

THE FORSAKEN MERMAID IN NAZLI ERAY’S “A NIGHT AT THE POLICE STATION; THE MOON, THE STARS AND THE SKY”

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Abstract

Nazlı Eray in her short story uses the mermaid/siren figure in questioning the issue of rape, the rights and condition of women, and the society’s views in relation to the rape victim . The mermaid figure which has its roots in ancient Western tradition is specifically suitable for the treatment of the subject as the figure has been cast as a temptress endangering man’s life. Moreover, the fantastic figure of the mermaid allows the distancing of a common violent crime so as to create an objective evaluation of various view points and biases.

Key words: mermaid, siren, rape, Nazlı Eray, *Geceyi Tanıdım*

Nazlı Eray’ın “Karakolda Bir Gece; Ay, Yıldızlar ve Gökyüzü” Hikâyesindeki Mağdur Denizkızı

Özet

Nazlı Eray, söz konusu hikâyesinde tecavüz eylemi, kadının bu bağlamda konumu, hakları ve toplumun yerleşik bakış açılarını irdelemek için anlatının baş karakterini bir deniz kızı olarak çizer. Deniz kızı/ siren figürünün kökenleri Batı edebiyat ve mitlerinde Klasik Çağ’a kadar uzanmaktadır. Ayrıca deniz kızına atfedilen kötü, tehdit edici ve baştan çıkarıcı özellikler bu konunun irdelenmesi için özellikle uygun bir edebi ortam sunmaktadır. Bu özelliklerin yanısıra deniz kızı gibi bir fantastik karakter kullanılması, geçerliliğini günümüzde de koruyan bu toplumsal yara ile okuyucu arasına bir mesafe konmasını sağlayarak, uygulamalar ve toplumsal önyargıların nesnel bir şekilde sorgulanmasına olanak vermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: deniz kızı, siren, tecavüz, Nazlı Eray, *Geceyi Tanıdım*

Nazlı Eray generally creates a fantastic and non-realistic world in her works where she combines everyday realities with the dreamlike elements of the fantasy world which she employs for critical purposes. In her short story entitled “A Night at the Police Station: The Moon, the Stars and the Sky” the supernatural figure of the mermaid also serves an ironic and satirical purpose. One of the three main figures of this story is a mermaid. In fact the main concern of Nazlı Eray in writing this short story seems to be to draw attention to the attitude of the public to rape and the unjustifiable treatment of the female rape victims and the laws related to rape.

The choice of the mermaid as the rape victim is very significant due to the legends attached to this figure. The mermaid has a long history and through out the ages the meanings and qualities assigned to the figure has undergone many changes. The mermaid and the other marine creatures associated with or merged with the mermaid figure are basically rooted in classical mythology or North European legends and myths. In order to be able to shed light to the specific choice of the mermaid figure and to discuss the complexity of the rape problem in Nazlı Eray’s short story, a brief look at the evolution of the supernatural creature will be beneficial.

The figures of the mermaid and the siren were often confused. However, as Beryl Rowland also emphasises, the mermaid and the siren were of different origins and natures (1973 139-40; 1978 154-57). The mermaids were the creatures of the sea and lived in the water, whereas the sirens who were originally terrestrial mortals, due to a punishment they suffered were changed into half bird and half woman creatures (Tripp 1970: 533). The sirens who are sometimes represented as three bird maidens forming a musical trio, lure the sailors into forgetfulness and cause them to perish on the shores of the island they inhabit (Bell 1991: 400-401). Similarly, the mermaids were believed to lure the sailors to death (Briggs 1977: 287-89).

In the Middle Ages the feature of the mermaids and the sirens became confused. Hanneke Wirtjes, in his introduction to the new edition of the Middle English *Physiologus* points out the fact that the Middle English translator may not have been familiar with the classical distinction between the siren and the mermaid, and the merging of the characteristics of these two fabulous creatures took place. He also points to the metamorphosis taking place as early as the late 7th and 8th centuries (Faral qtd. in Wirtjes Ixxxviii). In the *Book of Beasts*, although the text clearly describes the sirens as “human beings from the head to the navel, while their lower parts down to the feet are winged”

(White 134), the illustration of the bestiary depicts her with both bird and fish characteristics (Fig. 1). In the *Physiologus* she is defined as half woman and half fish; her body resembling that of a fish below the navel and

ending in a tail. With her music she charms the sailors to sleep and causes them to perish. In the *Significatio* section of the work the text gives a moral lesson by warning man against hypocrites who say one thing and do another to steal their souls (391-92). The meaning assigned to the mermaid/siren figure were of a negative nature; they symbolised sexual enticement, lust, worldly and fleshly pleasures leading to man's destruction (Rowland 1973: 141).

Fig. 1 The Siren as commonly depicted in the bestiaries (White 135)



In addition to the descriptions and illustrations of the mermaid/siren figure that appeared in the bestiaries, the stories related to them also had their roots in the folk ballads and tales of the northern seafaring nations. It seems that

while the origins of the sirens were firmly in the Mediterranean sources, the mermaid stories were more popular and had more variety in the waters surrounding the British Isles. The features of the mermaids were quite well defined; they were in the form of beautiful maidens from the waist upwards and their lower bodies were in the form of fish. They would sit on rocks carrying a mirror and a comb in their hands. They would comb their long hair and sing “with irresistible sweetness”(Briggs 1977: 287) to allure men to death (Russell et al. 1973: 26-27). They were also ominous of misfortunes and sometimes they would even devour men. Some of them could even live in fresh water while some were allergic to it.

The northern myths and legends abounded in sea creatures who had natures and attributes similar to the mermaid. The Irish equivalent of the English mermaids were the Merrows, who were described to be of a gentler nature and had little webs between their fingers (Briggs 1977: 290). The Selkie was also a close relative of the mermaid. The Roane was the Welsh name given to these creatures who were in fact seal people. They could be captivated by terrestrial men who hid their skins, which they had cast off while dancing, and thus marriages between the amphibian and the terrestrial creatures would be possible. However, as soon as the seal maidens recovered their skins they would desert their earthly husbands and return to their aquatic quarters and families. Although there are various sea creatures and sea monsters in the Mediterranean texts, there does not seem to be any parallels to the seal maidens or seal men though these seas are the natural home of the Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*) (Mursaloğlu 1964: 316-17).

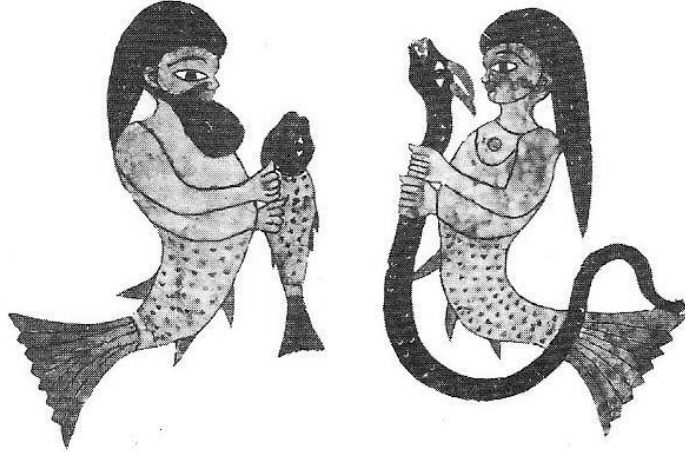
The Christian interpretation and morals attached to the sirens are also valid for these seemingly harmless versions of the mermaid, although she looks half human she does not possess a soul and she yearns to acquire one. In the story related to Saint Columba, the mermaid begs the saint to give her a soul, but he refuses and it was said that the smooth round pebbles of the Island of Iona were the tears that the mermaid shed when her wish was declined (Harding 16). This legend seems to have provided the basic motif for Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The Little Mermaid”. Andersen’s mermaid retains the physical qualities and the beautiful voice of the tradition, however, she has been purified of the negative significances assigned to her in the bestiaries, and has become a totally beneficent, loyal, loving and self-sacrificing figure. Rather than being depicted as the temptress, and the dangerous and destructive creature, she has become the victim. In the fairy tale the mermaid’s sisters when they come of age are allowed to swim to the surface. When they feel that a storm is about to break, they sing sweetly to the sailors of the attractions of the deep and beg them to come down there, but their song is incomprehensible to the sailors (41). The mermaids are in no way depicted as active agents in the

destruction of the sailors, nor is their song a means of temptation. Andersen presents the two worlds as quite separate and incompatible with each other. In contrast to the mermaid/siren depictions of the bestiaries, the mermaid of Andersen is not an enchanter but she is herself enchanted by the human world and saves the life of the prince who is shipwrecked, remembering the fact that human beings could not live underwater (47). The Christian and allegorical moralisation attached to the former depictions of the mermaid have been discarded, but on the other hand another Christian motif, the yearning for a soul has been emphasized. The mermaid questioning her elders learns that although mermaid lives are longer than mortal lives- about 300 years- there is no existence for them after death and no hope of afterlife since they do not possess souls (50), they just turn into sea foam. Hence, the only way she can acquire a soul and an existence after the earthly existence is through the true love of a mortal for her ending in marriage. The double motivation of Andersen's mermaid leads her to sacrifice her tongue and hence her ability to charm through her sweet song, in order to obtain a pair of legs (54). The only implication of feminine and sexual appeal she may possess is now reduced to her grace of movement and dance, which she may employ to win the heart of the prince (55). Thus, the most well established feature of the mermaid/siren of the bestiaries has been cast out of the make up of the mermaid. The quest of the mermaid for a soul and the love of the prince end in defeat. The mermaid has been totally silenced. Andersen omits yet another conventional element; the poor mermaid attends the prince's wedding celebrations with the knowledge that the next morning at sunrise she will turn into sea foam. As she is gazing at the sea waves, her sisters appear. They have sacrificed their long hair to the sea witch in order to save her. If she drives the knife into the heart of the prince she will resume her mermaid form and existence. However, the mermaid cannot bring herself to commit the act when she sees the nuptial bliss of the newly married couple. Hence, she changes into one of the "daughters of the air." The only hope for her to achieve a soul is through good deeds. At the end of the fairy tale there is a moral intended for children; capitalising on their sympathy, the narrator states that for every good child the daughters of the air can find, the spirits come closer to earning a soul (64).

While the mermaid/siren figure is quite common and well known in various types of literary works in Western literature and legend, it is not so well established in Turkish literature and folklore. The few references to the figure appear mostly in the last two centuries. The marine figure does not exist in Turkish mythology. However, there are some references to the mermaid in Turkish performance arts. Although there are no spoken parts or plays in which the mermaid takes place in the Karagöz shadow theatre, there is a "seyirlik"(frontispeace) which is presented in Metin And's book *Karagöz* (2). These "seyirlik" figures were presented in the beginning of the show until the

audience settled down for the play main piece. In the seyirlik a mermaid and a merman facing each other can be seen (Fig. 2). Both of them are depicted in half human half fish form similar to the medieval Western depictions (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 The merman and mermaid frontispiece in Karagöz shadow theatre (And 2).



The second Turkish reference to the mermaid is in the field of performance arts in the title of the singer Eftelya Sadi (1891-1939) as Eftalya the Mermaid (Ermert, Tankut, Tostka, İskender-Hayatseven n.p.). The title was given to her when she was very young due to the fact that she had a very beautiful voice and also because she would sing at the special singing sessions during moonlit nights (“mehtabiye”) on sea at Büyükdere, İstanbul. The composer Aleko Bacanos composed a song addressing her as the mermaid. The nickname given to her is in keeping with the beautiful enchanting voice and her association with the sea.

Nazlı Eray is fully aware of the implications and traditions associated with the mermaid figure and the story can be better appreciated in the light of these significances. Similar to the mermaid in Andersen’s fairy tale, the mermaid in her short story is presented as the victimised rather than the temptress or victimiser. She retains her traditional physical qualities; she has

long beautiful blond hair, a fair though childlike upper body and a fish like lower body (Eray 1991: 17). The story which evolves around the victimised mermaid is in fact an indirect questioning of a rape incident and how it is regarded and, so to say, solved in the Police Station. Eray's depiction of Hülya the mermaid is devoid of the temptress qualities. There is no mention of evil intentions or implications on her behalf. In this short story Eray does not relate the rape incident, but she describes the incident through the perspectives of the mermaid, the fisherman, the *dolmuş* driver, the typist and the police superintendent, it may be said, through the testimonies of the three main characters. The readers are requested to suspend their disbelief by imagining a fantastic creature, the mermaid, as the victim of rape in the very realistic setting of the beach and the Police Station. The choice of the mermaid as the female victim in a very unusual way emphasizes the incomprehension of the two parties coming from totally different worlds, whose lives intertwine in an unpremeditated way. Moreover, the choice of a supernatural female figure as the victim conveniently distances the readers from the incident allowing for a better and more objective evaluation and discussion of this common crime.

The character traits of Hülya the mermaid are important in establishing her moral traits and situation as the victim. She is "slim, thin and fragile as a child" (17). Reminiscent of Andersen's fifteen year old mermaid, Hülya is "barely sixteen", perhaps implying her inexperience, innocence and incomprehension of the realities of the terrestrial world. She had come to the surface, but in keeping with her naïve portrayal she realised that she was "entangled in the fisherman's net" and pulled into the boat by him. She had not plotted to lure the fisherman, she was caught unawares.

Eray describes the physically and psychologically traumatised mermaid in the police station; her beautiful hair is dishevelled, her lip is bruised, her scales are torn and blood is oozing out of her fish skin and her eyes are swollen from crying (17). As befits the metaphor "as a fish out of water," she is defenceless and ill suited to the environment. She can barely sit on the chair, not being able to manage her fish tail out of water. She is an alien and overpowered victim on land. Her nakedness which is a normal aspect suited to her aquatic existence, being unacceptable in the ironically respectable rules valid on land, has been covered with an illfitting borrowed blouse. Hülya the mermaid is not the enchanter, the possessor of gifts to entice men, as in the bestiaries, but she is the shy recoiling mistreated and overpowered female figure. Eray seems to invite the readers to examine the realities and the biases of the members of the society towards a rape victim by changing the mermaid into an innocent victim. The officials in the story, namely, the Superintendent who represents the law and conducts the inquiry is detached, and distances himself and the male offender from the mermaid. When he is questioning the mermaid, after taking

the personal information, he does not use the active form but the passive when inquiring about the violent action and asks if force was used (19). The physical injuries of Hülya are evidence of the ugly reality that this union was definitely not an act of love or that she consented to it (19).

After Hülya's testimony the fisherman is questioned and he immediately confesses that he is guilty and that he was enchanted by the physical appearance of the mermaid. The fisherman is repeatedly described with the adjectives "young" and "handsome" as if to create sympathy for the criminal. In fact, in the opening lines of the short story the watchman voices the prevailing traditional patriarchal view by saying "I just can't understand why the girl has resisted" (17). No choice or voice is allowed to Hülya the mermaid. Although, the mermaid explicitly states her intention and determination to sue the fisherman for the crime he has committed, the extent of her injuries, the greatness of the crime are incomprehensible to the majority of the characters in the story. The watchman, in his introductory remarks, in a very knowledgeable manner relying on his experiences in the Police Station trivializes the attack by saying "Oh what things we witness every night!"(17): by comparison, the rape of an innocent defenceless creature does not deserve much attention. Similarly, another ironical incident takes place as the questioning of the parties has been completed; instead of commenting on the incident the superintendent and the typist speculate about the species of fish that the mermaid belongs to, whether she is mackarel or bluefish.

The *dolmuş* driver who seems to represent the law abiding and justice loving character who is the defender of honour is also depicted in an ironic way. His motive in saving the mermaid in distress, though a bit late, and bringing the offender to answer law and justice is overshadowed by his over enthusiasm and his attitude. When this character is introduced, he narrates the incident and describes how he raised the hue and cry as the representative of social consciousness, but his attitude, the way he grins sarcastically and his choice of words avoiding socially acceptable direct objective descriptions also raises questions about the sincerity and objectiveness of his intentions and intervention in the criminal act. This attitude is clearly perceived by the police superintendent and prevented curtly by his direct orders. The driver who was the eye witness is not offered a seat during the inquiry, and the superintendent orders him to be brief, thus preventing him of making a show of the incident and turning himself into a saviour hero.

At the end of the story the mermaid is put under pressure to accept the rapist as her wedded husband and to make it up, because if she sues him "It is not worth the trouble" (20). Unwillingly, Hülya consents and the problem seems to be solved. Nazlı Eray has dated each story separately and this specific story has been written on 21st June 1977 when the Turkish laws concerning the rights

and status of women had not yet been reformed. According to the laws valid at the time, if the rape victim married the rapist the charges against him would be automatically dropped. Later in 2001 the Civil Law 4721 came into force and this application was abolished. However, in this short story Eray presents to the readers the traumatic situation of the rape victims who generally became social outcasts like Hülya the mermaid, not being able to raise their voices and making themselves heard. Eray raised various questions through the figure of the raped mermaid. Similar to Hülya, who is embarrassed and innocent the society tends to blame the victim in the rape cases who is depicted as the temptress. The attitudes and approaches of the police, the authorities and the witness who take active part in catching the rapist and in his investigation are questioned. The story ends with the ambiguous remark of the driver where he seems to comment on the system and the present situation by saying "You see how they embarrass you." The use of the mermaid figure by Eray is very significant due to the various attributes she has been assigned through out the ages and is specifically functional in the open ended story as it enables not only the distancing but also the various arguments it leads to.

The mermaid figure is a very potent symbol in reflecting the negative qualities assigned to women over the centuries, thus it enables the writer to call attention to the biases and mistreatment of women and indirectly to ask for a re-evaluation of the values. The application of the supernatural figure enables the subject to be approached both with a fresh interest and in an objective manner.

Notes

1 The names used in the short story are significant: the mermaid's name "Hülya" means dream, her surname "Deniz" means sea. Her father's name is Poseidon, the god of the seas and waters in classical mythology. Her mother's name is "deniz anası"- "Medusa" as stated in the text-which literally translates into English as "the mother of the sea".

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