



THE SUPRANARRATABLE AND THE ANTINARRATABLE IN WILKIE COLLINS' *MAN AND WIFE*

Wilkie Collins'in *Erkek ve Karısı* Adlı Eserinde Anlatılabilir Üstü ve Anlatılabilir Karşıtı Kavramları

Muhammed Metin ÇAMELİ*

ABSTRACT

The integration of traumatic events such as sexual abuse, war attacks and other forms of violence into literary narratives has been quite remarkable from ancient times onwards. However, the unfathomable nature of trauma that resists representation becomes manifest as a difficulty to be surmounted in the field of literature at the same time. In other words, the unnarratability of a traumatic experience with the help of a literary genre has been at the heart of multifarious discussions pertaining to the relationship between literature and trauma. It must be stated that the literary period of a work with its peculiar characteristics has been associated with the hardship of articulating trauma as well. Based on this idea, many trauma narratives of Victorian Era can be said to incorporate what remains unnarrated because of stifling social conventions. This is particularly evident in Wilkie Collins' *Man and Wife* in which readers view the world through the lenses of a traumatized woman, Hester Dethridge. To clarify, the purpose of this paper is to study the ways in which the selected novel functions as an apt forum of relating the concepts of the supranarratable and the antinarratable to Hester's case to understand her psychic condition.

Keywords: Wilkie Collins, the supranarratable, the antinarratable, Victorian novel, trauma.

ÖZ

Cinsel istismar, savaş saldırıları ve şiddetin diğer türleri olarak isimlendirebileceğimiz travmatik olayların edebi anlatımlar ile bütünleşmesi eski zamanlardan günümüze dikkat çekmektedir. Fakat betimlemeye karşı direnen travmanın anlaşılması zor yapısı bir yandan edebiyat alanında aşılması gereken bir güçlük olarak kendini göstermektedir. Başka bir deyişle, travmatik bir deneyimin edebi bir tür vasıtasıyla aktarılamaz oluşu fikri travma ve edebiyat ilişkisi üzerine odaklanan çok çeşitli tartışmaların merkezinde yer almaktadır. Edebi bir eserin yazıldığı dönemin kendine has

* Asst. Prof. Dr., İstanbul Aydın University, Faculty of Science & Letters, Department of English Language and Literature, İstanbul/Türkiye. E-mail: metincameli@aydin.edu.tr. ORCID: 0000-0002-9479-4416.

özelliklerinin de travmanın dile getirilmesi zorluğu ile ilişkilendirildiği durumunun vurgulanması gerekmektedir. Bu düşünceye bağlı olarak, birçok Viktoryen çağı travma anlatılarının o dönemin boşucu sosyal geleneklerinin etkisi altında anlatılmayanı içerisinde bulundurduğu söylenebilir. Wilkie Collins'in *Erkek ve Karısı* şeklinde Türkçeye çevrilen ve içerisinde sarsıntıya uğramış bir kadın karakter olarak karşımıza çıkan Hester Dethridge'in bakış açısından dünyaya baktığımız eseri bu doğrultuda örnek teşkil etmektedir. Bu makalenin amacı, seçilen bu romanın Hester karakterinin yaşadığı vakanın anlatılabilir üstü ve anlatılabilir karşıtı kavramları aracılığıyla incelenebilir olması açısından uygun bir zemin oluşturduğu fikrine dayanarak bu karakterin ruhsal durumunu çözümleyebilmektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Wilkie Collins, anlatılabilir üstü, anlatılabilir karşıtı, Viktoryen romanı, travma.

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that literary productions of different periods in Western literature, particularly as of the Classical period, have exhibited a concern with depictions of traumatic individual or collective experiences. Considering the referred period of time between ancient and modern times, it must be stated that the Victorian period stands out in terms of its preoccupation with trauma as contentious political, cultural and societal developments of the time provide a fertile ground for all these to be integrated into thematic content of literary genres. Relevantly, Wilkie Collins' *Man and Wife* written in 1870 can be regarded as one great exemplification of trauma narratives of the Victorian period inasmuch as this novel serves as a means of foregrounding pervasive ills of the Victorian society such as gender inequality, domestic violence and coercive rape. What impresses readers from the outset in Collins' handling of these issues is the author's focus on marriage laws of the nineteenth century as the essential underlying reason behind the disruption of the relationships between men and women. His overall argument centers around his explicit criticism of legal procedures of Irish, Scottish and English societies pertaining to conjugal laws that disempower women and make them feel trapped by societal constraints. In other words, the institution of marriage founded upon these laws is portrayed as an insurmountable impediment to the likelihood of women's benefiting from their rights.

The design of the entire plot of the novel with its inclusion of a main plot and a subplot goes hand in hand with Collins' expostulation of the ways in which women are supposed to take on roles as dutiful wives in het-

eropatriarchal society to a serious extent. Lisa Surridge argues that “[t]he main plot, designed by Collins to expose inconsistencies and archaisms in English, Scottish, and Irish marriage law, depicts the matrimonial legal tangles endured by the middle-class characters Anne Silvester and Geoffrey Delamayn.” (Surridge, 1996: 103). At this point, a brief synopsis of the convoluted plot of the novel would help to see the extent to which it is built upon accounts of abuse on the part of central women characters. Anne Silvester, a close friend of and governess to Blanche Lundie, escapes to an inn in Scotland in the hope of getting married to Geoffrey Delamayn, a young athlete, who abandons Silvester irrespective of her extramarital impregnation by him. To Anne’s consternation, Delamayn decides not to go to the meeting point and sends his friend, Arnold Brinkworth, with the idea in mind that it would be improper for a young woman to be seen there alone. Nevertheless, his own intention, in the meantime, seems to get married to a richer woman whom he believes would elevate him to a higher position in the society. Brinkworth, who is indeed expected to marry to Blanche on his arrival to the inn, acts as if he and Anne were a married couple so as to fight against the notoriety of visiting a single woman for himself and of privately meeting a man in this way for Anne. This demonstrates both how much English people in the Victorian age are indoctrinated to feel obliged to conform to societal norms and the easiness with which people in Scotland pretend to be officially married on account of the laxity of the marriage laws in the country. Carolyn Dever emphasizes that “[t]he novel chafes at the prospect that the state has reduced the culture’s sacred ideal of marriage to a thin legal technicality.” (Dever, 2006: 121). It can also be maintained that this particular circumstance of the characters is gravely injurious to their identities since they ostensibly fall prey to the legal impositions of the society. Pertinent to this aspect of the events in the novel, Geoffrey Baker notes that “[t]he consequences for Arnold, who is engaged to marry another, and for Anne, who has now been jilted by Geoffrey, are potentially enormous, and the rest of the novel strives to untangle the mess that has been created.” (Baker, 2018: 246).

The main plot with its introductory account of artificial marriages merges with the subplot that embodies the story of Hester Dethridge who “is driven to despair by years of physical and emotional abuse, and her inability to keep her own earnings or obtain a divorce from her alcoholic husband.” (Ifill, 2013: 12). It must be stressed that the most striking feature of the character of Hester is her mutism accompanied by hallucinatory fits

and split personality which makes readers contemplate upon her case in relation to the question of marital abuse and its effects upon a woman. She overtly symbolizes female entrapment by Victorian marriage laws and her silence which turns out to be an elective silence later on can also be deemed as evocative of “the unspeakable in the novel.” (SurrIDGE, 1996: 105). She is challenged by the ineffectiveness of the verbal language so as to articulate the hardships she encounters in her marriage. In line with this perspective, it could be argued that Collins’ presentation of the figure of Hester as a traumatized woman which becomes fully manifest in the revelation of her self-imposed mutism as a result of domestic violence serves in the novel to make sense of the unnarratable key issues of abuse and domestic incarceration. Hence, this study, relying on the theory of the unnarratable postulated by Robyn R. Warhol, aims to detail the case of Hester Dethridge lying at the core of Collins’ work through the concepts of the supranarratable and the antinarratable as two categories of the unnarratable in Warhol’s account.

Traumatization of Hester Dethridge and The Supranarratable

Robyn R. Warhol divides the unnarratable into different categories in her work entitled “Neonarrative; or, how to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film” and begins her discussion by highlighting the significance of the word “the disnarrated” coined by Gerald Prince in relation to her coinage of the word “the unnarrated”. Addressing Gerald’s concept of the disnarrated, Warhol contends that “[i]f the “disnarrated” describes those passages in a narrative that tell what did not happen, what I call the “unnarrated” refers to those passages that explicitly do not tell what is supposed to have happened, foregrounding the narrator’s refusal to narrate.” (Warhol, 2005: 221). More importantly, Warhol further emphasizes that “I examine the disnarrated, as well as its affiliated figure, the unnarrated, and the larger category to which they both belong, the unnarratable, for the ways they serve as distinctive markers of genre.” (Warhol, 2005: 221). What lies at the heart of Warhol’s argument for the rest of the work is seen as her classification of the unnarratable into four categories as the subnarratable, the supranarratable, the antinarratable and the paranarratable. What these varieties of the unnarratable signify is briefly explained by Warhol as follows: “I offer these categories as four among many possibilities: that which, according to a given narrative, (1) ‘needn’t be told (the subnarratable),’ (2) ‘can’t be told (the supranarratable),’ (3) ‘shouldn’t be told (the antinarratable),’ and (4) ‘wouldn’t be told (the pa-

ranarratable).” (2005: 222). With respect to the specific definition of the supranarratable, Warhol makes an explanation as follows: “The second variety of the unnarratable, ‘that which is not susceptible to narration,’ comprises those events that defy narrative, foregrounding the inadequacy of language or of visual image to achieve full representation, even of fictitious events.” (2005: 223).

It is seen that Warhol’s explanation entails considering the sort of events that disrupt one’s psyche and the events whose description by means of the verbal language used in daily life is not probable. Viewed in this light, it would make sense to contend that what Hester Dethridge in Collins’ work experiences after having been wedded to the drunk husband, namely, her having been subjected to maltreatment, harassment or abuse corresponds to the concept of supranarratable. The traumatized woman is seen grappling with the hardship of putting into words what she has been suffering from thereby inviting readers to view her as someone tormented by the unspeakable, unrepresentable and unfathomable to a large extent. When Hester tries to detail the complexities of her disrupted mind in the company of the others, she continually finds herself entrapped by the problem of accentuating a traumatic experience. Anne Goarzin in the paper titled as “Articulating Trauma” maintains that:

In the case of a traumatic event, the subject’s defenses are radically called into question. There is also an overwhelming side to traumatic experience, in that it questions the usual systems of care and control, or connection and meaning experienced by the individual. Trauma is thus ambivalent on the individual level, as an experience of excess that can only be manifested in the lack of a meaningful structure or form to express this extreme, unbearable moment the self goes through (2011: 12).

Hester in *Man and Wife* goes through that unbearable moment on several occasions. This being said, the inaccessibility of her trauma on a linguistic level comes to the fore in a number of different ways. It must be stated that the ways in which traumatic memory works puts the traumatized person in a challenging situation to find the right words to explain her plea effectively. Faced with this challenge, Hester resorts to violent acts to consolidate the ineffectiveness of verbal language to accentuate her trauma based on marital abuse. To illustrate, she kills her husband as a result of the grudge she holds against the capitalist patriarchal society. In other words, Hester views her husband as the epitome of conventional patriarch

solely accountable for the accumulation of all the traumatic experiences at the back of her mind. The act of murdering him comes to the fore as the eventual outcome of her suffering and it puts before readers' eyes the fact that the difficulty of representing her marital abuse or the supranarratable nature of what she seems to have gone through finds expression through the harsh reaction she gives to man-oriented world. Furthermore, she later assaults the novel's villain, Geoffrey Delamayn, whom she considers as the ultimate reason of Anne Silvester's suffering when she sees Anne's collapsed body on the ground. Witnessing such a scene, Hester assumes that Anne has had an emotional breakdown on account of Geoffrey's rejection of marriage and this evokes her own traumatization to Hester by her husband from different angles. Looking at Anne's collapsed body that speaks her trauma, Hester draws a sort of analogy between her own story and that of Anne which culminates in her attacking the perpetrator of this violence.

The very first depiction of the character of Hester Dethridge in the eighth chapter of the novel reveals important aspects of her plight in marriage. The mute cook is portrayed as a survivor of trauma of the kind of treatment meted out to her by the drunk husband and her muteness is apparently explained as resulting from the violent acts of her husband as well. It becomes manifest that Hester's marriage is marked by a series of indescribably horrid experiences culminating in speechlessness on her part. However, as SurrIDGE notes "this explanation of Hester's muteness is immediately undercut." (1996: 106). SurrIDGE's point is better understood by reading closely the lines that follow:

Medical men, consulted about her case discovered certain physiological anomalies in it which led them to suspect the woman of feigning dumbness, for some reason best known to herself. She obstinately declined to learn the deaf and dumb alphabet- on the ground that dumbness was not associated with deafness in her case. Stratagems were invented to entrap her into also using her speech, and failed. Efforts were made to induce her to answer questions relating to her past life in her husband's time. She flatly declined to reply to them, one and all (Collins, 1995: 113).

Hester's rejection of giving a response to the questions, in the light of the ensuing explanation made in the novel, can possibly be identified as an indicative of a self-imposed silence which means that words cannot codify the atrocities of her life. As has been stated, the traumatized woman whose speechlessness is the central question in her story ends up murdering her

husband to put a stop to her wrath. Philip O'Neill illuminates this point stating that "[e]ventually Hester murders her husband, by burrowing through a lath-and-plaster wall, smothering him and then making the wall perfect again." (O'Neill, 1988: 151). It is important to reemphasize that what makes Hester's case aligned with supranarratability in the novel is also the character's homicidal mania troubling her from time to time. Since the language we use does not have the full potential to put into words Hester's distress, her committing crime turns out to be a way of expression or representation of her revolt against the mores of patriarchal society. The character raises her silenced voice through her actions characterized by outrage and hatred towards abuse of women. There exists no other way of escaping from the mental and physical torture to which she has been subjected. Words do not seem to do enough justice to the soul-destroying experiences associated with the incongruities in her marriage. It would be right to contend that the unspeakable case of Hester only becomes speakable with the help of the violence she resorts. When she tries to talk about how much she suffers from her knowledge of consequences of marital disaccord or of the disrupted nature of her relationship with the drunk husband, her fear of not being able to fully represent or refer to it all by using daily language gets in the way as an insurmountable obstacle, or as what is named as supranarratable within this study.

Hester's silence in the storyline of the novel has its place in her written account of her marriage difficulties as a testimony to her lifelong suffering which comes to the fore in the fifty-fourth chapter of *Man and Wife* titled as The Manuscript. It can be stated that this part evokes ancient accounts of and mythical portrayal of trauma in the sense that cases akin to that of Hester abound in the Greek texts. As Arpine Mızıkyan persistently argues in her essay entitled "Timberlake Wertenbaker's The Love of the Nightingale: From Silence to Rebellion", "the mythical Philomela character, rendered unable to speak, finds resource in weaving to convey her story of rape to her sister, Procne, who reads her sister's sufferings that are woven into a tapestry (Mızıkyan, 2020: 12). The manuscript dismantles the unknown aspects of her life even before her marriage to the alcoholic man with its emphasis on her unhappy family atmosphere during her upbringing with inadequate parental compassion. This being said, it is significant to note that Hester has already encountered hardships posed by the existence of a rich but peripheral father figure and a mother figure indifferent to her needs. As Philip O'Neill highlights:

Hester is not actually a member of the working class; her father was often away “travelling for business”, and she had a “little fortune” left to her by her aunt. Her manuscript explains how she determines to marry for very pragmatic reasons. Marriage is not a grand romance for her, but, rather, provides the means by which she can escape her invalidated and tyrannical mother (1988: 150).

Wishing to get rid of any obstacles to a happier life, it is understood that she decides to get married to Joel Dethridge whose domestic violence and unjustifiable actions unfortunately justified by the marriage laws of the time renders Hester weaker and more vulnerable to male domination. Her failure to find solace in her own family compounded by constant subjection to physical violence by her vindictive husband, therefore, causes her to resolve to kill her husband as a means of getting revenge from the patriarchal system as projected in Collins’ work as J. Cox likewise stresses: “Though Collins cannot fully articulate the sexual trauma endured by Hester, the effects of her inability to process her past are clearly apparent in his narrative: unable to ‘bear witness’ to her own traumatic experience, she enacts a violent revenge on those she perceives as responsible for the systematic abuse of Victorian wife.” (2019: 150).

In addition to signifying the ways in which Hester commits acts of retribution as a response to oppression inflicted by both her husband and the society, the manuscript is shown to provide a final explanation made by Hester herself to her own silencing as she points out that it is her decision to “set [her] guilty self apart from [her] innocent fellow creatures from that day forth: to live among them a separate and silent life: to dedicate the use of [her] speech to the language of prayer only...” (Collins, 1995: 603-4). Viewed in this light, her confession can also be viewed as a touching account of all of her gloomy experiences and as a cautionary tale to those intending to liberate themselves from the chains of capitalist heteropatriarchal society by turning to physical violence.

Traumatization of Hester Dethridge and The Antinarratable

These novelistic descriptions of Hester Dethridge’s problems as an oppressed low-class housewife resolving to punish herself with a self-imposed silence as the manuscript brings to the fore in Collins’ narrative can be studied in accordance with the concept of the antinarratable as well. As regards the definition of the antinarratable, Warhol makes an explanation as follows:

The antinarratable transgresses social laws or taboos, and for that reason remains unspoken. This is the unnarratable as “that which does not call for narration,” in the specific sense that it might prompt a response of “that’s uncalled for.” Sex in realist Victorian novels, for instance, is always antinarratable, and can only be known by its results as they play themselves out in the plot (Warhol, 2005: 224).

Considering the emphasis Warhol puts upon sex’s being always antinarratable, especially in Victorian novels, it must be noted that traumatic experiences of Hester in Collins’ narrative can likewise be regarded as antinarratable. To demonstrate, the particulars of maltreatment or abuse by her husband are obliterated. In other words, the author can be regarded as having been faced with the difficulty of precisely describing the sexual trauma tolerated by Hester. The norms and conventions of the time as a whole come to the fore as a challenge to the total freedom of speech in narration. The entire novel is rife with hints or partial depictions of the mental and physical torture Hester endures. Since the placement of scenes detailing Hester’s abuse into different sections of the novel is frowned upon, readers are merely left with clues as regards what has exactly occurred. Moreover, not only Hester’s abuse but also other components associated with what is named as antinarratable are obscured in the novel. For instance, the physical impacts of the husband’s addiction to drinking alcohol are not articulated by the author, either. It is evident that sex, abuse or indulgence in drink are believed to have been taboos whose overt and detailed description are condemned in Victorian narratives. This being the case, as has been underlined, a decadent household of abuse and drink in which Hester is assumed to have spent her years as divested of her marital happiness falls under the category of what should not be told. When such cases are fully exemplified and thoroughly investigated in a literary work by the author, this can be deemed as violation of the boundaries of Victorian propriety. Therefore, this is what Collins seems to have cared about in the writing process of *Man and Wife*. By masking the abuse of Hester, leaving out the description of the drunk husband’s behavior in the household, the author is seen as acknowledging the validity of the notion in the above-given part belonging to Robyn Warhol’s narrative theory. Yet, readers who benefit from the hints given as regards Hester’s traumatized psyche may notice that the character merely finds a solution to this impediment of antinarratability of what has befallen to her through writing, which does not

even work well. She feels utterly impotent when it comes to dealing with her trauma particularly because she harbors a sense of fear of public shame to be imposed upon her. As J. Cox notes: “Hester cannot bear to commit the details of her husband’s abuses against her body to paper, even when there is no one to ‘bear witness’ to her narrative. Unlike later protagonists in the neo-Victorian novel, she is unable to work through her traumatic experiences, to find catharsis through writing.” (2019: 149-50).

It is understood that the attempt of verbalizing the torture caused by male domination from the side of a woman in this age is strictly prohibited thereby reducing the woman’s status to a lower position. It would be true to argue that this becomes fully manifest in Hester’s case for she is seriously challenged by the established norms of idealized femininity and masculinity. To illustrate, when she goes and asks for help from policemen to protect her from her husband’s abusive acts, the anguished woman is made to feel solely dependent upon the legislations implemented in accordance with patriarchal doctrines. Her husband’s right of taking all her money, furniture and other belongings in the event of a divorce is explained as what is seen as appropriate by the law of the time and invites readers of this novel to reflect upon the extent to which her traumatic experiences can be studied in the light of the concept of the antinarratable postulated by Warhol as well. Helen finds herself entrenched in a world where she seems to be overwhelmed by the social forces. The Victorian conventions impinge on individual freedom and it is clear that she is condemned to a life of restlessness. Akin to Warhol’s underlining the fact that sex in Victorian novel is that which does not call for narration, it can be surmised that the oppression which Hester is destined to endure is what is uncalled for as illuminated by Collins’ *Man and Wife*. The novelist, with his designing of the plot and structure of this work, closely examines and implicitly interrogates women’s plight emanating from the established man-made societal structures and resulting in proving that this plight cannot be told and should not be told at all.

Conclusion

All in all, in the process of reading *Man and Wife*, readers should not only focus their attention upon the narrated but also upon the unnarratable, which incorporates a huge number of problems Hester Dethridge seems to be coping with. As an imprisoned woman within the constraints of Victorian norms, she experiences unspeakable difficulties which can be better understood in the light of the concepts of supranarratable and antinarrata-

ble explicated by Robyn Warhol. With the help of Warhol's concept of supranarratable, readers are reminded of the fact that the traumatic experiences of the character of Hester signify the sort of trauma that defies representation, narration or precise depiction. Words cannot codify her suffering originating from sexual violence and oppression. What readers witness is Hester's incapacitation, subordination and victimization by the patriarchal system. As for the application of the concept of the antinarratable to the novel with Hester's case, it can be said that it shows the extent to which the stifling rules of Victorian society renders it improbable for authors to freely accentuate the particulars of subject matters like sex or violence as part of their literary narratives. To put it more specifically, the challenge posed by the Victorian notions seems to have caused Wilkie Collins not to directly tell the unpalatable truth about the unfairness of the system with its repercussions upon the life of a victimized woman. Considering these points, it can be assuredly claimed that Collins' *Man and Wife* is an appropriate text for relating the tribulations in Hester's life to Warhol's narrative theory, particularly to the concepts of supranarratable and antinarratable with the underlying purpose of making sense of her traumatization better.

References

- Baker, Geoffrey (2018). "Legal Others: The Knowledge of National Community in Nineteenth-Century British Legal Theory and Wilkie Collins's *Man and Wife*". *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 40(3): 239-254.
- Collins, Wilkie (1995). *Man and Wife*. Ed. Norman Page. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Cox, Jessica (2019). *Neo-Victorianism and Sensation Fiction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dever, Carolyn (2006). "The Marriage Plot and Its Alternatives". *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins*. Ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 112-124.
- Goarzin, Anne (2011). "Articulating Trauma." *Open Edition Journals*, 36(1): 11-22.
- Ifill, Helena (2013). "Wilkie Collins's Monomaniacs in *Basil, No Name* and *Man and Wife*". *The Wilkie Collins Journal*, 12: 1-17.
- Mızıkyan, Arpine (2020). "Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*: From Silence to Rebellion". *Marginal Women in Theatre*. Ed. B. Ayça Ülker Erkan. İstanbul: Kriter Yayınevi, 3-21.

- O'Neill, Philip (1988). *Wilkie Collins: Women, Property and Propriety*. London: MacMillan.
- Surridge, Lisa (1996). "Unspeakable Histories: Hester Dethridge and the Narration of Domestic Violence in *Man and Wife*". *Victorian Review*, 22(2): 102-126.
- Warhol, Robyn, R. (2005) "Neonarrative; or How to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film". *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Eds. J. Phelan & P. J. Rabinowitz. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 220-232.

The following statements are made in the framework of "COPE-Code of Conduct and Best Practices Guidelines for Journal Editors":

Author's Note: This article is a revised version of the presentation at the 26th METU British Novelists International Conference: Wilkie Collins and His Work, 8-9 December 2022, Ankara.

Ethics Committee Approval: Ethics committee approval is not required for this study.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The author has no potential conflict of interest regarding research, authorship or publication of this article.