

Lucy's Quest for Self-discovery

Kevser Ateş

Karabük University, kevsercennet_55@hotmail.com

Abstract

This article aims to show the female narrator, Lucy Snowe's self-discovery through her experiences in a patriarchal society from a feminist point of view. Through this courageous and unconventional female narrator, Charlotte Bronte questions her society's expectations from women while also criticizing women's willingness to obey the rules defined by men. The traditional characterizations of women and men consequently result in binary oppositions which give "reasonable" and "strong" men the right to control "emotional" and "weak" women. Lucy has to face a lot of difficulties as she does not accept to be guarded by any men. In this novel called *Villette*, refusing her traditionally assigned social, passive role, Lucy tries to create her own identity as an independent individual.

Keywords: Feminism, Identity, Patriarchy, Binary oppositions

Lucy'nin Kendini Keşfetme Arayışı

Özet

Bu makale bir kadın anlatıcı olan Lucy Snow'un ataerkil bir toplumdaki tecrübeleri yoluyla kendini keşfini feminist bir bakış açısıyla göstermeyi amaçlıyor. Bu cesur ve geleneksel olmayan kadın anlatıcı sayesinde, Charlotte Bronte kadınların erkekler tarafından belirlenen kurallara uyma isteklerini eleştirirken toplumunun beklentilerini de sorgular. Kadın ve erkeklerin geleneksel tanımı "mantıklı" ve "güçlü" erkeğe, "duygusal" ve "zayıf" kadını kontrol etme hakkını tanıyan ikili karşıtlıklarla sonuçlanır. Lucy, erkekler tarafından korunmayı kabul etmediği için pek çok zorlukla yüzleşmek zorunda kalır. *Villette* adlı bu romanda, geleneksel olarak belirlenmiş sosyal, pasif rolünü reddeden Lucy, bağımsız bir birey olarak kendi kimliğini yaratmaya çalışır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Feminizm, Kimlik, Ataerki, İkili Karşıtlıklar

Introduction

In *Villette* Charlotte Bronte brings together different types of female and male characters with the purpose of shedding light on the perspectives of people in that period and depicts the self-discovery of the narrator, Lucy Snowe, through her interaction with these people. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator, Lucy, stays in the beautiful house of her godmother, Mrs. Bretton in the summer where she meets Mrs Bretton's teenage son, Graham and their relative's little daughter, Polly, whose father leaves her until he finds home in Europe. The writer gives socially desirable sex roles through the observation of silent, regardful and dignified Lucy Snowe, who tells us their story. The traditionality of Mrs. Bretton is seen in her opinion of Polly's mother "as silly and frivolous a little flirt as ever sensible man was weak enough to marry" (Bronte, 1984, p. 5). She thinks the reason why Mr. Home marries her is he spends most of his time in laboratory and does not have enough time to pay attention to his wife. A woman is supposed to have some certain qualities such as being pure, submissive and devoted to her family to find a husband while there is no information about the qualities a man is supposed to have as he has the privilege to choose the woman he wants. The binary oppositions between women and men are clear in the descriptions of characters. Polly is described by Lucy as silent, diligent, absorbed, womanly, but Mr. Home, Polly's father, is told to have a "manly self control" as he does not express his feelings. Lucy also implies the weakness of woman nature when she explains to Polly why Graham cannot love her as much as she does. The reason she says is "his nature is strong and gay, and (Polly's) is otherwise" (Bronte, 1984, p. 31). The animals' names referring to women also point out this weakness as Mrs Bretton calls Polly's mother a butterfly, a fragile animal, since she does not have the capacity to understand the experiments of her husband, and Mr. Home calls Polly "my pet" as if she needs to be tamed by a man.

Nearly ten years after Polly, Graham and Lucy separate, they meet again in a different country, France. Lucy now is depicted as an independent, unconventional young woman who is trying to look for her own identity in a conventional society. In a period when women are seen as the Angels in the House, it is troublesome for her to work as a teacher since she is subjected to criticisms of people around her. It is not a virtue for a woman to make a living on her own but a misfortune as she has no rich parents to support her or beauty to find a rich husband to take care of her. The pity Polly feels when she learns that Lucy is not rich is an epitome of her society's attitude towards working women:

“But poor Lucy! I thought she was a rich lady, and had rich friends.” “You thought like a little simpleton. I never thought so. When I had time to consider Lucy's manner and aspect, which was not often, I saw she was one who had to guard and not be guarded; to act and not be served: and this lot has, I imagine, helped her to an experience for which, if she live long enough to realize its full benefit, she may yet bless Providence. (Bronte, 1984, p. 297)

Interestingly, Bronte introduces a man, M. de Bassompierre, who is chastising his daughter for her simple-mindedness and defending Lucy's profession by arguing she is not someone that needs to be protected or served, which has advantages for her. However, her female character, Polly, is a dependent, selfless young girl that needs a guard all her life, which is explicitly clear in her own words: “I am not endeavouring, nor actively good, yet God has caused me to grow in sun, due moisture, and safe protection, sheltered, fostered, taught, by my dear father; and now--now--another comes. Graham loves me” (Bronte, 1984, p. 391). She is content with the social role assigned to her which is being an angel of her house after being a dear, docile daughter of her father, because without the protection of a man, she believes, she cannot lead a happy life. Thus, she approves and blesses her stereotypical social role that brings her comfort without making her struggle for anything in her life. Even when she is a child, she is well aware of the differences between a girl and a boy. She wants a piece of cake from Mrs. Bretton to give Graham: “girls--such as me and Miss Snowe—don't need treats, but he would like it” (Bronte, 1984, p. 23). Her upbringing makes her believe that the longings and needs of a man come before those of a woman who are supposed to be in the service of a man who deserves to be flattered and in return she just longs for his affection: “To stand by his knee, and monopolize his talk and notice, was the reward she wanted” (Bronte, 1984, p. 23). Polly is exactly “the little girl”, who “is as a rule less aggressive, less defiant, and less self sufficient; she seems to have a greater need for affection to be shown her, and therefore to be more dependent and docile” (Dickason, 1982, p. 18). When her father gets angry after learning the relationship between her and Dr. Graham Johnson, he resentfully reminds her of her duties: “Be married, Polly! Espouse the red whiskers. Cease to be a daughter; go and be a wife!” (Bronte, 1984, p. 450). Even before her birth, in patriarchal society her feminine duties are definite from an obedient daughter to a submissive wife based on common cultural norms. With the fear of hurting her father's feelings or losing his affection, Polly, taught to repress her feelings, altruistically says she can give up on her love by revealing her passivity and selflessness which makes Lucy think she can never be like her.

By refusing to depend on anyone in contrast to the expectations of her time, Lucy is consequently called mad in accordance with the definition made by Phyllis Chesler, who asserts “what we consider madness, whether it appears in women or men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one’s sex role stereotype” (Chesler, 1972, p. 56). It cannot be argued that Lucy completely rejects her “sex role stereotype”, but when compared to dependent and self-denying Polly or fun-loving and selfish Ginevra Fanshawe, she undauntedly struggles to stand on her own legs by working as a governess, a schoolteacher and a director of her own school. She turns down the offer to be a companion to Polly despite its much higher salary than she gets as a teacher: “...to be either a private governess or a companion was unnatural to me. Rather than fill the former post in any great house, I would deliberately have taken a housemaid’s place, bought a strong pair of gloves, swept bedrooms and staircases, and cleaned stoves and locks, in peace and independence... I was no bright lady’s shadow--not Miss de Bassompierre’s” (Bronte, 1984, p. 311). The extent of Lucy’s fond of independence is clear in her choice of being a housemaid instead of being a shadow of someone no matter how polite and kind she is like Polly de Bassompierre. Even though there is an implication of her madness through her continuous illness and depression resulting from being lonely for a while, the main reason of this madness primarily comes from her rejection to adopt the rules of male-defined culture. Elaine Showalter defines

Lucy’s illness as “moral insanity” in Victorian period that is “redefined madness, not as a loss or reason, but as a deviance from socially accepted behavior” (Showalter, 1987, p. 29).

Despite her independent nature, the presence of male dominance is occasionally felt in Lucy’s life. The professor at her school called M. Paul locks her in the dreary, hot attic, full of rats, where the ghost of the nun is rumoured to have appeared, and masterfully wants her to memorize her role for a play for a few hours. Though she has to obey him, she is not completely strict to the play as she shows her control over her role by rejecting to wear the male clothes given to her but demanding to dress as she wishes, which indicates her difference from other girls at school. The dark depiction of the attic symbolizes the confinement of women to their dark domestic lives by the pressure of males where they cannot escape. However, Lucy, who also thinks of seeing the ghost of the dead nun that turns out to be Hamal, dressed like a ghost to see his lover Miss Fanshawe at school, comes through by showing her strong nature as she neither gets crazy due to the appearance of the

ghost, which is surprising to Miss Fanshawe, nor blindly submits to whatever is told to her by M. Paul.

The deterrent attitude of male oriented society towards women who enthusiastically enjoy learning is seen in the anger of M. Paul, who teaches math to Lucy, against her as she has fun in learning it. She refers to a book by Paul Carl David Emanuel in order to explain how intellectual women are seen by society: “A ‘woman of intellect,’ it appeared, was a sort of ‘*lusus naturae*,’ a luckless accident, a thing for which there was neither place nor use in creation, wanted neither as wife nor worker” (Bronte, 1984, p. 370). “A woman of intellect” is not approved and even considered as a “luckless accident” as it is no use for the responsibilities of women expected to be passive, good-tempered and lovely as wives or workers. Helen Deutch also points out how the intellectuality of a woman affects her life: “Woman's intellectuality is to a large extent paid for by the loss of valuable feminine qualities: it feeds on the sap of the affective life.... the intellectual woman is masculinized; in her, warm, intuitive knowledge has yielded to cold, unproductive thinking.” (qtd. in Russ, 1983, p. 36) This intellectuality is in contradiction with the patriarchal qualities imposed on women such as selflessness, self-sacrifice, submissiveness, silence since she is no longer ignorant enough to be shaped by male culture but can express her own opinions. Being an intellectual is peculiar to men, which is necessary to make them superior to women like misogynist, conventional and conservative M. Paul, who likes to teach a woman but gets angry when he sees her enjoying it. In fact, Bronte reflects the difficulties she has as an intellectual woman in the nineteenth century of Europe when she attempts to write poems, which is discouraged by the poet Robert Southey, who thinks she is talented but “[l]iterature cannot be the business of a woman’s life and ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as ... recreation” (qtd. in Russ, 1983, p. 11). These “proper duties” are supposed to be the priorities of a woman for whom literature is merely seen as a time consuming entertainment. Even if she brings to light important issues of her time, she has no right to reclaim praise for her knowledge on the basis that she neglects her feminine roles for the sake of her achievement.

Conclusion

Within this patriarchal society confining women to domestic life rather than encouraging them to seek for their selves, Lucy, resolutely striving against male-oriented rules, discovers her own identity. Teresa de Lauretis argues that “subjectivity is neither (over) determined by biology nor by ‘free, rational, intentionality’ but, rather, by experience, which

she defines (via Lacan, Eco, and Peirce) as “a complex of habits resulting from the semiotic interaction of ‘outer world’ and ‘inner world’; the continuous engagement of a self or subject in social reality” (qtd. in Alcoff, 1997, p. 342). Lucy’s self is determined by the interaction of her “inner world” where she feels lonely and unsteady, but is fond of independence and “outer world” where she meticulously observes and analyzes people with whom she lives together and thus reaches the conclusion that what kind of qualities she has as a woman in this society. Her external exploration helps her acquisition of self-knowledge, self-understanding and self-discovery. Lucy, though inwardly afflicted by Dr Graham John’s obliviousness, concludes that she would not be happy with such a man who is completely blind to her true feelings and needs, and turns her attention to M. Paul, who truly understands Lucy whose love changes him as he does not care now she is a Protestant and encourages her to be a director of his school. Taking the chance to run a school on her own when M. Paul is away, Lucy experiences the joy of independence and success by proving herself to be a prospering female director.

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