

## **‘When Madame Butterfly refuses to die’ by Erendiz Atasü**

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### *Abstract*

As it is visible from the presented short story, the main cause of predestined crazed female identity is the patriarchal system, which through repression generates madness, making a woman trapped by isolating and excluding her from the society. The behaviour of the main protagonist Çio Çio San is certainly connected to the inability to identify with the imposed role of the woman, while it also shows her reaction and resistance because she cannot and does not want to tolerate this state any longer. Through history, gendering of hysteria has directly implied gender asymmetry which is also portrayed in this short story by the Turkish writer Erendiz Atasü.

*Key words:* woman, hysteria, E. Atasü, woman's role in the society, Madame Butterfly

### **Introduction**

There are countless ways of approaching a literary text, so its interpretation and evaluation are never fully rounded or final. A literary work is always open for new interpretation and analysis, and allows us to discover new attributes and values, which leave room for new research and new research perspectives.

This paper focuses on one small, but highly important part of research of literary text, and that is the issue of gender and gender differences in the short story ‘*When Madame Butterfly Refuses To Die*’ (*Madam Butterfly Ölmeyi Reddederse*) by Turkish writer Erendiz Atasü.

In her constant effort to fulfil her primary and secondary roles, while simultaneously renouncing herself and her essence, woman, ‘constructed as the one without credibility, as absent and silent’ (Spivak, as cited in Đurić, 2009: 239), has to constantly stifle her sense of alienation and not belonging to the man’s world. With time, this becomes an extremely heavy mental load after which she acts outside the norm and becomes the ‘social monster.’

Women in E. Atasü’s short stories refuse to be oppressed and fight for their more equal role by resisting the norm. However, the cruel reality and patriarchy are so deeply rooted in every aspect of the society that women often, physically rather than morally, fail in their attempt to escape the gender oppression.

### **Madame Butterfly, Çio Çio San or simply a woman**

Representation of women, as a kind of critique of the existing patriarchal matrix, presented in Erendiz Atasü’s short story ‘Madame Butterfly Refuses To Die’ (*Madam Butterfly Ölmeyi Reddederse*) portrays the woman who refused to adhere to the ruling hegemony and the deterministic pattern created in the short story ‘Madame Butterfly’ written by the American writer John Luther Long in 1989. Opera of the same name was inspired by the short story and composed by Giacomo Puccini, while the text was adapted by Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica. The author in her story follows the existing plot, but with her arguments subverts the existing ‘narrative’ from the inside, ultimately delaying the expected/tragic outcome.

The original opera in three acts, which was the inspiration and the starting point for Atasü’s short story, begins with the introduction of the fifteen-year-old geisha Çio Çio San ready to marry Pinkerton, the lieutenant of the United States Navy. The young geisha changes her religion for love and starts living with Pinkerton. Her family considers this as a betrayal of her religion, culture, nation, and themselves, therefore, they renounce her. Çio Çio San, or Butterfly as the young lieutenant names her and she accepts it without hesitation, is in that way left without anyone

apart from Pinkerton and her maid Suzuki. Not long after, Pinkerton goes to his homeland leaving the pregnant Butterfly behind. She waits for him for years with the son to which she gave birth. One day, he comes back, but not alone. He returns with his new wife and the reason for his return is more hurtful than the knowledge that he married, because he returned to take his and Butterfly’s son to America. Pinkerton’s double betrayal causes unspeakable pain for Butterfly and results in her taking her own life with a sabre.

‘The limits of a book are never clearly drawn: beyond the title, first line, last full stop, beyond the internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is through the reference system woven into other texts, other sentences: it is the bind that ties it all.’ (M. Fuko, 1972; as cited in Tomašević, 2011: 86)

In this version of the story, which is based on binary opposition, Atasü attempts to demystify and deconstruct the ideological narrative, to shake the foundations of the patriarchal inevitability and accordingly tries to change the existing determinisms. Therefore, she decides to gift her heroin with not a different destiny, but the freedom of choice.

In fact, the life of young Butterfly – whose only wish was to become Mrs Pinkerton, but after Pinkerton had left, she only succeeded in becoming Madame Butterfly – turns into a long wait. While questioning and analysing the situation she is in, she becomes aware that she is no longer Çio Çio San, just like she is no longer Butterfly because the one who chose that name for her is gone. Therefore, she begins to question who she really is.

For Butterfly, life became a constant wait. She was no longer Çio Çio San, and since Pinkerton left, she was no longer Butterfly. Who was she then? (Atasü, 2012: 89)<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the long awaited return turns into a nightmare for her. Having been marked as *the other*, i.e. a geisha who had a son out of wedlock, was rejected by the society and her own family, and was irrevocably marked as abhorrent, she silently accepts to surrender her son to his father, which leads to a tragic ending.

<sup>1</sup> (‘Butterfly içinse, yaşam kocaman bir bekleyişe dönüşmüştü. Artık Çoi Çoi San değildi. Pinkerton gittiğine göre artık Butterfly da değildi. Peki neydi?’)

Çio Çio San, Butterfly, Madame Butterfly, undestined Madame Pinkerton, or simply a woman ends her own life because she could not exist outside the dominant discourse which would, for her, mean the life of solitude.

In her text, Atasü delays the discursive destruction of Madame Butterfly by giving new meaning to the character of the main protagonist. In fact, after having spent eighteen years on the opera stage, her Madame Butterfly refuses to commit suicide for love, and decides to leave the opera and the destruction. While the director and others try to convince her to stay, she is determined to live and does so to spite them all.

- I won't die; I will live to spite them all...

- But, distinguished geisha, you cannot do that. You are a collective social property. After this, how is Giuseppe Giacosa to write his libretto? How is the respected Puccini to compose his opera? Who and in what way will with the supernatural power of music portray the sublimity of love's suffering, serenity of the wait, the depth of sorrow caused by failed hopes and woman's destiny? Then remember all the sopranos who became famous for their role of Madame Butterfly. Renata Tebaldi, Maria Callas... How can you do this to them? (Atasü, 2012: 90)<sup>2</sup>

By deconstructing the existing modes, the author aims to 'redraft' the original story of the unhappy woman in love, who in the original story was unable to exist outside the historical context because she was 'the one who opposed' (Moranjak-Bamburać, 2003: 267). In this respect, the text advocates for the liberation from norms imposed by the patriarchal system, and rebellion against adopted, stagnant, rigorous limitation of women. The society sees this as destruction of the moral and communal values by women, and as a great threat to its homogeneity and unity.

<sup>2</sup> ('Ölmeyeceğim işte, yaşayacağım herkese inat...' 'Saygıdeğer geyşa, bunu yapamazsınız. Siz insanlığın ortak kültürünün malısınız. Sonra Giuseppe Giacosa bu libreyoyu nasıl yazar? Sayın Puccini bu operayı nasıl besteler? Aşkın yüce ıstırabını, bekleyişin hüznünü, boşa çıkan umutlardaki derin kederi ve kadınların yazgısını, müziğin tanrısal gücüyle insanların yüreğine kim, nasıl iletebilir? Sonra, Madam Butterfly röliyle ünlenen bütün o sopranoları düşünün. Renata Tebaldi, Maria Callas... Onlara bunu nasıl yaparsınız?')

The voice that addresses her is representative of the patriarchal society and it always refers to her as ‘respected woman or geisha’, never by her name. On the one hand, this minimizes the woman’s role and insists on the pejorative meaning, while, on the other hand, it emphasizes her importance. However, woman, as well as her role, is important here as long as she is subjected to the hegemony of those who rule.

“But, respected geisha, you cannot behave as you wish. How many times do we have to repeat that you are the property of the entire mankind? You are the most beautiful and the most fragile symbol of the sacred suffering. (Atasü, 2012: 91)<sup>3</sup>

Any action outside the norm condemns Madame Butterfly because in the patriarchal society, according to Kate Linker, women do not speak, they exist to be watched, displayed, and objectified. She also adds that a woman inside the patriarchal structure is unauthorized, illegal; she does not represent, she is being represented (Linker, as cited in Erić, 2007-2008: 175).

Every time Madame Butterfly speaks, in discussions with her director, composer, colleagues, nations, the world, Atasü emphasizes Madame Butterfly’s critical thinking, her aspiration to change the existing world, her invitation to the social order to change the world.

Kate Millet states that misogynistic literature presents the heroines who entertain, amuse, flatter, and surrender themselves to a man (Millet, 2000: 57). The refusal to uphold these set customs and the continuous violation of the order and harmony results in exclusion from the society, which happened to Madame Butterfly.

When she refuses obedience, she is condemned to ridicule. The society sees ugliness in the anger and rage she shows. It sees the opinion she states as a threat, and reminds her that she is not supposed to think as her task is to be pretty and obedient. She is accused of ignorance the moment she raises some historical questions. Thus when she rips her own clothes with a knife because she cannot overpower the voice of society, she is deemed ‘insane’.

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<sup>3</sup> (‘Aman saygıdeğer gejša, öyle aklınıza estiği gibi davranamazsınız. Kaç kez söyleyeceğiz, siz insanlığa aitsiniz. Siz kutsal acının en güzel ve ince simgesisiniz.’)

As it can be seen, the author allowed her protagonist to develop herself perfectly and enabled her full realization, yet everything resulted in the character's downfall.

Trapped by the dominant group, in a tragic epilogue, Madame Butterfly from E. Atasü's short story '*When Madame Butterfly Refuses To Die*' gives in to the pressure of the society in which the heroine notices both men and women, and the author uses this to depict the power of the patriarchal discourse and its influence on female identity. However, there is a crucial difference, which even the heroine points out, and it is that this time she does not kill herself for love, but because she 'lost herself'. This can lead to a conclusion that the tragic figure of Madame Butterfly did not succeed in saving herself from the hegemonic patriarchal matrix.

Virginia Woolf's opinion that women are susceptible to the subconscious mind and 'split consciousness' (Lešić, 2006: 423) due to their unequal and frustrating social and material position seems to be applicable to this short story as well.

## Conclusion

Atasü's Madame Butterfly threatened the patriarchal discourse, which, terrified of the prospect of emancipation of *the other* and possible symbolic castration that would mean the loss of power, has to characterize her as insane and abhorrent, otherwise she would cause disruption. Given that Çio Çio San is (in)capable of expressing her dissatisfaction without 'a voice of reason' taken away by the men's world, she tries to collect all of her strength to overpower the 'obedient and quiet' woman within herself, which causes her double marginalization and costs her everything. Since she attempted to free herself of social and cultural constraints, which were in the way of her creating her own identity and finding herself, she was characterized as mentally disturbed. Bell huks claims that, *if you are a woman, insanity is often punishment for speaking out* (Huks, 1997: 272) and this is undoubtedly visible in the short story.

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## ‘Kada Madame Butterfly odbije umrijeti’ autorice Erendiz Atasü

### Sažetak

Kao što je vidljivo iz prikazane kratke priče, glavni uzrok predodređenog zaludenog ženskog identiteta je patrijarhalni sistem, koji potiskivanjem generiše ludilo, čineći ženu zarobljenom, izolacijom i isključivanjem iz društva. Ponašanje glavne protagonistice Čio Čio San svakako je povezano sa nesposobnošću da se

identifikuje sa nametnutom ulogom žene, a pokazuje i njenu reakciju i otpor jer ne može i ne želi više da trpi ovo stanje. Rodna histerija je kroz historiju direktno implicirala rodnu asimetriju koju u ovoj kratkoj priči oslikava i turska autorica Eréndiz Atasü.

*Ključne riječi:* žena, histerija, E. Atasü, uloga žene u društvu, Madame Butterfly