced on the stage. They are more laughable in proportion as the scene repeated is more complex and more naturally introduced. (Bergson, 1956: 119)

In *Moll Flanders*, Moll marries a man then, her husband dies. Secondly she marries a man then, she is divorced. Thirdly she marries another man, and then her husband leaves the country. These events happen five times. Her tragic, severe subsequent events don't make Moll engage in demagoguery, on the contrary, they make people laugh at the incidents however harsh they are. Moll becomes a machine who is constantly suffering, but it is not seen as a tragedy. Neither Moll makes us feel melancholic nor the subsequent course of events.

The second method identified by Bergson is the inversion. He mentions that if the certain characters are inverted from the certain roles, comic scene is obtained.

"The scene of the "robber robbed" belongs to this class. The plot of the villain who is the victim of his own villainy, or the cheat cheated forms the stock-in-trade of a good many plays." (Bergson, 1956: 122)

Bergson calls this method as 'topsy-turvydom.' In *Moll Flanders*, Moll is introduced as a well off gentlewoman to Lancashire husband. At the same time Lancashire husband, Jemy is introduced to Moll as a wealthy man who has the estate in Ireland, but it turns out that Jemy does not have estate at all even Moll is in good financial position. The deceiver is deceived.

It cannot be fairly accurate to name *Moll Flanders* as an amiable humorist because towards the end of the novel, Moll gradually becomes an evil character. "The alliance of the comic and tender emotions in the eighteenth century, expressed most strikingly in amiable humor, drew additional inspiration from the history of the English stage" (Tave, 1960: 181) Moll is such a character that as a young girl, she is pure and loves dreaming. Normally we can say that we sympathize with Moll and feel sorry for her when she is deceived by her first lover and disappointed. When she is young, we can call her amiable humorist, but when she commits misdeeds day by day and becomes wicked, it is unlikely to sympathize with her.

The amiable humorists obviously transcended the categories that made the comic inferior. They were created not by the unsympathetic, abstractive and reductive method of wit and ridicule, typified for Hazzlit in the use of nicknames, but by a full, sympathetic, imaginative appreciation of the web of mingled yarn; they were concrete, individual existences, vivid and picturesque, capable of evoking mixed emotions. (Tave, 1960: 221).

It is not possible to feel sorry when Moll commits crime, moreover she is unsympathetic. Though we see a destruction of life in *Moll Flanders*, she is not regretful, so it becomes not possible for us to cry for her. At the end of the novel; on the other hand, she repents and gains sympathy.

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The heroine of the novel, Moll is repentant at the end of the novel. Although she conquers lots of obstacles, her hardship ends in triumph and happiness. When Moll is transported to Virginia, she is reunited

with her own son and lives with Jemy on the inheritance from her mother. Like all comic works of art, Moll Flanders has a happy ending, which indicates one of the romance elements.

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