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The Woman Question¹ in the Memoirs of a Survivor and Güneş Saygılı'nın Gerçek Yaşamı

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Abstract

Although *The Memoirs of a Survivor* by Doris Lessing and *The Real Life of Güneş Saygılı* by Erendiz Atasü are written in different cultural backgrounds in separate decades, they meet on common ground: both are semi-autobiographies, both take place in apocalyptic dystopias, and both authors of the novels are labelled as feminist writers. Both *Güneş Saygılı*, which details before the apocalypse, and *Memoirs*, recounting the aftermath of the catastrophe, portray the social and psychological struggles of women (and men) with regard to transforming gender roles in changing societies. In this context, the present article will attempt to reveal how gender roles and sexuality are represented in these two related novels, how these works address the woman question with regard to the radical changes in their fictional societies, and in the end will question whether they can be called as feminist texts regarding their portrayal of women and men amidst the social transformation in the stories.

Keywords: Lessing, Atasü, Feminism, Güneş Saygılı, Memoir

¹ “Many of the historical changes that characterized the Victorian period motivated discussion and argument about the nature and role of woman — what the Victorians called ‘The Woman Question’.” (“The Woman Question: Overview,” *The Victorian Age*, Norton, accessed November 8, 2018, https://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/victorian/topic_2/welcome.htm)

Hayatta Kalma Güncesi ve Güneş Saygılı'nın Gerçek Yaşamı Adlı Eserlerde Kadın Sorusu

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Özet

Farklı kültürel zeminlerde ve zaman dilimlerinde yazılmış olsalar da Doris Lessing'in *Hayatta Kalma Güncesi*² ve Eréndiz Atasü'nün *Güneş Saygılı'nın Gerçek Yaşamı* yarı-otobiyografi olmaları ve kıyamet distopyası anlatımları ve bu eserlerin yazarlarının da birçok eleştirmen tarafından "feminist" olarak tanımlanmaları ile ortak bir zeminde buluşurlar. Kıyamet öncesi (*Güneş Saygılı*) ve sonrası (*Günce*) distopyalara yer veren bu iki roman ayrıca kadın (ve erkeklerin), değişen toplumla birlikte dönüşmekte olan toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri içerisinde yaşadıkları sosyal ve psikolojik mücadelelerine yer verir. Bu bağlamda ilintili bu iki romandaki cinsellik ve toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin temsili ve eserlerdeki kurgusal toplumlarda yaşanan değişimin ışığında kadın sorununun ele alınışı bu makalenin ele aldığı konulardır. Yapılan incelemelerin sonucunda romanlardaki kadın ve erkek temsillerine dayanarak bu romanların feminist metinler olup olmadığı tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Lessing, Atasü, Feminizm, *Güneş Saygılı*, *Günce*

² The translation belongs to Püren Özgören. Doris Lessing, *Hayatta Kalma Güncesi*, trans. Püren Özgören (İstanbul: Can Yayınları, 2010).

Doris Lessing (1919-2013) and Eréndiz Atasü (1947) are two women writers whose texts deal with the issues of sexuality and gender roles, especially through the experiences of female heroines. Although they were born into and have lived in different cultures and languages, both Lessing and Atasü are involved in related social movements. Lessing, having been influenced by the Socialist movements of 1940s and 1950s, inclined towards social and political themes in her works. As Watkins points out, "Lessing's work was associated with Communism and its aftermath in the 1950s."³ Moreover, Lessing has generally been associated with second-wave feminism and most of her works have been cited as feminist texts by many critics.⁴ While she gave up the Communist ideology - as she lost her belief in any grand narratives which claim to be able to save all - she admits that she was a follower of that ideology. she "resisted the reductive label of 'feminism',"⁵ though most of her novels have female protagonists. Likewise, Atasü, who has witnessed the great socialist movements around the world, and lived through the 1980s upheaval in Turkey, was of the belief that socialist way of life would solve many social problems including capitalist corruption. She is also a writer who is defined as a feminist. Different from Lessing, though, Atasü owns her identity as a feminist woman writer who addresses women's personal and social positions in her works with a critical approach.⁶ Regardless of the authors' intentions in their written texts, it is clear that their works have a common concern regarding women's social and psychological struggle, though in different context and content.

Two specific works by these authors, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* by Lessing (1974) and *Güneş Saygılı'nın Gerçek Yaşamı* (2011) by Atasü, despite having been written in very different times and cultures, feature very similar contexts and contents within the textual level. The first of the two analogies is that both have been rightly named as "semi-autobiographical" novels which means they involve certain personal experiences of the authors woven into the fictional world of the stories. Maureen Howard writes in her 1975 *New York Times* review for the *Memoirs* that Lessing describes her book as "an attempt at an

³ Susan Watkins, "'Grand Dame' or 'New Woman': Doris Lessing and the Palimpsest," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 17, no.3-4 (2006): 244.

⁴ Sarah De Mul, "Doris Lessing, Feminism and the Representation of Zimbabwe," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 16, no.1 (2009); Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "The Feminist Apologues of Lessing, Piercy, and Russ," *A Journal of Women Studies* 4, no.1 (1979); Gayle Greene, "Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory," *Signs* 16, no.2 (1991); Elayne Antler Rapping, "Unfree Women: Feminism in Doris Lessing's Novels," *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3, no.1 (1975); Watkins, "'Grand Dame' or 'New Woman'."

⁵ De Mul, "Doris Lessing," 33.

⁶ Alev Önder, "Eréndiz Atasü'nün *Kızıl Kale* Adlı Öykü Kitabında Toplumsal Cinsiyet," *Turkish Studies* 11, no.10 (2016): 462.

autobiography."⁷ *Güneş Saygılı*, too, as Aksoy says, is a semi-autobiographical work.⁸ While we follow Güneş Saygılı on her life journey from 1980s to 2010s, we also get glimpses of Atasü's own personal and political experiences. For that matter, the two novels are critiques of the past and projections to possible – but undesirable – futures. Though the works' apocalyptic visions seem to be predictions for future societies, they, on some levels, look back to the recent past as reminders of what happened and warnings for what could happen again. *Güneş Saygılı*'s point is more obvious in this regard, but Dooley argues that *Memoirs* is also "a metaphor for the past" as well.⁹ Greene in "Feminist Fiction and Uses of Memory" contemplates on remembering the past in specifically feminist fiction and how it helps women's writing. She cautions that in much of feminist fiction, memory should not be confused with nostalgia, for nostalgia refers to a yearning for the past.¹⁰ She suggests that "nostalgia and remembering are in some sense antithetical, since nostalgia is a forgetting, merely regressive, whereas memory may look back in order to move forward and transform disabling fictions to enabling fictions, altering our relation to the present and future."¹¹ In this sense, we can say that Lessing and Atasü's remembering is an urge to take lessons from the past and change for the better.

Another obvious thread that they both share is the dystopic and apocalyptic components of the novels. *Memoirs*, narrated by an unnamed middle-aged woman, tells the aftermath of a political and environmental catastrophe which left the country in a chaotic state. As Draine indicates, "[h]er 'memoirs' record, in terms of a particular life, how the institutions of a technological and bureaucratic society collapse from inner corruption."¹² *Güneş Saygılı* also includes apocalyptic and anti-utopic elements as Direnç points out;¹³ however, while *Memoirs* takes place almost completely in the post-apocalyptic period (except for the past scenes from behind the wall) and only implies, but does not explicitly display, what has led to this final stage,¹⁴ *Güneş Saygılı* builds up

⁷ Maureen Howard, "Doris Lessing Considers Her World and the World," *The New York Times*, June 8, 1975, <http://movies2.nytimes.com/books/97/09/14/reviews/lessing-survivor.html>.

⁸ Nazan Aksoy, "Erendiz Atasü'nün Romanlarında Feminist Kurgu," in *Erendiz Atasü Edebiyatı*, ed. Günseli Sönmez İşçi (İstanbul: Can, 2014), 51.

⁹ Gillian Dooley, "An Autobiography of Everyone? Intentions and Definitions in Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of A Survivor*," *English Studies* 90, no.2 (2009): 161.

¹⁰ Greene, "Feminist Fiction," 297.

¹¹ Ibid., 298.

¹² Betsy Draine, "Changing Frames: Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of A Survivor*," *Studies in the Novel* 11, no.1 (1979): 54.

¹³ Dilek Direnç, "'Yürekli Yaratıcılığın Büyük ve İstıraplı Mücadelesi': Erendiz Atasü'nün Yazan Kadınları/Kadın Yazarları," in *Erendiz Atasü Edebiyatı*, ed. Günseli Sönmez İşçi (İstanbul: Can, 2014).

¹⁴ Draine, "Changing Frames," 54.

towards that apocalyptic ending and reveals the reasons (mainly and roughly capitalism) behind the breakdown of society, politics, and environment, all of which are interconnected. Amidst all of the disarray, still, the novels do not fall short of underlining the sexuality of women and workings of gender systems, which are under the control and effect of patriarchal constructions. In the light of all these, therefore, the present article will attempt to reveal how gender roles and sexuality are represented in these two related novels, how these works address the woman question with regard to the radical changes in their fictional societies, and in the end will question whether they can be called as feminist texts regarding their portrayal of women and men amidst the social transformation in the stories.

The Memoirs of a Survivor by Doris Lessing is the narration of a catastrophic situation in which an unnamed town and possibly a whole country has found itself as a result of unstated chain of events. The narrator in this chaotic world is left with the care of a little girl named Emily Cartwright, and her cat-dog Hugo, by a man she does not know; but she does not find it strange in the new world order. Although the story, or "history" if we can trust the narrator,¹⁵ is told (maybe even written) through the perspective of the middle-aged woman, it revolves around Emily, who is about to become a young woman. As the known order has been dissolved, people, especially young children, have begun to set up their own social systems. They come together and form gangs, and start a new way of life of their own. Emily joins one of these groups, led by a young boy Gerald, in the blink of an eye. That is when Emily becomes a woman and that is when we can talk about the issue of gender in Lessing's work as well.

Emily is introduced as an "obliging and obedient"¹⁶ girl due to her upbringing by her strict mother. Yet, this changes when she begins to "portray" herself through making of new cloths from the old ones,¹⁷ which can be read as a metaphor for the changing social system. As De Rango asserts, "Emily's journey towards self-realization is possible partly because of the broken-down society in which she lives."¹⁸ After she becomes a part of a gang and begins to make her own clothes in different styles, Emily goes through a process of self-realization as well since "she was 'trying on' not a dress, but self-portraits."¹⁹ However, this self-realization intertwines with her first experience at being in love.²⁰ She falls in love with Gerald, the group leader, who is "the natural guardians of the

¹⁵ Doris Lessing, *The Memoirs of A Survivor* (London: Flamingo, 1995), 94.

¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁷ Ibid., 51.

¹⁸ Emily De Rango, "Clothing in Doris Lessing's *the Memoirs of a Survivor*," *The Explicator* 71, no.4 (2013): 261.

¹⁹ Lessing, *Memoirs*, 52.

²⁰ Ibid., 73.

younger ones, the distressed, the forlorn;"²¹ he is like a knight in shining armour who arrives to save the damsel-in-distress.

This *love affair* between Emily and Gerald, however, is not a new one that would change the man-woman relationship and liberate her from the traditional women's roles. Emily chooses to be the consort of the male leader, because, as the narrator explains, "she was in love,"²² instead of becoming a "chieftainess" of another commune in the broken-down society, which would be expected to result in the break-down of the gender order as well. The position in which Emily is placed, or prefers to be placed, reveals that not much has changed for the good of women. It also suggests, as DuPlessis observes, "certain psycho-social patterns are inevitable, that the laws of the world as we know them are 'unalterable'."²³ Gerald's attempt to take all the responsibility for the safety and survival of his little band as a man reinforces the essential roles of men as breadwinner and protector.²⁴ That Emily is not the only woman with whom Gerald has intimate and sexual relations takes back some of the rights that women have gained over their partners. The problem is not that Gerald has other women in his life but that Emily suffers from the situation, "Emily was suffering, she was in pain ... She wanted ... to be alone with Gerald."²⁵ Thus, she turns into "everywoman, a victim of emotional hurts,"²⁶ "the eternal woman at her task of weeping."²⁷ As Hoberstroh observes, "[a]s the narrator watches Emily attempt to create an identity, acting out different roles, she sees a version of herself, and, ultimately, of many other women. Unaware of the potential conflict between her own needs and society's expectations, a woman may ... find herself trapped in a situation which she has accepted without understanding."²⁸ Thus, Lessing's Emily, as the ultimate representation of the new woman in the new order, fails to escape the clutches of the roles of the old order's women.

Another representation of woman is Emily's mother, depicted through motherhood. The narrator gets glimpses of the lives of baby Emily and her mother through the "screenings" behind the wall. "The woman, the wife, and the mother" is seen experiencing guilt, anger and agony in her role as a mother. She occasionally takes it out on Emily, and in one particular scene, she openly laments the burden of the compulsory motherhood for every woman, "I simply

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 94.

²³ DuPlessis, "The Feminist Apologues," 6.

²⁴ Lessing, *Memoirs*, 93.

²⁵ Ibid., 74-75.

²⁶ Dooley, "An Autobiography," 160.

²⁷ Lessing, *Memoirs*, 145.

²⁸ Patricia Boyle Hoberstroh, "'I' and 'It' in Doris Lessing's *the Memoirs of A Survivor*," *Psychological Perspectives: A Quarterly Journal of Jungian Thought* 17, no.2 (1986): 175.

did not expect it, no one warns how it is going to be, it is too much ... No one has any idea, do they, until they have children, what it means. It's all I can do just to keep up with the rush of things, the meals one after another, the food, let alone giving the children the attention they should have."²⁹ The "complaint" of this stern and prim woman, burdened mother, vocalizes the burden of many women through the ages. However, the difference between Emily and her mother is the time period in which they live and experience womanhood. While Emily's mother is genuinely trapped in the roles assigned to her in a society filled with deep-seated traditions, Emily seemingly has the freedom to choose to be the woman she wants to be in a newly-constructed social order. Therefore, Emily's self-inflicted position is much more disheartening than that of her mother's in terms of gender roles.

Güneş Saygılı tells the story of a young woman, in analogy to *Memoirs*, named Güneş Saygılı over a period of thirty years. The novel is narrated by an omniscient narrator, but it is done mostly through the perspective of Güneş. We follow Güneş as she lives her twenties in the heat of 1980s political upheavals, military coup, her middle-age in 1990s religious conflicts and her old-age in 2000s ascent of capitalistic politics and eventually the destruction of a nation in a near future in a dystopic and apocalyptic atmosphere. Güneş's personal life is always intermingled with the social and political changes of the times. Although this political and social background is very important and effective in the ways that Güneş's personal life evolves, the novel gives more focus on her loves and heartbreaks. Through Güneş's relationship with various men and women, we can observe a gender order which is fictional but based on real situations.

Güneş Saygılı is an educated and intellectual daughter of two intellectual doctor parents who grew up in the aftermath of the foundation of Turkish Republic, which is referred to as enlightenment for Turkish society. Contrary to many young women who are abused and exploited by the male hegemony, her parents do not expose her to oppressive treatments. Her life, first of all, is told and built around her various relationships to men: Ali, her first boyfriend with whom she does not have a serious relationship, Doğan who affects and shapes Güneş's later personal life at great extents, and Şair (the Poet) who reawakens love in Güneş but then destroys it completely. Güneş is described by the narrator as "a girl who falls in love with the love itself before men", and as "a woman who is willing to consume her own self (ego) for the sake of her man."³⁰ These descriptions of her reveal to the reader that she is still trapped in a woman's role in which *her man* comprises everything in her life. Furthermore, in the union she volunteers with Doğan and Ali, she acts like a "female bird", who takes it up on

²⁹ Lessing, *Memoirs*, 60-61.

³⁰ Erendiz Atasü, *Güneş Saygılı'nın Gerçek Yaşamı*, (İstanbul: Everest, 2011), 14-15.

herself to make that place like home.³¹ She is so interested in the decoration and orderliness of the place that most of the time she is not as involved in the political activities as her male counterparts. Naim Atabağsoy argues that the reason for the women to be left in the background in the leftist movement of the Turkish Republic is that even the revolutionist men fail to revolutionize women's place in politics and keep up with well-established gender roles.³² However, throughout the novel, Güneş does not attempt to transform herself and women's roles in general from passivity to activity, nor does she protest openly about the unequal treatments of men and women within the movement.

On this point, Şayman Kaylı asserts that the women in Atasü's novels challenge the patriarchal hegemony not with words but through their unapologetic ways of living.³³ From this perspective, we can say that Güneş does not live strictly within the demands of patriarchy, either; she has sexual intercourse out of wedlock with more than one man throughout her life, she refuses to marry, and she chooses (or is forced to choose) not to have a child. On the other hand, it is not clear whether she refuses motherhood because she does not want to be a mother, or because the circumstances compel her to refuse motherhood. She gets pregnant with Şair's child, and when she tells Şair about the pregnancy, he reacts anxiously rather than joyfully to this news and does not show any interest in Güneş or baby; then she goes through an abortion.³⁴ At first, she, too, does not want to give birth to the child. Yet, after Şair's indifference, and especially after Zehra's (the uneducated wife of the maintenance man) constant nagging about motherhood, she starts to feel differently. Zehra warns her that she might regret not having a child later in her life when she cannot give birth to one, which makes Güneş question her feelings and desires on the subject, "A child... Does she desire a child despite everything? It was a need, rooted deep in the sea, an unmoving need like the rocks unseen from the surface of the sea... unseen because of its immobility;"³⁵ this immobility may refer to the static composition of gender norms and roles.³⁶ Atasü, in this process, remarks that the concept of motherhood and family are cultural constructions of patriarchal societies which wish to keep sexuality and women in control,³⁷ but the reader is left uncertain about whether Güneş is a strong woman who makes her choices

³¹ Ibid., 60.

³² Naim Atabağsoy, "Güneş Saygılı'nın Gerçek Yaşamı Romanında Türkiye Solunun Kadın Kimliğine Bakışı," *Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 34, no.1 (2017).

³³ Derya Şayman Kaylı, "Erendiz Atasü'nün Romanlarında Bedenin, Doğurganlığın ve Anneliğin İzini Sürmek," *Fe Dergi* 9, no.1 (2017): 30.

³⁴ Atasü, *Güneş Saygılı*, 140.

³⁵ Ibid., 139.

³⁶ Çimen Günay-Erkol, "Güneş Saygılı'nın Gerçek Yaşamı'nda Tarih ve Erkeklik," in *Erendiz Atasü Edebiyatı*. ed. Günseli Sönmez İşçi (İstanbul: Can, 2014), 141.

³⁷ Atasü, *Güneş Saygılı*, 138-140.

freely or a woman who is left to choose among the options presented to her by male authority.

As for the other female characters in the novel, Zehra, Müberra and Güneş's mother are also the victims of the male hegemony. Zehra and Müberra are similar to Emily's mother in terms of their almost-inevitable roles. They represent the uneducated, lower-class, migrant women of Turkey who come from the rural areas of the country. They are the women who internalize gender roles and do not and cannot develop a feminist consciousness; therefore, are imprisoned inside the confines of male authorities. Güneş's mother, on the other hand, is an educated woman who is the representative of the Turkish Republic's earlier periods. Yet, even she falls victim to the domination of male power on the fate of her daughter, Güneş's twin sister Ülker. When Ülker needs to have an appendix surgery, their mother protests against the appointed doctor, who is rumoured to operate drunk on patients, but their father, not wanting to sever his relationship with his doctor friend, ignores the warnings. In the end, Ülker becomes another sacrifice in the name of men's honour and authority. In this scenario, Ülker does not even have any saying in her fate, "Ülker said nothing; she just died."³⁸

Atasü's more obvious criticism of gender order can be observed through the behaviours and habits of male characters. Güneş's boyfriends Doğan and Şair, for instance, cannot overcome the urge to act or to feel in accordance with the alleged (but questionable) male nature. Doğan is a man who is in between his upbringing in the conventional manner, and his unconventional relationship with Güneş. After they have sexual intercourse, Doğan inwardly feels himself responsible towards Güneş because of his conservative nurturing which dictates that *a man's woman* is his responsibility. On the other hand, his leftist ideology suggests that he does not owe anything to her.³⁹ Likewise, Şair as a poet and a self-educated man is a man torn between conventions and revolutions. His bond to the cultural norms about gender relations bursts into sight after Güneş gains experience and fame as a result of her career as a writer. After her success, Şair shies away from Güneş's views on his poetry because the man in him commends that a man should be superior to *his woman*.⁴⁰ Especially after this turn of events, their relationship begins to deteriorate and eventually ends. Önder observes that the emphasis on male characters' inferiority complex despite the power assigned to them by patriarchal codes indicates the heavy burden of gender roles that the

³⁸ Ibid., 110.

³⁹ Ibid., 78.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 174.

system puts on each sex.⁴¹ As Atasü says, men cannot escape from the ancient male stuck in their spinal cord.⁴²

When it comes to the question whether or not these two novels can be regarded as feminist texts, it appears that they are not so powerful and empowering feminist novels. Especially Emily in *Memoirs* and Güneş in *Güneş Saygılı* are characters trapped within the traditional gender structures that exploit and debilitate women despite the liberating potentiality of the times in which they live and of the novel positions in which they find themselves. However, both novels present stronger arguments towards the end. After her disappointments and heartbreaks, Emily comes to full self-realization, recognizes her abilities and her power to take action in difficult circumstances, and emerges as an empowered young woman. She walks through the door opening on the wall side by side with Gerald with confidence. On the other hand, Güneş meanders to take control in her personal life and the political and environmental disasters around her, but in the end, with a dauntless resolution, she takes an entire building down to terminate the virus that has been spreading throughout the country, killing herself in the process. In her old age, she builds up the courage to destroy the destruction itself.

Another element that enables us to read these texts as feminist representations is the act of writing performed by women. In *Memoirs*, the narrator is the writer of the memoir who takes on the task of relaying the events of a society through personalized narratives. Similarly, Güneş becomes a successful and appreciated writer "who does not apologize from the world for being a woman" in her works.⁴³ Lessing's subtle employment of metafiction which "is a powerful tool of feminist critique, for to draw attention to the structures of fiction is also to draw attention to the conventionality of the codes that govern human behaviour" as Greene asserts,⁴⁴ further demonstrates the feminist aspect of the novel implied through the act of writing. Moreover, Şengül remarks that women authors who tackle the problems of women present alternative lives for other women.⁴⁵ In light of all this, we can say that *Memoirs* and *Güneş Saygılı* do not offer radical alternatives to women's unequal status and effective solutions for gender issues, but rather portray the existing gender structures, male/female hierarchies and the burden of the patriarchal order on both women and men. Nevertheless, the novels pose subtle yet substantial feminist appeals, through the critique of conventional gender norms, the acts of women's writing, and the final defying and empowering

⁴¹ Önder, "Erendiz Atasü," 469.

⁴² Atasü, *Güneş Saygılı*, 78, 89.

⁴³ Ibid., 159-160.

⁴⁴ Greene, "Feminist Fiction," 293.

⁴⁵ Mehmet Bakır Şengül, "Kadın Edebiyatı: Bir Varoluş Mücadelesi," *International Journal of Social Science* 44 (2016): 209.

acts of the leading women figures. It is only fair to say that both novels are the examples of feminist writing by women in their own styles.

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M. Tarık Ablak İstanbul'da dünyaya geldi. 29 Mayıs Üniversitesi'nin İslam ve Din Bilimleri Bölümü'nde lisans ve Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü'nde yan dal eğitimini tamamladı. İngilizce ve bilimsel hazırlık döneminin ardından şu anda Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Eski Türk Edebiyatı Bölümü'nde yüksek lisans ders dönemine devam etmektedir. İngilizce, Arapça ve Farsça bilmektedir. Evli ve bir çocuk babasıdır.