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CHARLES DICKENS AND WOMEN

ABSTRACT

Throughout the literature, ‘concept of female’, position of women and place of women in the society are controversial matter of subjects. One of the greatest periods and turning points of English Literature, Victorian Period has a crucial impact on women description in poetry. As a founding father, Charles Dickens employed female figures in a wide range and in different masks and roles with his novels. In this article, female figures with unique identities and concepts of women will be analyzed by giving detailed descriptions and exemplifying from different works of art of Dickens.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, women, female figure, Victorian Period

ÖZ

Edebiyat boyunca, kadın konsepti, kadının toplumdaki yeri ve konumu tartışmalı bir konu olarak süregelmiştir. İngiliz Edebiyatının en ihtişamlı ve dönüm noktalarından biri olan Viktorya dönemi edebiyattaki kadın tasviri üzerinde büyük bir etkiye sahiptir. Edebiyatın kurucu isimlerinden biri olan Charles Dickens, kadın figürünü geniş yelpazede ve farklı maskeler ardında ele almıştır. Bu makalede, eşsiz kimlik özellikleri ve konseptiyle kadın figürü Charles Dickens’ın eserlerinden sağlanan detaylı açıklamalarla ve örneklendirmelerle analiz edilecektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Charles Dickens, kadın, kadın figürü, Viktorya Dönemi

INTRODUCTION

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an

elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and to-morrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next. (Dickens 19)

Dickens described the town, Coketown, with this striking realism following the developments of his own age. He told a lot about his environment in his works of literature. He mentioned 19th century's involvement with different aspects and examples in his works. The women issues of that period are employed by not only Charles Dickens but also his contemporaries. This essay will demonstrate the reflections of the patriarchal structure, his creation of the new women concept under Victorian society masks and fallen women that are created with his own imagination and experiences from his life in Charles Dickens's novels.

In this paragraph there will be given background information about 19th century. With the Industrial Revolution people started to lead new lives. All classes in society were influenced by the revolution. Changing dramatically with a lot of terms such as living style, financial situation, losing their jobs or taking up different kinds of jobs was their main problems that waited for to be solved. One aspect of what it will be concerned with is women aspects.

PATHETIC POSITION OF WOMEN IN VICTORIAN SOCIETY

In 19th century, Victoria Period women were in a pathetic position because they were deprived of many rights and they were suppressed by men.

The accepted reasoning was that the career for women was marriage. In addition to being able to sing, play an instrument and speak a little French or Italian, the qualities a young Victorian gentlewoman needed, were to be innocent, virtuous, biddable, dutiful and be ignorant of intellectual opinion. Whether married or single all Victorian women were expected to be weak and helpless, a fragile delicate flower incapable of making decisions beyond selecting the menu and ensuring her many children were taught moral values. A gentlewoman ensured that the home was a place of comfort for her husband and family from the stresses of Industrial Britain. (Thomas, 2000)

The women were seen as prosperities of their husbands. They were not allowed to go out by themselves. They were responsible for households and raising up their children. They did not have any rights in terms of selection or governing. Reform Bill, 1832, as an example, extended the franchise only for males. Moreover, they could not govern even their own houses. They were kinds of slaves in other words.

DETAILS ABOUT CHARLES DICKENS OWN LIFE

It will be continued with specific information about Charles Dickens's own life. His life was full of griefs and bad experiences. With the imprisonment of his father, little Charles was raised up a kind of fatherless. Charles had to work for his family because his education was not affordable. He experienced the life's cruel and painful side when his early ages. His mother sent him to work in a blacking factory. She was one of the most influential figures in Dickens' life. His wife, Catherine, giving birth 10 children to Dickens, was a miserable woman. Dickens mentioned about his wife in his letters as a dumpy, boring woman. Dickens was a womanizer. A few examples for his womanizer character are: his adoration to his own sister-in-law and afterwards separation of his wife his having relationship with a young actress. He reflected such these elements to his works. Apart from these elements, he gave place to women examples from his own life. For instance, his mother was mentioned in various ways in his works. His fondness to women was another subject for his novels.

Charles Dickens nourished his stories mostly from the Urania Cottage. He can be considered as a builder of this cottage. Urania Cottage was a kind of house in which there were a lot of women from almost all places in the society. Charles Dickens dealt with these women in terms of their education, getting skills for their households and for bringing them identities in the community.

“Charles Dickens was a founder the Urania Cottage. On 26th May, 1846, Dickens sent her a fourteen-page letter concerning his plan for setting up an asylum for women and girls working the London streets as prostitutes. He began the letter by explaining that these women were living a life "dreadful in its nature and consequences, and full of affliction, misery, and despair to herself. His idea was to begin with about thirty women. Order, punctuality, cleanliness, the whole routine of household duties - as washing, mending, cooking - the establishment itself would supply the means of teaching practically, to everyone. The house was already named Urania Cottage but from the first he called it simply the Home, the idea that it should feel like a home rather than an institution being so important to him. Charles Dickens later recalled the type of women he recruited for Urania Cottage. "Among the girls were starving needlewomen, poor

needlewomen who had robbed... violent girls imprisoned for committing disturbances in ill-conducted workhouses, poor girls from Ragged Schools, destitute girls who have applied at police offices for relief, young women from the streets - young women of the same class taken from the prisons after under-going punishment there as disorderly characters, or for shoplifting, or for thefts from the person: domestic servants who had been seduced, and two young women held to bail for attempting suicide". Dickens also arranged for the women to be well fed, with breakfast, dinner and tea at six, being their last meal of the day. There was schooling for two hours every morning where they were taught to read and write. (Simkin)

With all these efforts for building a cottage for women, Dickens proved that he had a different perspective about women. He collected new life stories and fictitious characters from this house.

Patriarchal society is a system of men's power over women. The domination of male gender shapes the role of women in the community. In Victorian Era supremacy of men could be felt. Therefore, the society of that period can be considered as patriarchal society. According to opinions of men in Victorian Era, women had only one goal: sitting at home and waiting for a proper husband. After they found husband, they turned into a wife figure who took their husband's interest. Having reached this high, blessed position they began to run on their households and to bring up their children. Women had to have specific qualities to be an ideal wife according to the codes of conduct. For instance they should be innocent and untouched. If they did not have the qualities they would not be end up with marriage. In Charles Petrie's article he utters his opinion:

Innocence was what he demanded from the girls of his class, and they must not only be innocent but also give the outward impression of being innocent. White muslin, typical of virginal purity, clothes many a heroine, with delicate shades of blue and pink next in popularity. The stamp of masculine approval was placed upon ignorance of the world, meekness, lack of opinions, general helplessness and weakness; in short, recognition of female inferiority to the male (Petrie 184)

When Charles Dickens criticized the patriarchal system of Victorian England he employed male characters in his novels in order to show their dominance upon women. Mr. Murdstone in *David Copperfield* can be considered as an example of this situation. He believes that he is one of the most suitable husbands with his perpetual skills. Cruel and retributive characteristics of him, towards not only his wives but also David, could be seen during the novel. With the subordination of women in his

life and ill-treatment to women he is an apparent example for patriarchal society. Pip, in *Great Expectations* is a character who is willing to be a gentleman. Being gentleman in that era means that earning a reasonable amount of money, being dressed with luxury clothes and being served by servants. All he knows about being gentleman is on the surface. He lost a lot of values from his childhood date forward. He tries to get involved to hypocritical society. Pip, as a gentleman, tries to handle with expectations that patriarchal society requires from him. In *Our Mutual Friends* there is an ignorant father figure Gaffer Hexam. He is the father of Lizzie and her brother. He does never fulfill his responsibilities such as he does not support his children and does not let them to be educated. In financial terms he is like a parasite. Gaffer tries to suppress his own daughter in every opportunity. Again he can be considered as an example for patriarchal society's man in terms of his subordination of Lizzie and his way of living and treatments.

WOMEN POSITION IN 19th CENTURY ENGLAND

According to the Victorian society's opinion the women should be innocent and well-natured. In order to be an ideal wife-to be they had to have special qualities. As important required qualities, the sexual sides of them can be considered. The women in that era were thought as asexual creatures whose do not instinct for having sex.

Because they are often kept from participation in the commercial and governmental spheres, women are often oppressed by authority figures such as religious preachers. Men and even boys have more experience of the 'male world' and are often not as passive as nineteenth century women in obeying authority figures and believing the dogmatic truths they teach without questioning the motives that lay behind them (McGuire 35).

The women that were not allowed to educate themselves and could only read specific pieces of literature were seen as replaceable laborers whose lives were discounted. "The woman gave herself over to the rearing of children and overseeing of servants, housecleaning, food preparing, mending, sewing, shopping, flower arranging, and performing other tasks. The man earned wages, paid the bills, oversaw the livery, attended to political and legal matters, and went to war if necessary (Ayres,3)" In such a disastrous atmosphere Dickens tried to create new concepts for women.

Charles Dickens saw women as individuals and rebellious contrarily to society. "The orphans, servants and child-carers, the seamstresses, milliners and theatre girls, the prostitutes, tramps and petty thieves, the half-starved apprentices and the attempted suicides: they all gave him their voices and stories." (Hartley, 157) His all sorts of women characters can be seen in his works. He portrayed

his women in various ways. Dickens decorated the Victorian women in new clothes. He collected a lot of life-like stories from every field that can be observed in life itself. He dealt with a lot of women issues. Especially he was concerned with fallen women and the women in the position of immaterial for no-one.

In Charles Dickens's novels there are a lot of examples of new women. There are women figures that are humiliated and frustrated in the male-centered society in the Victorian Era. He tried to show his domestic ideology apparently not only by weaving plot but also by making characterization. He did not purpose to advocate any ideology. On the other hand, he, as an influential novelist, dealt with the domestic ideology in the Victorian society. Brenda Ayres thinks that Dickens' text overtly promotes an ideology of womanhood, however at the same time it modifies and subverts that ideology (Ayres 2). The women in his novels were depicted with their struggle against the patriarchal society rather than acknowledging the system of superiority of men. In his literary works he put the women in the position of their natural places according to the Victorian period's expectations but they had their veils that played the role of new identity for them. It will be given analyzes the in works of literature of Dickens.

EXAMPLES FROM DICKENS' PIECES OF ART

In *Great Expectation*, there is a woman named Miss Havisham. Her life was destroyed when she was abandoned on her wedding day. Her life was stopped with this abandonment. She educated the little girl Estella, who has no feelings and is brutal towards men. Estella symbolizes a new type of woman who breaks the rule. Expected manner is to get married or have relationship with man who is selected by her own family or relatives but she rebels against all social norms and rejects any kinds of relationship. Lady Dedlock is another woman whose emotional life over after her denial. In *David Copperfield* the mother figure Clara waited for a long time after her husband was dead. She came across a man, Mr. Murdstone, who destroyed not only Clara's life but also David's himself. Mr. Murdstone's victim is not limited with Clara. He got married after his oppressed wife's death. He was like a woman's life destroyer. Throughout the novel there is sense of harmful men who should be kept away from women.

In *Our Mutual Friend* there are two foil characters Bella Wilfer and Lizzie Hexam. Bella is full of pride in the beginning of the story. Her character development is on the side of increasing positively but her disputes and dissatisfaction about her father's position are several examples of resistance against patriarchal power, her father. In order to get married to whom is suitable for her with his social and financial situation Bella uses her sexual power and intellectual background. On the other side there is Lizzie who devoted her life to save and to watch out her father. Lizzie is an ideal girl according to social codes but with a few aspects she can be an example of an independent woman. So as to support his brother financially she works in a factory which is one of the duties of her father.

Dickens was good at creating new women but in his novels it can be observed that he criticized the old woman concept by depicting a few of them.

In *Martin Chuzzlewit* there is a spinster whose name is Mrs. Gamp. She is a typical the Victorian old woman as being a midwife, a drunken old woman and a nurse. Matthew McGuire has a comment about this woman:

“Mrs. Gamp is one of the Dickens’s most brilliant early comic creations. She sets aside ‘her natural predilections as a woman’ and becomes an example of a satirical, dark comic figure of opportunism and unconcern. She is a cavalier and desensitized to genuine emotions and overindulges herself in eating food. Dickens makes a good use of stereo-types humorously ingratiating them into the mind of his reader and then carrying the character’s thoughts and actions to the inevitable extremes of the stereotype he is satirizing” (McGuire, 33).

He, McGuire, gave another example for stereotype that is satirized by Dickens: “Mrs. Jellyby is a dimensional stereotype of the “Angel of Charity” whose selflessness is incredibly selfish- she cares more about the children of Borrioboola-gha than her own children’s welfare” (34).

Dora, in *David Copperfield*, is a girl who has a fundamental shocks one after another. She is depicted as an educated and intellectual attorney’s daughter. Her own purity and innocence what contributes to her character remain only property for after her first shock is experienced, which is her father’s death. Her only stand is David. These circumstances can show the audience a typical Victorian Miss’s behavior, her desperately neediness for men. When they are at loggerheads Dora knows that her intellectuality is not enough for holding David in her hands. She just hopes that her sexuality and beauty will work. Dickens demonstrates here that the Victoria women’s desperate and pathetic situation so as to give lesson for young Victorian women.

As a character fallen woman and orphan there are a lot of figures in Dickens’s novels. In this paragraph the approaches to fallen women in Victorian society will be discussed before detailed analyze of fallen women and orphans in Dickens’ novels are given. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs women in 19th century were considered as asexual.

“When examining the sexuality of the 19th century fictional heroine it is equally important to consider whether the sexuality that attaches to her in a given representation is experienced by her or has her as its object; to distinguish

boundary between sexual knowledge and 'impurity'; to discover the relationship between the various types of passion attributed to her. It is conceivable that many writers on the novel and femininity have read the heroines of the Victorian novel as at least approximations to the passive, sexless cultural ideal only because an ideal is what they expect the heroine to be. In fact, the ideal wife-mother, sexless and dutiful, is not central concern of the typical novel of the period" (Reynolds, 15).

In Dickens's novels there are ideal women or angel figures that are used to demonstrate various kinds of women. Dickens puts spoiled characters among them. His infinite sources for creating women types are because of both his fondness to women and different opinion towards them. He shows women's oppressed tendency to have sex in different versions.

In *David Copperfield*, Little Emily can be considered as an example of fallen woman. In the beginning of the novel Emily is an angelic figure whose beauty and innocence stand out. However, she intends to be a lady and her willing to be a rich woman and to save from poor condition are foreshadowing for audience that she is the future fallen woman. Little Emily, with her innocence and beauty is turning into a lady who has an attractive and sexy. She will be deceived by charming Steerforth, who is a friend of David. Her desire for a higher rank and passion for being a lady are her destructive elements. She flees from her lovely house and betrays her respected uncle who bought up pitiful orphan, Emily. She suffers the consequences when Mrs. Steerforth begins to humiliate her because she is from different class and her friends, lifestyle and way of dressing are the joking matters. The attitudes of Mrs. Steerforth towards Emily can be considered as society's opinion against fallen women. At this point an apparent example of fallen woman, Martha Endell can play her role. Martha is an orphan girl who is a potential harmful friend for Emily. She is fallen also. The two orphans unknowingly will share almost same fate. Emily continues to be a friend with Martha in spite of all oppositions. She may see her near future in the life of Martha. However, ironically, Martha will be the one who saves Emily from a fallen world. This will be Martha's salvation. "Mr. Peggoty's trust will redeem Martha, as he enlists her in the quest for Emily. The despised 'image of humiliation' now has an object and ultimately salvation. Rescuing Emily from what sounds like a brothel, Martha Endell will and well, flying the flag for other Marthas back at Shepherd's Bush"(Hartley, 160).

Oliver Twist is another profound Dickens's work of literary. Oliver is presented as an orphan to the audience. The first example of fallen woman can be seen as the mother of Oliver because she is not known for anyone and she is suspected to give birth out of marriage. The more apparent instance for fallen woman is Nancy. She is a prostitute but as an audience we do know hardly about her. Her

dialogues are limited but her crucial role is being a savior of Oliver. Like as Martha in previous novel she tries to gain her salvation by aiding Oliver. However, she cannot reach because Nancy is murdered. Her eagerness, challenge with men and risk to save Oliver can be consider as a heroine's manners.

CONCLUSION

With various examples and analyzes of characters Dickens has proof to have a different aspect towards women. He draws a picture in which there is a fallen woman for example but at the end, contrarily to Victorian society, that fallen woman reaches salvation or she is seen as a savior. The fallen woman character can change her being fallen woman characterization by behaving as not expected from a fallen woman. Dickens aimed exactly this concept of woman. In order to get attention to woman issues he employed new women characters or he demonstrated typical woman in 19th century women to criticize. Dickens wanted to see the women in different position with new perspectives. He tried to give message to society that if the conditions changed the women would not be a prostitute. His purpose to create orphans may mean that if there were decent individuals for being parent the society would be in a better condition. He tried to restore the aspects rather than erase them. In order people to imagine what a livable society would be like with the different featured women Dickens narrated these kinds of stories. Betterment, even if it is just a possible, could be a piece of hope for altering points of view. Dickens, therefore, employed new types of women and fallen women in his novels.

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